CUP OF CORPORATE COMMS

AN UNFILTERED LOOK AT WHAT'S PERCOLATING NOW

Below are key themes that dominated corporate communications news in February 2026.

EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY BECOMES THE NEW BRAND POWER SOURCE.

Employees have become brands' most influential storytellers, whether companies are ready for it or not. The Harris Poll showed that nearly eight in 10 adults say posts from employees feel more credible than official corporate accounts, and three-quarters say employees are more influential than traditional marketing in shaping brand perception. And while many companies fear opening the floodgates, employee posts are far more likely to inform, celebrate or promote than criticize, with only 12% describing their content as primarily negative. The real issue is silence: Two-thirds of employees rarely or never post about their employer, driven by boundary setting, fear of backlash and unclear guidelines. Yet when they do share, it moves markets — 70% of consumers say real employee experiences make them more likely to buy, and 74% say it makes them more likely to apply for a job. In an era where institutional trust is fragile, employee storytelling has jumped from "nice to have" to a critical reputational engine, reported *Ragan*, blurring the lines between employer brand, corporate brand and customer brand.

Bottom line: As HAVAS Red has long explored in our monthly *Cup of Corporate Comms* digests and white paper on employee engagement, the strategic shift from top-down corporate messaging to authentic, people-led storytelling is empowering employees to share their own voices and experiences as the most credible expression of a brand. Importantly, the most powerful version of a brand now lives in the voices of employees who *choose* to speak, not those who are told to. Companies that create workplaces worth talking about, offer psychological safety and empower employees with clear, human guidelines will earn a chorus of authentic advocates.

PR'S MANDATE EXPANDS AS AI, ROI PRESSURE AND LEADERSHIP GAPS REDEFINE THE FUNCTION.

The PR function is undergoing a structural shift. Reflecting input from 1,100 PR pros, Meltwater's 2026 State of PR report showed that AI has become fully mainstream, with more than 90% of PR teams integrating generative AI into workflows, even if only a small segment (13%) describes that integration as "highly advanced." Teams are using AI to reclaim time from their biggest drains, including reactive firefighting, content creation and reporting, and instead focus on higher-value activities like trend identification and insight synthesis. *PRWeek* reported that the tech acceleration is happening against a backdrop of chronic constraint. Budgets remain flat, workloads are increasing and insufficient resourcing remains the top challenge for PR teams globally. Even as the remit widens — nearly half of PR teams now manage social channels and a third oversee influencer programs — measurement maturity has not kept pace. **(Cont.)**

(Cont.) Leadership is demanding outcome-based proof, yet teams still rely heavily on activity metrics, with more than one-third struggling to align metrics to business KPIs. The most destabilizing pressure point? A persistent disconnect with the C-suite. Leadership in 40% of organizations lacks a strong grasp of what PR teams do, even though CEOs directly influence budget approvals.

Bottom line: Kelly Costello, head of corporate communications at Meltwater, told *PR News,* "The [State of PR] findings are meant to serve as both a benchmark and a roadmap — helping PR leaders refine strategy, metrics and AI adoption so they can demonstrate the impact of their work more clearly and earn a seat at the table. The biggest takeaway is that the PR and communications functions have more opportunity than ever to lead, but only if teams move beyond activity-based metrics and use data to clearly connect their work to business outcomes."

IN THE AGE OF AI DISCOVERY, BRAND AUTHORITY IS UP FOR GRABS.

AI is now marketing's gatekeeper, said *Forbes*. And its role as discovery's gatekeeper keeps becoming clearer, as generative AI shifts power away from traditional SEO signals toward the fastmoving world of social conversation. Social platforms, especially Reddit, are becoming disproportionately influential, with Reddit's share of citations doubling between October 2025 and January 2026. *Media Post* noted that this influence isn't uniform: on platforms like Perplexity, social content drives 31% of all citations, with Reddit alone accounting for 24%. Meanwhile, Google's own AI products cite vastly different domains depending on the product; AI Overviews pulls 13% of its citations from social media, while Gemini pulls just 3%, revealing a fragmented and unpredictable landscape for brand visibility. The gap is widening elsewhere, too. AI Overviews has seen a 46% drop in total tracked citations since November, while AI Mode and Gemini remained stable. And in ecommerce, Amazon continues to dominate AI citations even while aggressively blocking AI crawlers, holding more than 2% of all citations across prompts with commercial intent. Often, these clicks covert. *SmartBrief* wrote that when users choose a site to visit from their conversations with AI, they are often close to the decision point.

Bottom line: Because AI is citing Reddit threads, not press releases, CCOs and CMOs must broaden their definition of "search optimization" to include social credibility, community presence and platform-specific content strategies. Winning in this new arena requires a proactive, earned-first approach to AI visibility: cultivating authoritative social conversation, ensuring content is crawler-friendly across AI ecosystems and monitoring where your brand is (and isn't) showing up in generative outputs. An AI engine optimization audit is a great place to start, suggested the Hubspot blog. The brands that invest early will shape the narratives AI repeats. The ones that don't will find their competitors and critics doing it for them.

SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS ARE ENTERING THEIR REALISM ERA.

Corporate sustainability storytelling is undergoing a recalibration: less moralizing, more practicality; less virtue-signaling, more innovation storytelling that connects climate action to affordability, performance and market expansion. **(Cont.)**

(Cont.) On the surface, the data shows a pullback: According to *ESG Dive*, 38% of U.S. CEOs say sustainability-focused investments are not a priority in 2026, reflecting regulatory uncertainty and politicization. But the same analysis reveals something deeper: Executives are now prioritizing initiatives that improve cost efficiency, supply chain stability and resilience. For example, L'Oréal continues to scale sustainability innovation using what it calls "dual excellence" to link environmental benefit with consumer value and financial growth, reported *Fortune*. Meanwhile, with climate-driven disruptions directly affecting companies' day-to-day operations, more companies are investing in nature-based solutions to everything from failed stormwater systems to heat-stressed energy grids and water scarcity. *Environment+Energy Leader* even described companies restoring wetlands and strengthening watersheds to reduce their longterm risk exposure.

Bottom line: The winning strategy is candid, science-aligned storytelling that makes clear why sustainability is not a political position but an operational imperative. Brands that translate their climate action into innovation, cost savings, consumer relevance and longterm risk reduction will shape the narrative — and the market.

DEI MOVES FROM VISIBILITY TO VIABILITY.

The political environment has undeniably chilled DEI efforts: *Fast Company* recapped how federal executive actions and investigations have slashed public sector DEI roles and spurred legal scrutiny of corporate programs, creating ripple effects that pushed companies like Google, Meta and others to scale back representation targets or DEI-linked incentives. *Forbes* pointed out that some high-profile pullbacks — such as Goldman Sachs' elimination of diversity criteria in board selection, after earlier positioning itself as a pioneer — have exposed the fragility of corporate DEI when tethered to trends rather than embedded in systems. But the narrative that "DEI is over" simply doesn't match reality. Many companies are continuing equality work — albeit often rebranding it as "belonging" efforts and shifting from public-facing goals to behind-the-scenes enforcement. As *Charter* explored, the most forward-thinking organizations are adopting what scholars Kenji Yoshino and David Glasgow call "bulletproof DEI" — strategies that reduce legal exposure by expanding who DEI serves, reframing initiatives around fairness for all employees and shifting from "lifting" specific groups to "leveling the playing field" by addressing systemic bias in hiring, evaluations and advancement. Retreating from DEI altogether threatens culture, retention and performance, so companies that stay the course are increasingly reframing DEI not as a moral stance but as a risk mitigation, talent and performance strategy rooted in merit that has historically been distorted by bias.

Bottom line: Internal DEI communication must shift from virtue-forward messages to evidence-based, legally durable narratives about fairness, merit and workplace excellence. The winning strategy centers on three moves: 1. Reframe DEI as bias removal and performance enablement, not preference or politics. 2. Build "leveling" systems (structured interviewing, equitable evaluation, clear criteria) that stand up in court and in culture. 3. Expand the tent so DEI is positioned as serving *everyone* without abandoning those who have faced historic exclusion.