



Onclusive

PR, Comms & Marketing

The 2026 Outlook



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Foreword



2026 will be a defining year for communicators and marketers. The rules are shifting: budgets are tighter, expectations are higher, and the spotlight on results has never been stronger.

Proving impact is no longer an afterthought, it has become the foundation of effective decision-making. Senior leaders are demanding more than coverage reports or click-through rates; they want clear evidence of how communications and marketing activities move the needle for their business. This shift is forcing both brands and agencies to re-examine how they plan, execute, and evaluate their work.

This report explores those challenges and realities head-on. We surveyed over 300 PR, communications, and marketing practitioners across agencies and in-house teams to understand their expectations for the year ahead. What emerged is a picture of an industry preparing for continued data complexity, sustained budget pressure, and an accelerating demand to connect reputation, perception, and revenue in 2026.

Alongside the charts, you'll find the voices of practitioners themselves. Their reflections bring texture to the numbers and highlight where innovation is already happening. My hope is that these insights serve as both a benchmark and a source of inspiration. Whether you're a communications leader proving your team's value, or a marketing strategist building the case for investment, this report can help you reflect, adapt, and shape a stronger future.

Jennifer Roberts

Chief Marketing Officer, Onclusive



Executive Summary



Half of practitioners still can't prove ROI beyond vanity metrics



2 in 5 comms pros expect AI stability while marketers brace for change



Brand building unites both disciplines as the top 2026 priority



Media relations strain intensifies as half report shrinking journalist pools

The Bottom Line

Impact measurement and revenue linkage will dominate 2026. Budgets will stay constrained, media relations will remain strained, and AI will shift from experimental to operational. The convergence around brand building creates opportunity if teams can agree how to measure it.

What's Driving Change?

Revenue linkage pressure intensifies. Most practitioners across both disciplines expect connecting their efforts to revenue and business growth to be the top challenge, with proving ROI beyond vanity metrics also ranking as a critical concern. Marketing teams face additional pressure from algorithmic volatility.

Brand building emerges as a unifying priority. Both communications and marketing converge on brand building as their primary focus, creating opportunity for integrated frameworks.

AI transforms practical workflows. Teams increasingly adopt AI for automating reports, scaling content, and enhancing measurement, while experts warn that Generative Engine Optimization will fundamentally change brand discoverability.

What's Unexpected?

In-house teams fear politics more than customers. Corporate teams feel more vulnerable to regulatory shifts than market forces.

Organizational structure shapes reality. PR and comms agencies see shrinking newsrooms as existential while in-house teams have diversified. Marketing agencies fear algorithms twice as much as in-house teams.

Micro-influencer beliefs split by business model. Three-quarters of agency marketers believe micro-influencers will outperform celebrities, versus one in four in-house.

Success in 2026 Requires Three Shifts:

- 1 Translating metrics into commercial storylines that boards understand.
- 2 Preparing for Generative Engine Optimization to maintain brand discoverability as AI reshapes search.
- 3 Breaking down comms-marketing silos to implement integrated approaches around shared challenges like brand building measurement and AI adoption.



How to Read this Report



This report combines quantitative data and the voices of PR, communications, and marketing practitioners to provide a comprehensive view of industry expectations for 2026.

Data Approach

Communications & PR data forms the analytical backbone of this report. All questions used multi-select formats, meaning percentages reflect the share of respondents selecting each option rather than totalling 100%. Charts display these percentages clearly, while written analysis uses directional language to summarise patterns.

Marketing insights supplement the core communications analysis using survey responses and practitioner interviews. Findings are presented using both specific data points and directional language to indicate industry patterns.

Reading the Data

When interpreting survey results, remember that higher percentages indicate more commonly selected challenges, priorities, or expectations rather than universal agreement. The multi-select nature means multiple items can be equally important to practitioners.

Structure

The report begins with core communications trends across six key areas, followed by marketing-specific insights. Cross-cutting insights then compare communications and marketing perspectives on shared challenges, with practitioner voices integrated throughout to provide context and forward-looking perspectives on the survey findings.

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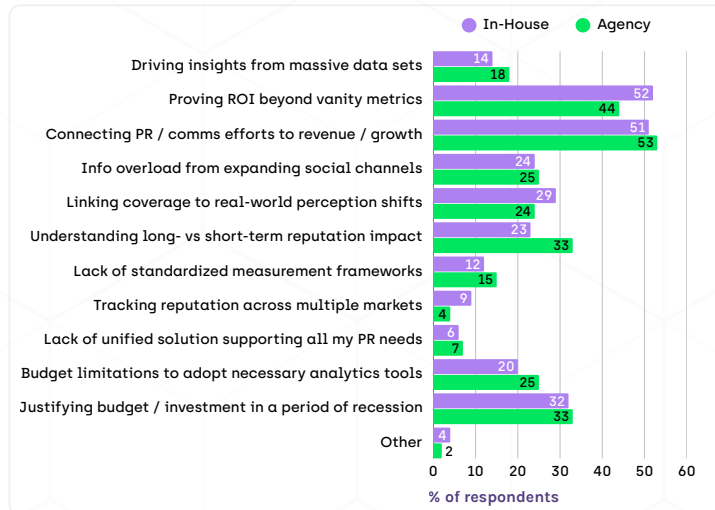
Comms & PR Realities 2026



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Reality #1: Half will struggle to connect efforts to Revenue Growth

Question: In 2026, what do you think will be the biggest challenges in demonstrating PR/Communications impact to your clients or senior leadership? [Select up to 3 answers]



Key Insights

Value demonstration will remain the core challenge: Most respondents expect proving ROI and linking communications to revenue to be their toughest hurdles in 2026, highlighting the persistent struggle to translate activity into business impact.

Budget pressure will intensify: Many anticipate budget justification challenges during potential recession, with agencies also expecting limitations in adopting necessary analytics tools.

Information complexity will grow: Practitioners commonly expect information overload from expanding channels and challenges understanding long-term versus short-term reputation impact.

Multi-select question. % = share who picked each answer option, so totals are over 100. Wording differs: In-house answered in relation to senior leadership; agencies answered in relation to clients.

More than
1/2

anticipate that connecting PR / Comms efforts to revenue and business growth will be a top challenge



What the Experts said about Proving Impact in 2026



"... comms professionals have had to get used to doing more with less. Now they must think about how they evolve their role and skills to provide the most value in the future ... the next few years will likely be uncomfortable, as teams continue to experiment to see what fits, but those that embrace the chaos and find a way to adapt will likely reap the benefits."

Matthew Hare-Scott
Corporate Affairs Director,
Teneo UK



"Our challenge, and opportunity, is to operate as a management discipline: aligning communication to organizational strategy, demonstrating impact beyond vanity metrics, and ensuring ethical use of new technologies. This requires practitioners to step up as advisors to management teams, not simply technicians executing campaigns ... When practitioners demonstrate value in organizational terms, they earn influence."

Stephen Waddington
Professional Advisor & PhD
Researcher, Wadds Inc.



Almost
1/2

say proving ROI beyond vanity metrics will be one of their biggest challenges



What the Experts said about Proving Impact in 2026



"Marketing, PR, and communications must move from soft metrics to hard outcomes. If we can't show how our work drives growth, loyalty, and advocacy, we'll remain 'nice to have' or worst 'OK to be without.' If we get it right, though, communications won't be a cost center. It will be one of the most powerful growth engines a company has."

Sam Rodriguez

Senior Director - Corporate Marketing, PAR Technology

PAR



"Comms is under more scrutiny than ever, particularly given the economic climate and budget pressure - senior leadership is demanding evidence of our impact on growth. Vanity metrics don't cut it, and the shift to report true business value is critical."

Mike Robb

Co-CEO, Boldspace



"Gone are the days when senior leadership was satisfied with coverage volume or sentiment alone. In 2026, every function — including communications — is expected to demonstrate a clear line of sight to business outcomes, not just vanity metrics."

Cathy Toft

Global Head of Corporate Communications, HMD Global



How to Prove ROI & Impact in 2026

Proving value to leadership will remain the fundamental choke point for communications teams in 2026. The challenge won't be lack of data but translating fragmented information into clear revenue-and-reputation storylines that resonate with decision-makers who think commercially, not in communications metrics.

Build Commercial Correlation Models

Correlate media coverage volume and sentiment with sales pipeline, website conversions, or lead quality to identify patterns that leadership recognizes.

Connect Reputation to Revenue Timing

Track whether positive sentiment shifts precede revenue improvements by 30-90 days, positioning communications as a leading business indicator.

Connect Paid, Earned and Owned

Show how PR and communications drive performance across the mix. For instance, coverage that sparks search demand or boosts ad engagement.

Benchmark Against Peers

Compare media and social impact with competitors to highlight strengths and justify additional resources where needed.

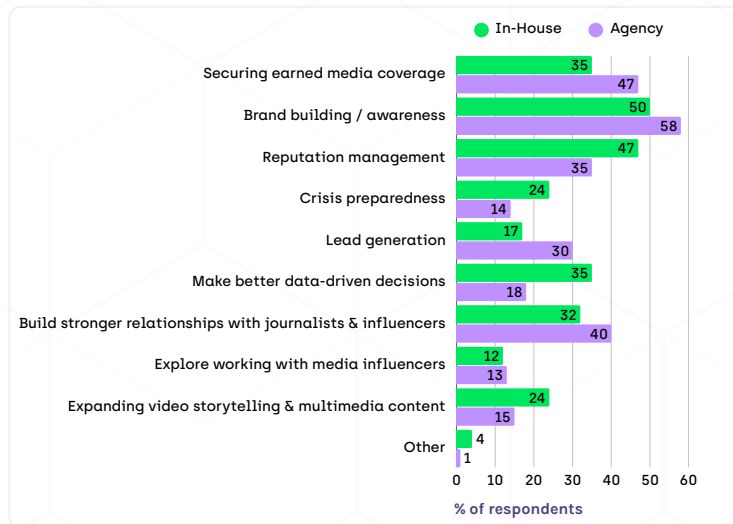
Translate Data Into Executive Language

Present findings in terms that leadership values. For example: "Communications activity correlates with 15% higher conversion rates" rather than "We achieved 85% positive sentiment."



Reality #2: More than half will prioritize Brand Building

Question: What are your/ your clients' communications priorities for the next 12 months? [Select up to 3 answers]



Key Insights

Brand building will lead consistently: Brand building will be the top priority across both agencies and in-house teams, with agencies slightly more focused on this strategic direction.

Reputation management will split by role: In-house practitioners will emphasize reputation management more heavily, while agencies will prioritize earned media coverage and journalist relationships.

Data-driven decisions will gain in-house traction: Many in-house practitioners plan to prioritize improving data-driven decisions, while agencies will focus more on relationship building.

Multi-select question. % = share who picked each answer option, so totals are over 100. Wording differs: In-house answered in relation to senior leadership; agencies answered in relation to clients.

More than
1/2 say Brand Building will be a top priority



Almost
1/2 of agency pros will prioritize securing Media Coverage



What the Experts said about Brand Building in 2026



"The biggest challenge - and opportunity - will be building coherent brand stories that travel seamlessly from linear broadcast to on-demand and social. Creativity will remain the differentiator in cutting through the noise."

Will Martin

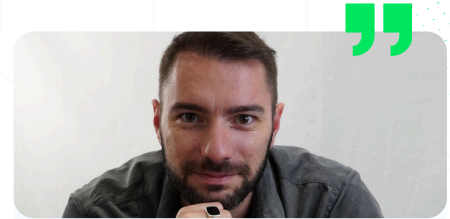
Head of Marketing Broadcasting,
News UK



"Over the next year, we expect communications to be reshaped by AI, accountability, and inclusion. PR and comms professionals must step up as ethical strategists, reputation guardians and business partners, not just storytellers."

Gabriela Weiss Clarke

Head of Communications,
PRCA



"One of the currencies that can attract attention, and ward off indifference, is authenticity—real authenticity. The stories that work are those that have the courage to show a brand's humanity: the victories, the cracks or defeats, the doubts, the values put to the test. They offer the audience something to identify with."

Alessandro Vajani

Head of Content,
Marketing Espresso





How to Reliably Measure Branding Building Success

Brand building will emerge as the unifying priority across PR, and communications in 2026. With both in-house teams and agencies planning to focus on this, the critical next step is defining what successful brand building looks like in commercial terms that leadership values.

Before launching brand awareness campaigns, agree on 3-5 measurable outcomes that leadership values:

Commercial KPIs: Sales lift in target segments, lead quality improvements, and customer acquisition cost changes.

Reputation KPIs: Share of voice vs competitors, sentiment shifts in target audiences, and crisis resilience scores.

Relationship KPIs: Stakeholder trust metrics, employee advocacy rates, and partner confidence levels.

Quarterly check: Report progress against agreed frameworks using consistent language that connects brand health to business health. Avoid reporting reach and impressions without connecting to these outcome measures.



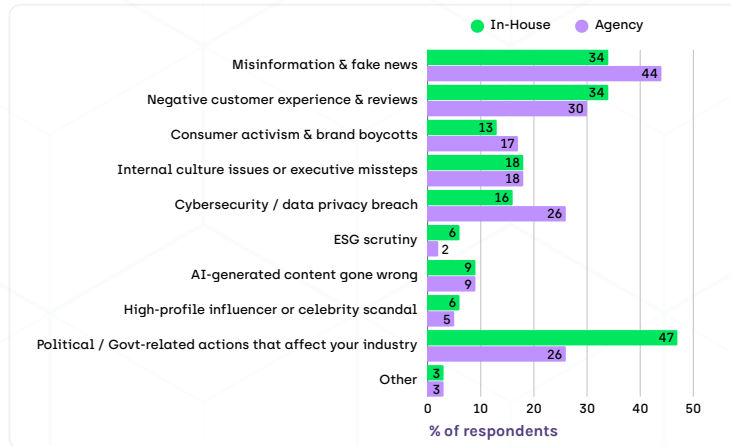
Track Your Brand Building Impact Across All Media

Onclusive processes over 28 million pieces of earned media content daily, tracking more than 60,000 print titles and 3 million websites to enable comprehensive brand building measurement. We provide share of voice analysis, sentiment tracking against competitors, and coverage quality assessment to help you understand which brand messages are gaining traction and where reputation-building efforts are most effective.

[Learn More](#)

Reality #3: Threat Perceptions will Divide In-House & Agencies

Question: What factors do you see as the biggest threats to your brand's / your clients' reputation/s that could trigger a brand crisis over the next 12 months? [Select up to 2 answers]



Key Insights

Threat perceptions split by organizational perspective: In-house most often identified political and regulatory actions as primary threats, while agencies focused on misinformation and fake news.

Customer experience emerges as a universal concern: Negative customer experiences and reviews appeared regularly across both groups as a likely crisis trigger.

Traditional reputation risks remain secondary: Internal culture issues, ESG scrutiny, and influencer scandals ranked lower than external threats and customer-driven issues.

Multi-select question. % = share who picked each answer option, so totals are over 100. Wording differs: In-house answered in relation to senior leadership; agencies answered in relation to clients.

Almost
1/2

of in-house pros see **political and governmental actions** as a top threat

of agency pros expect **misinformation and fake news** to be a major risk



What the Experts said about Reputation & Trust in 2026



Trust will (still) be the hardest currency to earn. With audiences increasingly sceptical of everything they see and hear, brands can't rely on polished messaging alone. Deepfakes, misinformation, and polarization are eroding public trust - and while not a new approach or priority for comms professionals, the need to prove credibility through actions, not words, has never been more important.

Mike Robb

Co-CEO, Boldspace



"The year ahead will test communications leaders like never before, as they navigate a climate characterized by deepening societal division. Nationalist rhetoric may play well in politics, but it risks leaving employees and customers feeling excluded - and in some cases unsafe. Every message a business leader sends either builds trust and belonging, or deepens division."

Koray Camgöz

CEO, Taylor Bennett Foundation



"Declining trust in institutions, media, and politics is creating a more volatile environment for brands and organizations alike. Communicators are already being called upon to forecast reputational risks and build resilience. This requires deeper integration of behavioral science to understand why people believe what they believe, and crafting more persuasive stories that speak to audiences' identities and worldviews."

Shayoni Lynn

Founder & CEO, Lynn



How to be Crisis Ready in 2026

Crisis readiness will require proactive monitoring in 2026. External threats like political/regulatory changes and misinformation require different detection approaches than customer experience issues, but all benefit from early warning systems that enable response before problems escalate into full reputation crises.

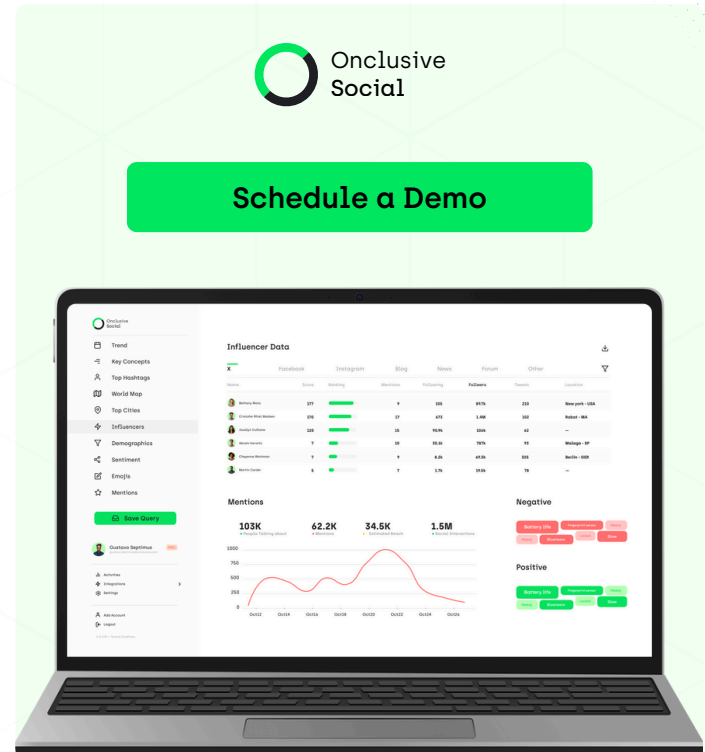
Set-Up Early Warning Systems with Social Listening Tools

Political/Regulatory Signals: Monitor policy announcements, regulatory consultations, and political discourse around your industry for early indicators of potential policy changes.

Misinformation Tracking: Set up alerts for false claims about your brand, industry myths, or conspiracy theories that could escalate into reputation threats.

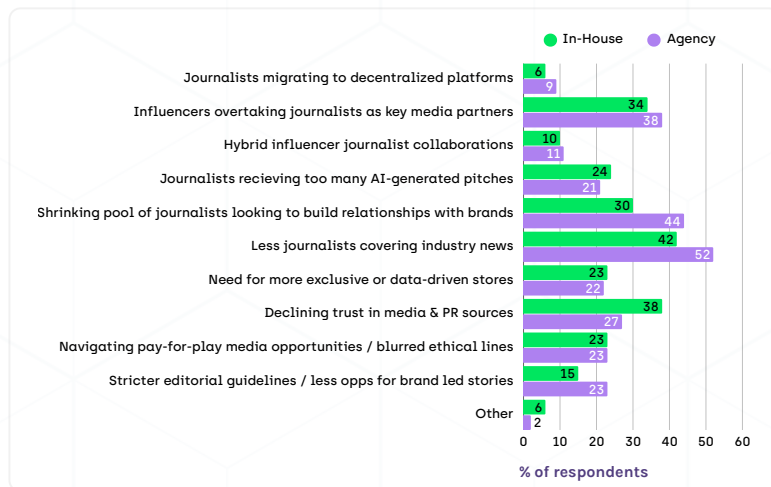
Customer Experience Monitoring: Track review sentiment trends, customer service complaint patterns, and social media mentions for early signs of experience issues before they become crises.

With Onclusive Social: Configure monitoring dashboards to track these signals in real-time, enabling proactive response rather than reactive damage control when threats emerge.



Reality #4: Half face fewer Journalists covering Industry News

Question: In 2026, what do you anticipate will be the biggest challenges in media relations and securing coverage? (Select up to 3 answers)



Key Insights

Newsroom capacity will shrink across the board: Both groups admit that fewer journalists covering industry news will be a top media relations challenge.

Relationship building will become harder: Many anticipate a shrinking pool of journalists willing to build brand relationships, with agencies expecting to feel this pressure more acutely than in-house teams.

Signal-to-noise ratio will deteriorate: Practitioners will frequently encounter journalists receiving too many AI-generated pitches and increased demand for exclusive, data-driven stories.

Multi-select question. % = share who picked each option, so totals are over 100.

1/2 of agency pros say less journalists covering industry news will be a key hurdle

Around 2/5 of in-house practitioners share the same concern



What the Experts said about Media Relations in 2026



"The debate often arises about who has more impact, journalists or influencers. I believe it's a false dilemma. Journalists provide rigor, analysis, and credibility; influencers provide closeness, empathy, and connection with very specific communities."

Reyes Justribó Ferrer
Director General, IAB Spain



"We're watching a major reset in how news is distributed and consumed. Visits to publisher websites are dropping fast—some outlets have seen traffic fall by 40%—while audiences increasingly get their news on social platforms, where video dominates. In fact, social media has just overtaken TV and news sites as the top source of news, with 65% of people now consuming via social video."

Lisa Vecchio
B2B Marketing Director, VEED



"More than ever, brands need to tell stories that connect. The ability to evoke emotion and connect, traditionally associated with journalism, has been democratized: influencers have entered the equation with an extraordinary ability to reach hyper-segmented audiences. If we learn to collaborate, we can unite depth and empathy to build more authentic bonds between brands and people."

Ana Becerra González
Senior Marketing Italy & Spain,
YouGov



How to Navigate a Shrinking Press Corps

With newsroom capacity continuing to shrink and inbox noise increasing in 2026, volume tactics will backfire. The path to coverage will be fewer, stronger pitches: data-led angles, credible spokespeople, tailored lists, and clear proof of impact. Pair exclusives and embargoes with high-quality assets, and reinforce earned outreach with owned channels (corporate newsroom, executive social) to sustain visibility when media bandwidth tightens.

Advanced Relationship Building in a Shrinking Market

Portfolio approach: Identify 20 tier-1 journalists who consistently cover your sector. Invest in understanding their beat evolution, story preferences, and publication pressures rather than mass outreach.

Predictive pitching: Use coverage analysis to identify seasonal story gaps, upcoming regulatory deadlines, or industry event cycles. Pitch stories that fill journalists' content calendars rather than competing with breaking news.

Asset banking: Create a repository of evergreen expert commentary, data visualizations, and case studies that journalists can access when building broader industry stories beyond your announcements.

Make it frictionless: House all assets, spokespeople bios, high-res images, and background information in an accessible online newsroom. When journalists are working faster with fewer resources, removing barriers to coverage increases your chances of inclusion.



- Portfolio Approach
- Predictive Pitching
- Asset Banking
- Make it Frictionless

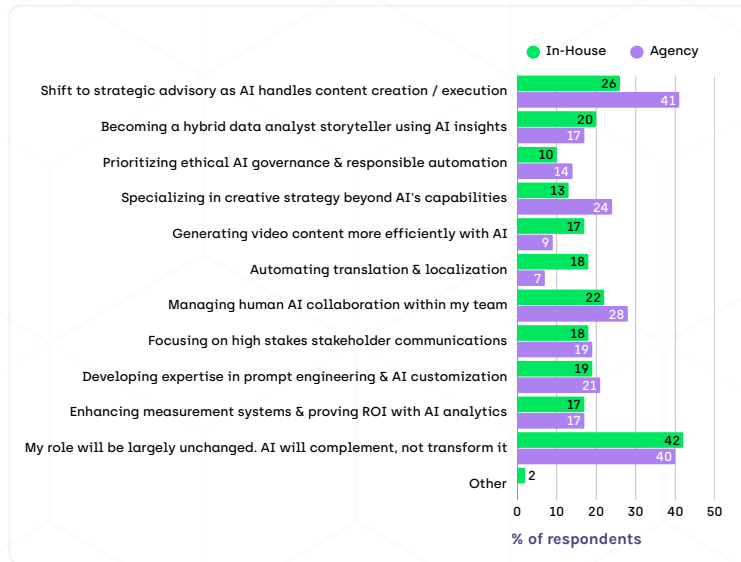
With Onclusive

Digital newsroom solutions organize all your media assets and company information in one journalist-friendly location. AP Planner provides visibility into upcoming news events, regulatory announcements, and industry conferences up to 12 months ahead. This enables strategic timing of announcements to maximize impact and avoid competitive noise.

[Learn More](#)

Reality #5: 2 in 5 expect AI Stability, not Transformation

Question: Over the next 12 months, how do you anticipate AI will most transform your role? [Select up to 3 answers]



Key Insights

Stability expectations will dominate: Most practitioners across both groups expect their roles will remain largely unchanged, with AI serving as support rather than replacement.

Strategic evolution will be agency-led: Agencies will be notably more likely to anticipate shifting toward strategic advisory work as AI handles content creation and execution.

Practical applications will cluster around efficiency: The most commonly expected AI applications will focus on content production, translation/localization, and measurement enhancement rather than strategic transformation.

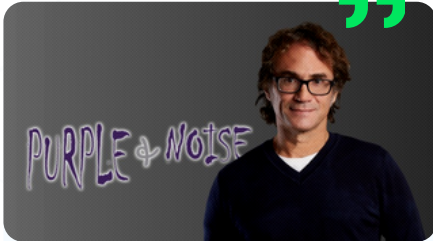
AI is bedding in as a co-pilot: It accelerates analysis and production but doesn't redefine roles overnight. Success means formalizing where it helps, adding guardrails for accuracy and ethics, and upskilling teams for strategic counsel - especially agencies, where advisory demand is expected to grow.

Multi-select question. % = share who picked each option, so totals are over 100.

2/5 expect their roles to be largely unchanged by AI, stating it will complement, not transform it



What the Experts Said about Practical AI Implementation



"More than one study has highlighted how almost half of communicators admit to using AI for writing press releases. A method that, besides being ineffective—the output is little more than textbook-level—I find to be a 'degenerative' way of using this technology. Thinking of delegating to a machine activities such as strategic approach, ideation, creativity, and writing means abdicating as a professional."

Davide Ciliberti
Founder & CEO, Purple & Noise PR



"PR professionals will need to cultivate a dual expertise: Creativity and storytelling, to design hard-hitting and differentiating narratives, capable of capturing attention in an environment saturated with information. Technical and ethical expertise, to master the mechanisms of algorithms . . . Communicators have a unique opportunity: to position themselves as key players in visibility in the age of generative AI, well beyond traditional media."

Marie-Laure Laville
Author & Founder, Agence
MLD CONSULTING



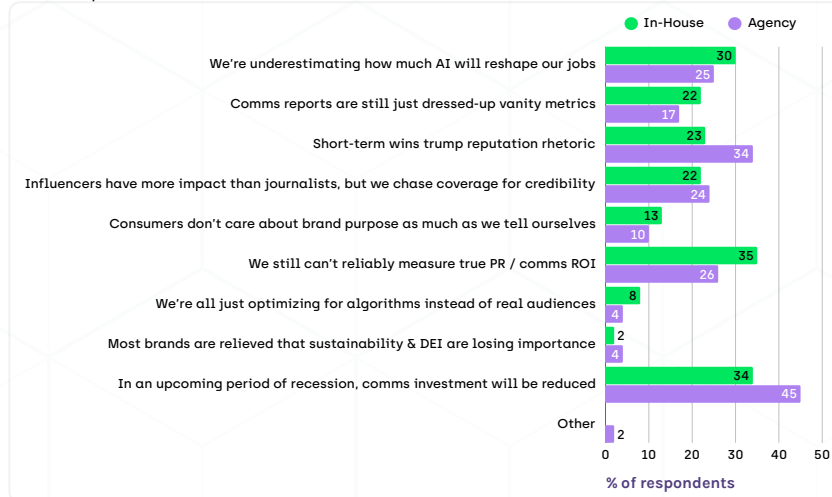
"We need to think beyond just how we use AI ourselves and equip ourselves with the expertise to help clients seize the opportunity and navigate the challenges of AI . . . Before communications and marketing teams can do this they must achieve AI literacy. Giving people access to powerful AI tools is like giving them a company car - a powerful sports car - when they don't know how to drive."

Stuart Bruce
Co-Founder, The PR Futurist



Reality #6: Nearly half of Agencies expect Budget Cuts

Question: Which uncomfortable truths do you agree with most about our industry?
[Select up to 2 answers]



Key Insights

Budget vulnerability is widely expected: Nearly half of agency practitioners expect communications investment cuts in 2026, reflecting communications' ongoing status as discretionary spending.

Measurement credibility gaps persist: A substantial share admit ROI measurement remains unreliable, undermining the case for sustained investment when budgets tighten.

Short-term pressure overrides strategy: Many acknowledge that despite long-term reputation rhetoric, immediate wins typically drive decision-making.

Multi-select question. % = share who picked each option, so totals are over 100.

1/3 of in-house practitioners admit they still can't reliably measure ROI

Nearly 1/2 of agency pros think comms investments will be reduced in 2026



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Marketing Pulse 2026



Marketing Pulse 2026

While communications teams are focused on ROI, reputation, and shrinking newsroom capacity, marketers face a parallel set of pressures. According to our survey, more than half of agencies expect adapting to algorithm changes to be among their toughest challenges, while in-house teams are more focused on connecting marketing to business growth. Half of agencies see misinformation as the most urgent threat compared to a quarter of in-house teams, and nearly three-quarters of agencies believe micro-influencers will outperform celebrity endorsements versus less than a third of in-house marketers.

The common thread: trust and authenticity will decide which brands break through.

More Than
1/2 of agency marketers expect algorithm changes and AI integration will be a top challenge

1/2 of in-house marketers say connecting efforts to revenue and business growth will be a major challenge



3/4 of agency marketers believe influencers will drive more impact than celebrity endorsements

2/5 of agency marketers will prioritize adapting strategies for AI-driven search compared to 1/4 of in-house pros

Reality #7: Algorithm Volatility will become the New Normal

According to our survey results, more than half of agency marketers cite algorithm changes as a top challenge - and nearly 2 in 5 prioritize AI-driven search adaptation compared to 1 in 4 in-house practitioners - reflecting deeper questions about discoverability and reach. Our experts confirm this tension: excitement about AI-powered personalization and efficiency, tempered by warnings about fundamental shifts in brand visibility.



“Today, generative AI is redefining the roles of professionals in the marketing sector. This marks the end of mass marketing and the beginning of personalized marketing on an individual scale . . . In short, marketers are moving from segmentation to supervision, ensuring that AI-generated communication remains authentic, ethical, and consistent with the company's identity.”

Pierre Cappelli

Senior Consultant in Marketing
Strategy & Digital Communications,
Kombava



“No marketing or communications business can do without the use of generative AI. But they still need to be used wisely. Practices have been changing since ChatGPT appeared in November 2022. We are now moving from prompt engineering . . . to context engineering . . . Prompts are enriched with user - or brand specific data to enable greater personalization and take account of the marketing and business environment.”

David Fayon

Project manager
and author of “Get informed!”



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"Generative AI dangerously amplifies existing cognitive biases, which makes critical thinking absolutely essential for marketing professionals. The ability to maintain one's autonomy of thought in the face of tools becomes crucial to master strategic objectives. Success will belong to organizations capable of using generative AI as a true amplifier of their existing skills rather than a technological substitute."

Yann Gourvenec

CEO & Founder,
Visionary Marketing



"We have overvalued 'doing' over 'thinking,' and AI is showing that 'doing' is easily replicated. This forces us to reclaim what truly differentiates us: the ability to think, create, and connect emotionally."

Juan Córdoba

Founder, Sancórdoba



"The role of marketers won't be in the execution. It will be thinking deeply, asking the right questions, setting the right strategy, and understanding the 'why' behind each thing that gets prompt input or produced. Marketing leaders won't just manage people; they'll orchestrate both humans and machines . . . Creativity and originality will take center stage as AI-generated content and execution will begin to look the same."

Sylvia Ortegon

Senior Vice President Marketing,
Hotwire



The Takeaway

AI will accelerate efficiency, but its impact depends on brand stewardship, creativity, and human oversight - along with new approaches to discoverability in a GEO and zero-click world. Onclusive Social supports this shift by helping marketers monitor and track emerging narratives, and understand where brand mentions are gaining traction.

[Find Out More](#)

Reality #8: The Misinformation Defense Challenge

According to our survey results, half of agency marketers cite misinformation and fake news as a top threat in 2026, compared to only about one in four in-house practitioners. This gap highlights how agencies, which often manage multiple clients' reputations at once, feel heightened exposure to misinformation risks. Generative AI has amplified the concern. Faster, cheaper content creation makes it easier for false or misleading information to spread, raising the stakes for brand damage and trust erosion.



“Disinformation is entering the industrial age. Deepfakes and low-cost fake news are blurring the evidence. This technique is part of a wider information war, in which players are using AI to saturate the digital space with alternative narratives.”

Fadhila Brahimi
Digital Strategist &
Founder at FB Associated



“Today, a brand’s reputation is at stake minute by minute. AI gives us an immediate pulse of what’s being said and how it’s perceived, and allows us to separate what’s relevant from the noise on social networks. But there’s something we must not forget: ethics is also reputation. Clearly explaining how we use data and algorithms builds trust.”

Reyes Justribó Ferrer
General Director at IAB Spain



Connecting the Dots

Marketers must not only monitor conversations faster but also adopt practices that demonstrate transparency and protect trust. Onclusive Social enables teams to track how false narratives spread, and separate noise from high-risk signals. This allows for faster response, transparent communication, and proactive protection of brand reputation.

[Find Out More](#)



Reality #9: The Micro-Influencer vs Celebrity Divide

According to our survey results, nearly three-quarters of agencies and slightly less than a third of in-house teams believe micro and niche influencers will drive more impact than celebrity endorsements in 2026. At the same time, more than four in ten in-house marketers expect brands to prioritize influencer authenticity and transparency to build trust with audiences. The findings point to a market that is recalibrating around credibility, not just reach.



"Micro-influencers are now real creative partners. Long-term collaborations are replacing one-off sponsored posts. It's this approach that generates more authentic content and lasting results . . . In 2025, they are part of the process. Their community insights will guide naming, design, and other elements, and 2026 will certainly be the year that confirms this trend."

Anthony Rochand
Co-Founder, LEW



"With the rise of AI, a massive proportion of traffic and content is generated artificially. As a direct consequence, usage is shifting towards the 'dark social', messaging, private groups and forums . . . where more sincere and contextualised interactions take place . . . Private communities are becoming a strategic lever for control and differentiation."

Jonathan Chan
B2B Content Creator & Marketing
Consultant

Connecting the Dots

Reach alone is no longer enough. Success depends on resonance, trust, and influence inside more private, curated spaces. The shift toward micro-communities and dark social creates new challenges for brands: understanding sentiment in closed forums, detecting authentic conversations versus manufactured buzz, and identifying early shifts in audience perception before they surface in mainstream channels. Teams that can navigate these private spaces effectively will spot potential reputation risks and adapt messaging strategies while competitors remain focused on vanity metrics and broad reach numbers.



Reality #10: Content Scale will challenge Authenticity

Our survey findings show that the top way marketers expect AI to reshape their work in 2026 is through automating reporting and trend analysis, selected by more than 6 in 10 agency practitioners and nearly half of in-house pros. Close behind, around 4 in 10 in-house marketers (and about 1 in 5 agencies) point to AI-driven content creation and personalization at scale. While relatively few flagged "AI content gone wrong" as a top reputational risk, the gap between efficiency and oversight is clear. As automation accelerates reporting and content production, the challenge will be ensuring that campaigns remain differentiated, authentic, and trustworthy in a market where sameness is a real risk.



“Let's stop asking ChatGPT to write (and sometimes, horror, woe, publish) for us. It's time to ask ourselves the right questions and rethink our strategies. Why should we speak out and for whom? What added value do we bring? Faced with the growing certainty of the carbon impact of our publications, it's high time we adopted a more sober and considered attitude. Let's limit our publications to what is really useful and impactful.”

Martine Le Jossec
Communication Consultant &
Author of 'Feel Good' newsletter



“Stories remain at the heart of brands. What has changed is how we tell them. People don't just want to know about a product, they want to enter the brand's story. Videos, in particular, confirm themselves as the most powerful format for engaging, moving, and building loyalty. But be careful: authenticity and consistency are the keys to making it really work.”

Valentina Napoli
Marketing Director,
MasterGroup World





"The meteoric rise of generative AI has turned content creation processes on their head. These tools are powerful, fast and accessible. But they often produce bland, emotionless messages . . . In this new context, the role of the communicator is changing profoundly. It's no longer just a matter of producing "SEO-friendly" or "social-network-compatible" content. We now need to create an immediate impact, an emotional hook, a reason to stop scrolling."

Fabrice Lamirault

Digital Communications & Social Media
Consultant, L'empreinte Digitale



"For premium brands, the next year will be defined by how well we can deepen emotional connections in an increasingly fragmented digital landscape. Audiences are seeking authenticity, craft and cultural relevance - not just reach . . . Success will mean balancing data-led precision with the art of building long-term brand equity."

Michael O'Donoghue

Global Senior Marketing Manager,
Peroni Nastro Azzurro



Connecting the Dots

AI is speeding up reporting and scaling personalization, but speed alone won't win attention. Authenticity is becoming the scarce resource in a saturated content landscape. Success will depend on understanding which narratives resonate with audiences, identifying where content fatigue is setting in, and recognizing what sparks genuine engagement rather than algorithmic optimization. Teams that can distinguish between reach and resonance will create campaigns that don't just scale, but connect in ways that feel consistent, credible, and human.



Reality #11: The GEO Revolution will change Everything

By 2026, Generative Engine Optimisation [GEO] will be one of the most disruptive forces in PR and marketing. Unlike traditional SEO, where the goal was to rank in search results, GEO is about being cited, recalled, and trusted inside AI-driven environments. Large Language Models (LLMs) don't rank content, they retrieve and repeat what they have seen and judged as credible. For communicators, that means reputation and authority will increasingly dictate visibility.



“To say that GEO is driving the PR market right now is an understatement. Media relations and social media are firmly centre stage, but the real question is how we measure their impact. Current AI-driven tools are opaque, and ‘share of model’ isn’t meaningful when context windows and personalization vary so widely. In many ways we are moving back to reputation and media output measures as a proxy for visibility in AI environments.”

James Crawford

Managing Director of PR Agency
One & Board Director, AMEC



“Traditional SEO is giving way to GEO. By 2026, it’s no longer about ranking well, but about being cited and legitimized as a reliable source in AI responses. Our strategy must prioritize proven expertise (EEAT), data structuring (Schema.org), and semantic authority to win this algorithmic storytelling war.”

Fadhila Brahimi

Digital Strategist &
Founder, FB Associated





"There is a risk that the prevalence and importance of editorial media for LLM results may be fleeting, as the media industry struggles to stay as broad and diverse in a post-AI Search world. Research shows that when AI Overviews are present, publishers witness a drop of 47.5% in clickthrough rate on desktop, and 37.7% on mobile . . . The opportunity is exciting, but it's dependent upon a healthy media ecosystem."

Darryl Sparey

Co-Founder & Managing Director,
Hard Numbers



"The stories that get picked up and repeated are the ones AI will remember. LLMs don't rank, they recall, which makes cited brand mentions more powerful than backlinks. For PR, that means moving from pushing out press releases to 'narrative seeding': making sure your brand shows up in the places LLMs and journalists draw from. And as journalists increasingly build stories off social conversations and killer product launches, strong relationships matter more than ever."

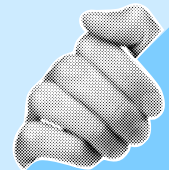
Lisa Vecchio

B2B Marketing Director, VEED



The Takeaway

By 2026, GEO will redefine visibility across PR, comms, and marketing. Success will hinge on influencing not just journalists and social audiences, but the algorithms themselves – ensuring your brand is remembered, recalled, and legitimized by AI systems.



Implications for 2026

According to our survey results, 2026 success strategies will vary by organizational structure:

- **Agencies** must prioritize algorithmic resilience, misinformation defense, and micro-influencer partnerships while scaling AI efficiency across multiple client accounts.
- **In-house** teams should focus on connecting marketing efforts to business growth, leveraging AI for personalized content creation, and building authentic brand narratives that demonstrate measurable impact.
- **Both groups** need robust monitoring systems to track narrative authenticity, separate signal from noise, and maintain trust in an AI-accelerated content landscape.

Marketing Pulse 2026 is clear: in a world driven by algorithms and automation, trust and authenticity are the true competitive edge.



Where Communications & Marketing Converge

Both expect AI Evolution, not Revolution

Both disciplines approach AI pragmatically rather than transformationally. The common expectation is that AI will enhance rather than replace human judgment, with agencies in both fields more likely to anticipate role evolution toward strategic advisory work.

Implication: Focus on practical AI integration that frees time for strategic thinking rather than chasing transformational change.



"AI helps us move faster, personalize better, and analyze smarter. But it's a tool, not the strategy. The real value will come from how we use it with creativity and human perspective. . . At the end, it's about connection. Technology gives us the tools, but the heart of marketing is still building relationships."

Andrea Moreno
Senior Campaign Marketing
Manager, TeamViewer



Brand Building is a Uniting Force

Overall, both disciplines recognize brand building as a primary strategic focus. This convergence creates an unprecedented opportunity to align communications and marketing efforts around shared objectives, moving beyond traditional silos toward integrated brand strategies that combine reputation management with commercial impact.

Implication: Develop unified brand building frameworks that combine communications reputation metrics with marketing awareness indicators, creating shared KPIs that both disciplines can rally behind.



"In communications, radicalism and nuance can coexist perfectly well. It's a question of bias and deep-rooted brand DNA. Of long-term consistency. Of a conscious desire to defend 'your' cause, while remaining open to conversation."

Damien Douani
Head of Educational Innovation,
Narratiiv School



Customer Experience will be a Shared Crisis Risk

Both disciplines face the same reality: customer experience failures can trigger both immediate reputation damage and long-term marketing effectiveness issues. The convergence suggests that communications crisis preparedness and marketing customer journey optimization are two sides of the same strategic coin.

Implication: Create integrated early warning systems that combine customer experience monitoring with reputation tracking, enabling coordinated response when experience issues threaten both brand reputation and marketing performance.



"While AI enhances the experience, the customer experience - the one that creates emotion and brand preference - is not just in the silicon, but in the human being. The future is the human being at the center, served by technology."

Jérôme Monange

Retail & Luxury Marketing Specialist, on Human-Centered Customer Experience

Both Functions will Struggle to Prove Revenue Impact

Both disciplines struggle with the same fundamental challenge: translating activity into business language that leadership values. Communications teams frame this through reputation and board impact; marketing teams through attribution and funnel effectiveness.

Implication: Develop shared frameworks that connect both reputation effects and performance metrics to commercial outcomes.



"Today, thanks to machine learning, we have much more precise attribution models that tell us what each touchpoint contributes to the consumer journey. What's exciting is that AI not only measures, but also predicts and recommends. But most importantly, we're beginning to talk about a 'Return on Creative': how creativity, when supported by AI, generates sustainable value and real growth beyond immediate metrics."

Reyes Justribó Ferrer

Director General, IAB Spain



Onclusive

Data Complexity will Overwhelm both Fields

Both disciplines face the same core problem: turning fragmented data into decision-ready insights. Communications teams focus on complexity management; marketing teams emphasize cross-platform integration and attribution.

Implication: Prioritize synthesis over collection - create unified scorecards that combine reputation and performance signals.



"... According to McKinsey, only 5-10% of marketing tasks can be fully automated without human intervention. The figure is modest - but it is essential ... Marketing could be at the forefront of this transformation and create an alignment with other business units to align activity on a common, non-siloed data repository. This would already be a huge step towards transformation. The lack of quality data costs businesses 3 billion dollars a year."

Fabrice Frossard

Consultant & Founder, Faber Content



Bridging the Communications & Marketing Divide

The convergence of these challenges creates an opportunity for integrated solutions. Onclusive enables both PR, comms, and marketing teams to monitor brand mentions, track sentiment shifts, measure reputation impact, and connect narrative performance to business outcomes - providing the unified measurement approach both disciplines need to prove value and align around shared objectives.

[Learn More](#)



Methodology & Sample

Survey Design & Timing

This research was conducted in June-July 2025 through online surveys distributed to PR, communications, and marketing practitioners across agencies and in-house teams. All survey questions used multi-select formats, allowing respondents to choose multiple relevant options. Percentages shown in charts represent the share of respondents who selected each specific option, not ranked preferences. Results should be interpreted as "X% of respondents selected this option among their choices" rather than "X% ranked this as their top priority."

Sample Overview

We surveyed 300 PR, communications, and marketing practitioners to understand their expectations for the year ahead. Additional qualitative insights were gathered through structured interviews and email-based consultations with 50+ industry leaders and experts. Surveys and interviews were conducted across Asia, Europe, Latin America, and U.S.

Communications & PR: 236 survey responses across varying roles including senior communications professionals, PR managers, and communications directors.

Marketing: 54 survey responses across various roles and sectors. Key report insights are drawn from practitioner interviews and survey responses combined. Findings are presented qualitatively and directionally to supplement the core communications analysis.

Expert Quote Methodology

Expert quotes and practitioner insights included in this report have been edited for length and clarity while preserving original meaning and authentic voice. Editorial changes include removing filler words, correcting obvious errors, and condensing lengthy responses to maintain report flow and readability. Full attribution has been maintained for all contributors. Where substantial content has been removed from quotes, ellipses (...) indicate omitted text. All edits were made with the intent to highlight key insights while respecting the contributor's original message and perspective.

Ethics & Privacy Statement

Survey participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed about data usage and provided consent for aggregated reporting. No individual responses can be traced back to specific participants or organizations.





Appendix: PR & Communications Survey Results

In 2026, what do you think will be the biggest challenges in demonstrating PR / Comms impact to your clients / senior leadership? (Select up to 3 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
Driving insights from massive data sets	14	18
Proving ROI beyond vanity metrics	52	44
Connecting PR / Comms to revenue / growth	51	53
Info overload from expanding social channels	24	25
Linking media coverage to real-world perception shifts	29	24
Understanding long vs. short-term reputation impact	23	33
Lack of standardized measurement frameworks	12	15
Difficulty tracking reputation across multiple markets	9	4
Lack of unified solution supporting all my PR needs	6	7
Budget limitations to adopt necessary analytics tools	20	25
Justifying budget / investment in a period of recession	32	33
Other	4	2

What are your / your clients' communications priorities for the next 12 months? (Select up to 3 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
Securing earned media coverage	35	47
Brand building/awareness	50	58
Reputation management	47	35
Crisis preparedness	24	14
Lead generation	17	30
Make better data-driven decisions	35	18
Build stronger relationships with journalists & influencers	32	40
Explore working with media influencers	12	13
Expanding video storytelling and multimedia content	24	15
Other	4	1

What factors do you see as the biggest threats to your brand's / your clients' reputation/s that could trigger a brand crisis over the next 12 months? (Select up to 2 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
Misinformation & fake news	34	44
Negative customer experience & reviews	34	30
Consumer activism & brand boycotts	13	17
Internal culture issues or executive missteps	18	18
Cybersecurity / data privacy breach	16	26
ESG scrutiny	6	2
AI-generated content gone wrong	9	9
High-profile influencer or celebrity scandal	6	5
Political / Govt-related actions that affect your industry	47	26
Other	3	3



Appendix: PR & Communications Survey Results

In 2026, what do you anticipate will be the biggest challenges in media relations and securing coverage? (Select up to 3 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
Journalists migrating to decentralized platforms (Bluesky etc.)	6	9
Influencers overtaking journalists as key media partners	34	38
Hybrid influencer-journalist collaborations	10	11
Journalists receiving too many AI-generated pitches	24	21
Shrinking pool of journalists looking to build relationships with brands	30	44
Fewer journalists covering industry news	42	52
Need for more exclusive or data-driven stories	23	22
Declining trust in media and PR sources	38	27
Navigating pay-for-play media opportunities & blurred ethical lines	23	23
Stricter editorial guidelines / less opportunities for brand-led stories	15	23
Other	6	2

Over the next 12 months, how do you anticipate AI will most transform your role? (Select up to 3 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
Shifting to strategic advisory as AI handles content creation /execution	26	41
Becoming a hybrid data analyst-storyteller using AI insights	20	17
Prioritizing ethical AI governance & responsible automation	10	14
Specializing in creative strategy beyond AI's capabilities	13	24
Generating / editing video content more efficiently with AI	17	9
Automating translation / localization	18	7
Managing human-AI collaboration within my team	22	28
Focusing on high-stakes stakeholder comms	18	19
Developing expertise in prompt engineering & AI customization	19	21
Enhancing measurement systems & proving ROI with AI analytics	17	17
My role will remain largely unchanged. AI will complement, not transform it	42	40
Other	2	0

Which uncomfortable truths do you agree with most about our industry? (Select up to 2 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
We're underestimating just how much AI will reshape our jobs, until it's too late	30	25
Most PR & Comms reports are still just dressed-up vanity metrics	22	17
Brands claim to prioritize long-term reputation, but short-term wins always come first	23	34
Influencers have more impact than journalists, but we chase media coverage for credibility	22	24
Consumers don't care about brand purpose as much as we tell ourselves	13	10
We still can't reliably measure true comms ROI	35	26
We're all just optimizing for algorithms instead of real audiences	8	4
Most brands are relieved that sustainability and DEI are losing importance	2	4
In an upcoming period of recession, comms investment will be reduced	34	45
Other	0	2



Appendix: Marketing Survey Results

In 2026, what will be the biggest challenges in demonstrating marketing impact to your clients / senior leadership? (Select up to 3 answers)

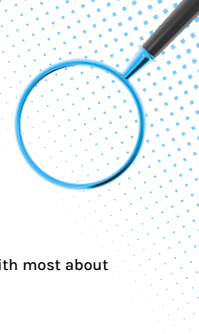
Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
Driving insights from massive data sets	22	28
Proving ROI beyond vanity metrics	33	28
Connecting marketing efforts to revenue and business growth	50	28
Measuring impact of social media on customer behavior	19	33
Integrating data from multiple platforms	31	44
Increasing data privacy regulations / limited third-party tracking	11	0
Evolving algorithms that impact visibility & engagement	22	56
Budget limitations to adopt the necessary analytics tools	3	28
Justifying budget & investments in a period of economic recession	17	11
Precise an accurate attribution across a multi-channel approach	14	22
Track / attribute leads seamlessly across channels	17	17
Other	3	0

What are your / your clients' primary marketing priorities for the next 12 months? (Select up to 3 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
Building brand awareness	44	44
Increasing lead generation	36	39
Improving customer retention & loyalty	31	50
Optimizing performance marketing (e.g., paid ads, SEO)	33	44
Expanding video content strategy for engagement & conversions	11	17
Enhancing personalization & customer experience	22	28
Adapting strategies for AI-driven search & recommendation algorithms	28	39
Increasing personalized marketing at scale with the help of AI	22	17
Demonstrate efforts to reduce environmental impact	6	0
Increasing awareness about Sustainability / CSR initiatives	8	6
Other	3	0

What factors do you see as the biggest threats to your brand's / your clients' reputation/s that could trigger a brand crisis over the next 12 months? (Select up to 2 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
Misinformation & fake news	25	50
Negative customer experience & reviews	36	44
Consumer activism & brand boycotts	6	0
Internal culture issues (e.g., employee backlash, DEI failures) or executive missteps	22	33
Cybersecurity / data privacy breach	22	22
ESG scrutiny	6	0
AI-generated content gone wrong	14	17
High-profile influencer or celebrity scandal	3	0
Political / Government-related actions that affect your industry	53	22
Other	3	0



Appendix: Marketing Survey Results

How do you see influencer marketing evolving in the next 2 years? (Select up to 2 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
AI-generated virtual influencers will become more common	28	22
AI tools will help brands identify influencers more accurately based on audience alignment & engagement rates	19	22
Micro & niche influencers will drive more impact than celebrity endorsements	28	72
Influencer content will be more integrated into paid media strategies	22	39
Brands will rely more on long-term influencer partnerships over one-off collaborations	19	0
Brands will prioritize influencer authenticity & transparency to build trust with audiences	42	28
Regulatory changes will reshape how brands & influencers work together	17	6
The rise of decentralized platforms (e.g., Web3, blockchain-based social media) will disrupt influencer marketing	6	0
Other	3	0

Over the next 12 months, how do you anticipate AI will most transform your role? (Select up to 3 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
Automating reporting & trend analysis to free up strategic time	44	61
Enhancing text & image-based content creation & personalization at scale	39	17
Advancing video creation, editing, & optimization for better engagement	17	22
Streamlining social media scheduling, engagement, & moderation	3	6
Optimizing ad targeting, campaign performance, & forecasting	14	22
Improving SEO strategy & search trend analysis	14	17
Deepening audience research, segmentation, & consumer insights	14	28
Enhancing measurement, attribution, & ROI tracking	14	6
Automating translation & localization to scale global marketing	14	6
Managing AI-driven workflows & automation within my team	8	28
Shifting focus to brand storytelling & creative differentiation from AI-generated content	8	6
My role will remain largely unchanged. AI will complement, not transform it	28	17

Which uncomfortable truths do you agree with most about our industry? (Select up to 2 answers)

Response	% of In-House selections	% of Agency selections
We're underestimating just how much AI will reshape our jobs, until it's too late	28	28
Most marketing reports are still just dressed-up vanity metrics	25	28
Brands claim to prioritize long-term reputation, but short-term wins always come first	31	17
Influencers have more impact than journalists, but we still chase media coverage for credibility	28	28
Consumers don't care about brand purpose as much as we tell ourselves	11	33
We still can't reliably measure true marketing ROI	31	11
We're all just optimizing for algorithms instead of real audiences	6	28
Most brands are relieved that sustainability and DEI are losing importance	6	0
In an upcoming period of recession, marketing investments will be reduced	17	22
Other	3	0

The Onclusive logo, featuring a green circle with a white dot inside, followed by the word "Onclusive" in a white sans-serif font.

Onclusive

PR, Comms & Marketing

The 2026 Outlook

@onclusive

Prove and Improve
Your Value.

Onclusive is a world leader in media intelligence technology and services, dedicated to supporting PR, Communications and Marketing professionals. We deliver leading-edge innovation, human expertise, and unmatched media reach in a suite of media management, monitoring and analysis solutions that support every stage of the communications cycle. Our unified platform and services enable our customers to make fast, accurate, data-driven decisions about their communications and marketing strategies, allowing them to prove and improve their value.