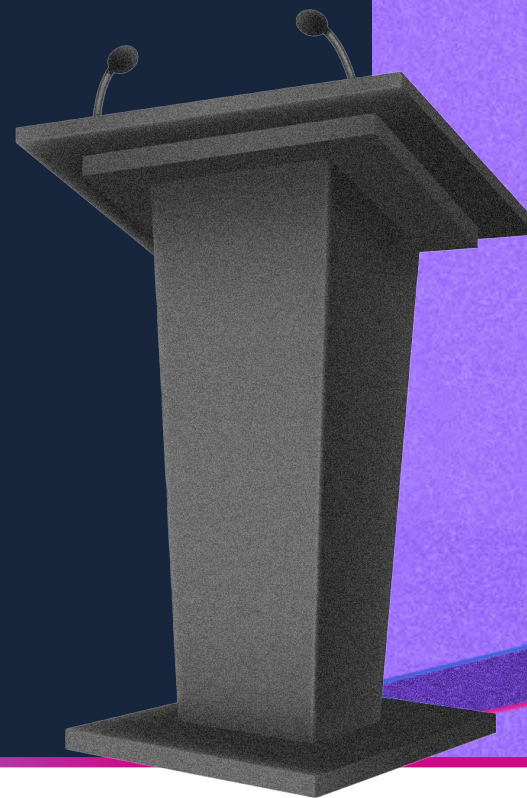


8 pressing priorities for execs and comms leaders in 2024

Key insights and strategies from conversations
with 90 of the nation's top communicators



About us

AXIOS HQ

Axios HQ is an internal communication platform powered by Smart Brevity® — a data-backed communications formula.

- Rooted in years of research, Axios HQ's tools, templates, and proactive AI make it possible for any communicator to distill vital information in less time, and quickly deliver it to staff inboxes or instant messengers.

Innovative companies like Walmart, Edelman, Everfi, and Tyson trust Axios HQ's intuitive platform to elevate what matters, and boost transparency, engagement, and trust at their organization.

MIXING BOARD

Mixing Board is a curated community of 325+ influential communications and brand marketing leaders.

- Its members are heads of comms, CMOs, brand strategists, social and content specialists, community builders, policy veterans, and speechwriters at the world's most recognizable brands.

Mixing Board provides select organizations, agencies, and venture capital firms access to members' expertise and talent recommendations for those seeking to hire senior leaders or top consultants.



What's inside

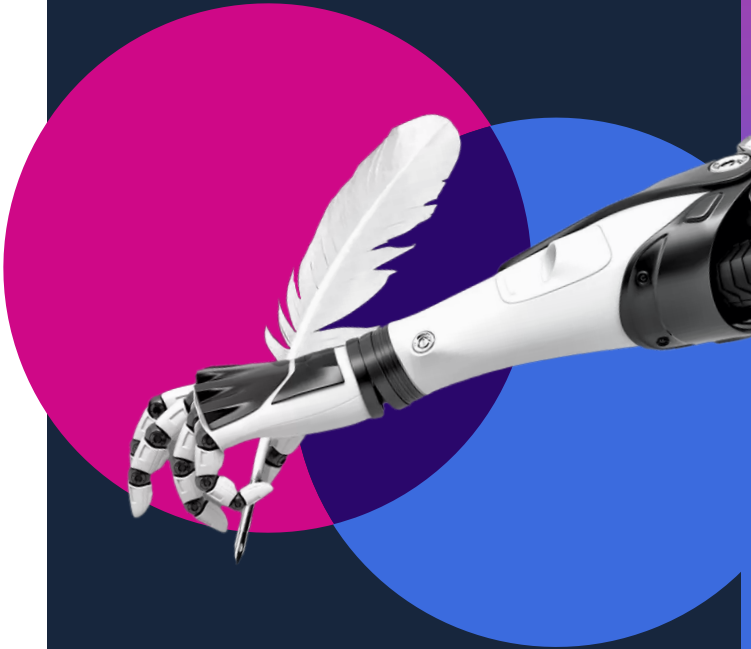
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We're about to enter another tough year.

And while 2024 won't be the same kind of tough we've felt over the last few years, it will be tough in a new way — tough in its own way. It's going to force communicators to be even more nimble.

- **We're about to enter a presidential election** year where any statement, internally or externally, can be hyper-magnified and feel political. And whether we're talking about policy or technology — *is page 4 too early to say AI?* — executives need to feel confident.
- **Employee engagement will be more vital** to an organization's success than ever. Most leaders have shifted their priorities from being "command and control" operators who own a story to being trusted advisors who reflect the people they lead and who tell the story together.

Truth and trust will have an amplified impact on both levels. In any moment when our toughest critics — the employees who expect us to lead them well — feel that what we're saying does not match what we're doing, we will hear it loudly. As we should.

But as anxious as executives might be about "getting it right" in tense times, we know employees are even more anxious — watching the world around them unpredictably change, their personhood or healthcare come down to a vote, their careers or innovations face regulation. They will look for us to...

- Earn and uphold their trust. We cannot draw on what we haven't built.
- Create a communication routine. Repetition is key in times of change.
- Guide them confidently, but openly. They must hear from us and also feel heard.

That's why for communication leaders, there's no better time than now to start talking with your CEOs, your Chiefs of Staff, and other top leaders about the playbooks you have — and others you might need to develop — that will help them stay confident.

We want to be your partner in not only keeping communicators embedded at the highest levels of decision-making, but also accelerating their rise. We hope this report, and its insights from top communication leaders, helps you anticipate what's to come — or validate what you thought might.



Roy Schwartz

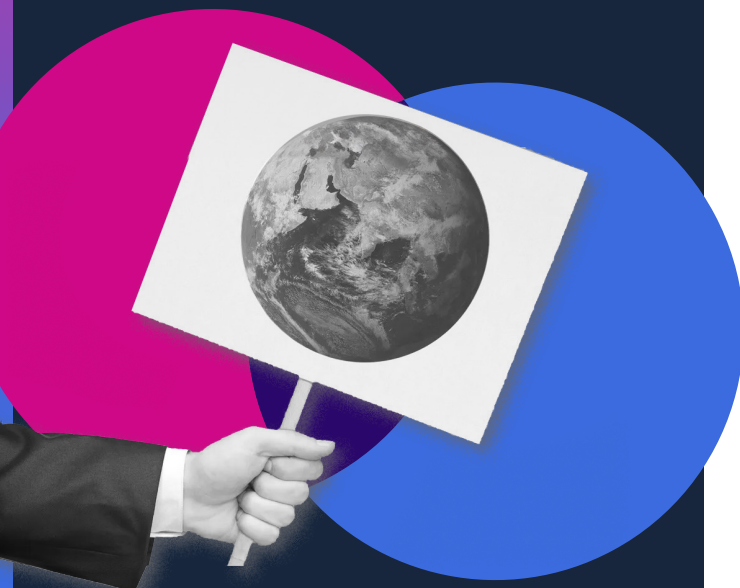
Co-founder and CEO of Axios HQ



Sean Garrett

Founder of Mixing Board

8 pressing priorities for execs and comms leaders



At the end of 2023, Mixing Board convened 90 of the nation's top communication professionals whose current or former roles span Johnson & Johnson, Intel, Google's Moonshot factory, Volkswagen, Bain Capital Ventures, StubHub, Airbnb, Meta, Procter & Gamble, Peloton, Audible, and more. Together, with Axios HQ, they led an important conversation:

- **The question:** Next year is going to be as important as it will be complicated. What can we anticipate, plan for, and help any leader get ahead of now?
- **The outcome:** Eight key topics came into focus. Our room of experts divided up and developed strategic advice to help any leader get a running start.

Below is a high-level look at each of those topics.

1. **The 2024 Presidential election.** Employees will turn up the temperature on leaders, expecting them to stand up, speak out, and advocate for workers.
2. **AI in every workplace.** Every company that wants to stay competitive will have to implement AI in their own way. Not just have a strategy — implement it.

3. **A stabilizing economy – finally.** The new year will ease spending insecurity, but spark internal tension around where leaders offer relief first.
4. **Rising burnout, weak culture.** Employees are more unhappy than at the height of the pandemic and more disengaged and burnt out, too.
5. **Dissatisfied frontline workers.** Deskless workers are the least trusting, least engaged, and most ready to pressure employers to change.
6. **Evolving ESG and Climate reporting.** CEOs are under more pressure to track and talk about their initiatives in a quantifiable way.
7. **Social media, news, and trust.** Publishers are getting more focused, brands are turning to owned channels, and niche outreach shows less is more.
8. **The blurring of comms and marketing.** Leaders will need to look for more modern ways to integrate strategy, preserve identity, and improve operations.

Let's go deeper on each one of them. In the pages that follow, you can dig deeper into each and get a one-sheet of advice about it.

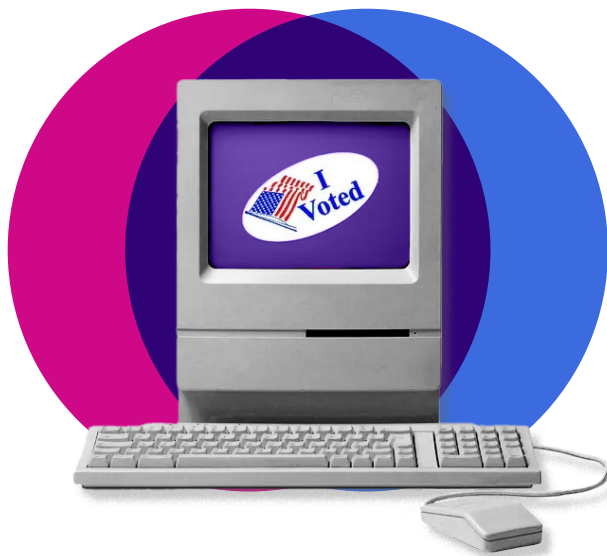
The 2024 Presidential election

Axios HQ view

Everything will feel political

Every cycle brings up difficult, sensitive, hot-button issues, and the uncertainty of who will lead our nation — or what policies and protections may change as a result — can be deeply unsettling to staff.

Employees will turn up the temperature on their leaders, expecting them to once again stand up, speak out, and advocate for the people who follow them. [Edelman's 2023 Trust Barometer](#) may show teams trust their organization more than the media, government, and non-governmental organizations, but it is a trust that is heavily scrutinized, hard won, and easily lost.



Mixing Board member advice

What your executives may face:

1. **Tension in trust.** Leaders need to be ready to defend their political choices. The intent and impact of anything a leader says or does will feel hyper-magnified, and any choice will reflect equally on their organization and its people.
2. **Urgency to speak.** More than ever, employees will expect their leaders to fill the vacuum, provide clarity of thought, offer trustworthy direction, and follow through with action. Leaders need a plan for what to speak on, when to stay silent, and how to never waver.
3. **A polarized workforce.** Every organization is a divided space to an unknowable degree. Leaders will need to anticipate how deeply personal politics are, what support or space employees might need, and the important role employer action plays in people's lives.

What communication strategies can help:

- ❑ **Cross-reference key issues** with your mission, vision, and values. Know where you stand and when leaders need to take a stand. These are the areas where employees will push most.
- ❑ **Host conflict management workshops,** webinars, or other events. Hone the skills that help leaders and employees navigate disagreements and have productive discourse.
- ❑ **Revisit your playbook** for issue management, and make sure it's solid. Walk key stakeholders through it again so they feel close to the process before pressure hits.
- ❑ **Keep people in your process.** Both employees and consumers want to understand how leaders make the decisions they do. Transparency goes a long way in trust.
- ❑ **Create listening groups now.** Hear what issues they care about. Understand how the election could impact their day to day. Prep the resources that will help them before they need them.

Go deeper: [Strong internal communication should be every executive's first step](#)

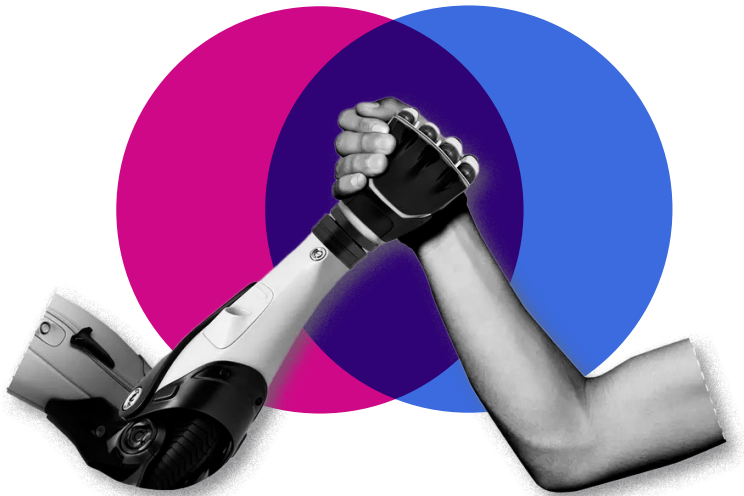
AI in every workplace

Axios HQ view

Implement it, or fall behind

People think AI exploded this year, but what really happened was that ongoing, steady improvements finally broke above an invisible line where the world noticed. Next year is going to feel even stronger.

Every company that wants to stay competitive will have to implement AI in their own way. Not just have a strategy — implement it. [Forrester's 2024 predictions](#) rightfully call AI the new skills gap and project 60% of employees will go through prompt engineer training in the year ahead. It's time to invest.



Mixing Board member advice

What your executives may face:

1. **Public plans for private data.** Data — using and protecting it — is critical for trust. AI is a game changer for turning private data into usable intelligence. But leaders must find a safe way to do it.
2. **Ambitious but skeptical leaders.** They saw Web 2.0, the social media boom, FinTech's regulation. They have reference points for what's coming. And they're both excited and anxious for it.
3. **The need for guardrails.** Every organization will need its own unique standards for incorporating AI — whether they expect staff to use it for inspiration or only for full-on work product.

What communication strategies can help:

- ❑ **Guide team standards.** Before you can communicate new processes, practices, and safeguards, you can influence them. Evaluate what people really need to pick tools that keep them focused.
- ❑ **Streamline implementation.** Whether it's rolling out a new tool or building an internal practice to uphold AI standards, you will be key in keeping everyone, org-wide, informed.
- ❑ **Set a strong example.** Incorporate AI in the ways you draft, send, and streamline employee communications. Lead by example, and share what you're learning.
- ❑ **Initiate ongoing education.** Open a dialogue with staff and stakeholders alike to keep a pulse on how AI is changing the way you work — and what resources or services will further amplify it.
- ❑ **Always champion truth.** AI is still prone to “hallucinations” and bias. Communicate the plans your leaders have in place for human reviews and interventions, where appropriate.

Go deeper: [6 things to look for when choosing AI-powered software](#)

A stabilizing economy

Axios HQ view

Re-prioritize how you're spending

In 2023, budgets got tighter, headcounts got smaller, and most organizations had to sustain or grow with fewer resources. That will ease in 2024 — with many executives saying they expect better balance and buying power.

With every department stretched, though, it will be critical to have a plan for if, when, and where you offer relief — and how you communicate those choices. [Deloitte's year-end projections](#) show a reassuring “soft landing” of our economy and low risk of recession. So it's time to plan your spending.

Mixing Board member advice

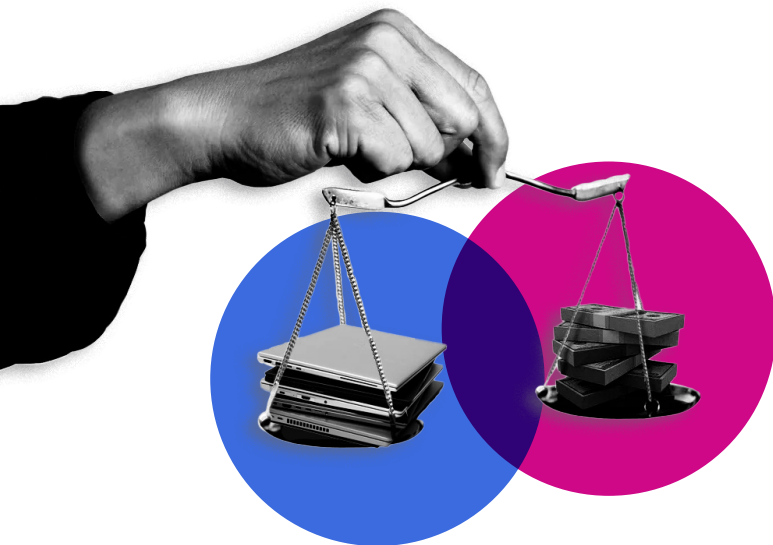
What your executives may face:

1. **Less economic strain.** The second half of 2023 picked up, and while leaders still need to be intentional about their spending, the state of the economy is improving.
2. **Cautious consumer spending.** The housing market is tough, consumer credit card bills have never been higher, and cash people saved in the pandemic is starting to run low.
3. **Patient venture capitalists.** VC hit record lows this year, and many investors are still sitting on their available cash while the world stabilizes.

What communication strategies can help:

- **Stay alert and nimble.** The economy will settle, but the election will challenge that stability. Keep your business operations flexible. Have multiple contingency and communication plans ready.
- **Proactively counsel executives.** Push to expand your seat at the table. Share what you — and other comms leaders — are hearing and seeing, especially around employee needs.
- **Continue running lean.** As you go into annual planning, know that things may still meaningfully shift in one month, two months, or 10. Free up spending, but don't go too fast.
- **Double down on employee communications.** However anxious executives feel, employees will pick up on it, too. Invest in opportunities to improve alignment and communications org-wide.

Go deeper: [How organizations like Shopify are saving themselves millions](#)



High burnout, low engagement

Axios HQ view

It's time to retrain managers

Employees are more unhappy now than they were during the height of the pandemic, [according to BambooHR](#). They're also more disengaged, burned out, and [overloaded with ineffective information](#).

The obvious problem: 2023 was meant to be a year of optimization, but economic challenges forced organizations to do more with less. The solution for 2024 is to invest in your managers, who may never have experienced hybrid or remote work until now — let alone learned to lead or communicate in it.



Mixing Board member advice

What your executives may face:

1. **Weak connection.** Employee burnout is not always about working too much. It can also stem from weak connections, low levels of trust, and micromanagement. Do a health check.
2. **An anonymous workforce.** As more companies go fully remote, hiring outside of core markets gets easier. It will also get harder to create identity and unity across the workforce.
3. **Insecure managers.** Autonomy and trust is hard to offer when people have never led in a remote environment. The moment will call for empathy and education.

What communication strategies can help:

- ❑ **Reset working norms.** Restate ideal work hours, communication expectations, meeting standards and best practices, and PTO plans. Have management lead by example.
- ❑ **Reallocate program spend.** Prioritize bringing employees together at least once a year. Advocate for program spending to be deferred toward T&E costs if budgets are tight.
- ❑ **Plan meaningful meetups.** Retreats, office days, and other encouraged in-person activities must be high-value. Define a clear purpose, and share it early. Purposeful connection is what wins.
- ❑ **Lead management training.** Coach managers on how to communicate and mentor remotely. Equip them with best practices to maximize hybrid meetings, build team trust, and more.
- ❑ **Create a comms routine.** The more you share news and status updates through reliable, written communication, the more you can focus live conversations on making progress.
- ❑ **Implement user guides.** Have new hires share their working styles and communication preferences in onboarding. Keep them public so everyone can learn to interact better.

Go deeper: [Burnout drops 58% when leaders connect purpose to employee work](#)

Dissatisfied frontline workers

Axios HQ view

Prioritize empowering autonomy

Deskless workers make up about 80% of the global workforce, but they are the least trusting, least engaged, and most likely to feel burnout, [according to Qualtrics](#). They're also ready to pressure their employers to change things they don't approve of.

Leaders need to level up the communication channels, operational strategies, and employee recognition ideas to fix this trend before they lose a meaningful portion of their workforce.

Mixing Board member advice

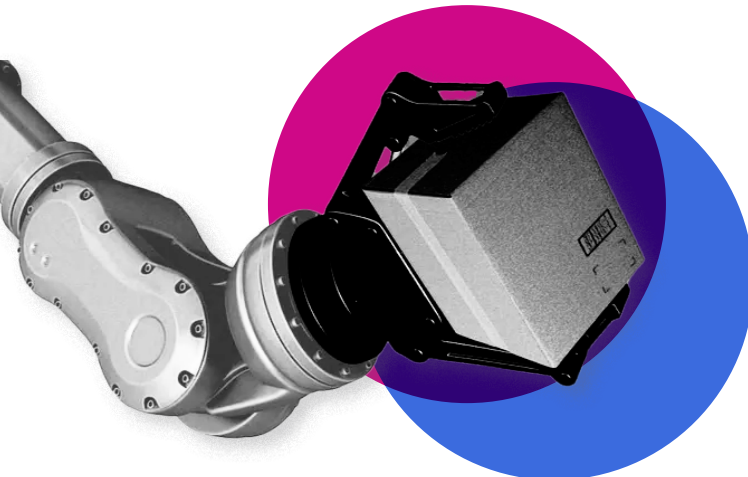
What your executives may face:

1. **Labor strife.** Leaders are seeing more and more successful stories of unions bargaining well and paving a successful path forward. Anticipate more unionization.
2. **Staff insecurity.** AI is sparking job insecurity. Low autonomy is increasing burnout. Poor communication is adding to the stress. Empower staff, or lose them to companies that can.
3. **Fractured relationships.** Frontline workers need a unique sense of connection and gratitude from their leaders that they currently aren't receiving.

What communication strategies can help:

- ❑ **Re-evaluate your channels.** Listen to what your employees check — emails, social media, signage — and meet them there. Then develop success metrics for that format.
- ❑ **Empower middle managers.** Develop and offer training for managers to help them communicate more efficiently — and create more time for 1:1 or personal connections that equate to trust.
- ❑ **Create CEO connections.** Hold a monthly new hire lunch, test a virtual Ask Me Anything, send a hand-written note for key staff milestones. Folks want to feel valued and connected to leadership.
- ❑ **Reexamine benefits.** You can show gratitude with expanded L&D budgets, tailored career tracks, stronger leave policies, or mental health resources. Stay in tune with your people, and remind them what's available to them.

Go deeper: [The vital role managers play in communication and employee success](#)



ESG reporting evolves

Axios HQ view

Data and accountability is key

The number of S&P 500 companies citing “ESG” on earnings calls has been declining over the last two years, [according to FactSet](#). CEOs are still committed to their initiatives, but they’re under more pressure than ever to track and talk about it in a way that’s tied to quantifiable results.

Defining and communicating a data-driven approach will be critical for any organization prove its words are just as strong as its actions — and for any vocal workforce to confidently stand behind it.



Mixing Board member advice

What your executives may face:

1. **New standards.** Stricter European Union, US, and global rules will impact the 2024 season, strengthening reporting rules and broadening the types of organizations that have to report.
2. **General confusion.** The acronyms alone — let alone social expectations — in ESG can feel like another language. Executives will be fighting for clarity as much as pushing for progress.
3. **Urgent circularity.** Consumers will continue to demand more transparency, greener practices, and clearer communication about what can happen at the end of a product’s lifecycle.

What communication strategies can help:

- ❑ **Stay data-driven.** Help your organization develop — and communicate — a more data-driven approach to ESG initiatives and accountability. Focus on areas you can incrementally improve.
- ❑ **Don’t do it alone.** Partner across industry, or even with other industries, to tackle big issues. Start looking for the smart alliances and strong stories that can enhance and reflect your work well.
- ❑ **Speak plainly.** Challenge executives to shift their speech and use layman’s terms and clear examples when updating employees, other industries, and your communities.
- ❑ **Standardize your outreach.** Make sure the employees and stakeholders involved in initiatives know what’s expected of them. Use clear, consistent communication to keep them connected.
- ❑ **Make it personal.** Find small things that average, everyday consumers can do on a daily basis to support your vision to make a long-term difference on our climate.

Go deeper: [See how Walmart communicates its ESG initiatives to stakeholders](#)

Social media, news, and trust

Axios HQ view

Focus on quality, not quantity

Media is rapidly changing, and the way any organization tells its story will need to evolve just as quickly. Publishers are becoming more focused, brands are turning to owned channels or “going direct,” and social media is constantly changing how leaders communicate with consumers and employees alike.

As audiences — both internally and externally — reach out to organizations they trust, or as leaders try to capture audience attention, communicators play a key role in helping them connect.

Mixing Board member advice

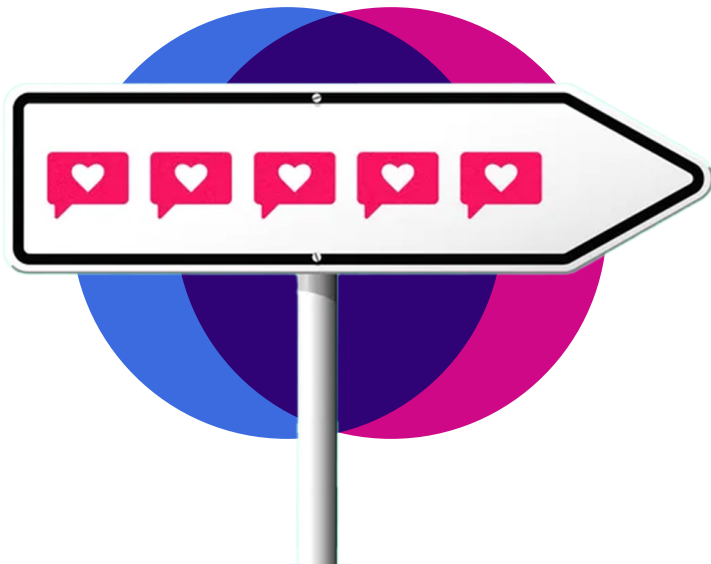
What your executives may face:

1. **Viral is largely over.** Leaders are re-evaluating the current landscape, re-educating themselves on what coverage to care about, and relinquishing their reliance on big pops of coverage.
2. **They require trust.** Leaders are re-evaluating which outlets and reporters they want to build relationships with and invest in establishing shared trust with.
3. **They need a bench.** Organizations have changed a lot over the last few years. Leaders are taking stock of who their powerful internal storytellers are and how and when to leverage them.

What communication strategies can help:

- ❑ **Define modern metrics.** Quality is greater than quantity right now. Reimagine what success looks like, how you will track it, and how you will re-educate stakeholders to value it.
- ❑ **Return to exclusives.** This ladders back to relationship building with key members of the media. You put your trust in them to get the story right, and they put their trust in you to be honest.
- ❑ **Pursue niche press.** Create a groundswell in niche verticals, and focus on telling great stories to a small set of the right readers. Do it well, and you will generate interest from bigger outlets, too.
- ❑ **Incorporate AI.** Look into ways it can generate narrative ideas, identify trends, or otherwise surface opportunities for you. It isn't doing the work. It's helping you get the work done.

Go deeper: [How to modernize internal communication metrics, too](#)



Communications vs. Marketing

Axios HQ view

Boundaries will continue to blur

The lines between communications, brand, and marketing are visible, but evaporating. As disciplines continue to merge, leaders will need to look for more modern ways to integrate strategy, preserve identity, protect roles, and streamline operations.

Mixing Board member advice

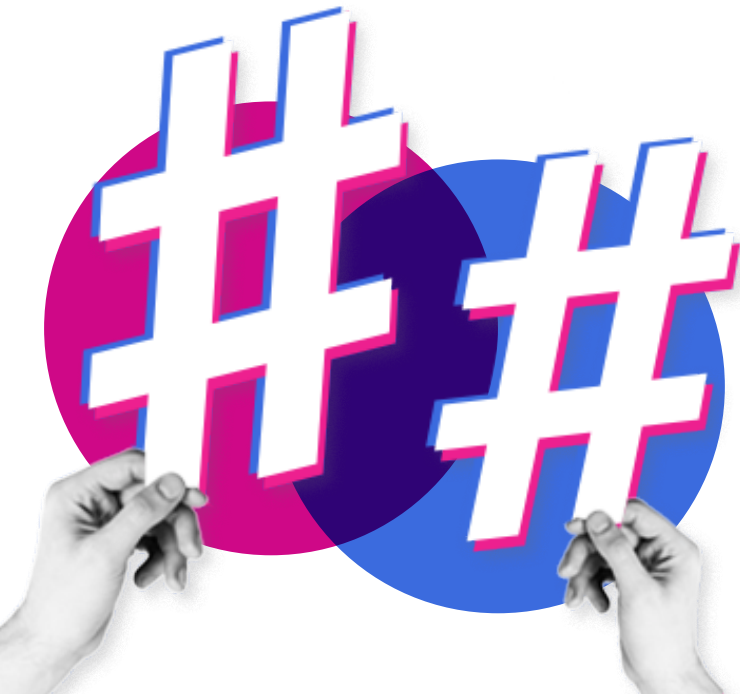
What your executives may face:

1. **Integrated strategies.** Whether these functions merge, overlap, or sit separately, marketing and communications need aligned messaging and core narratives. Leaders must integrate strategies.
2. **Forced self control.** Podcasts, TikToks, and other platforms are exciting. But leaders are finally feeling the need for discipline. Launching means sustaining, and it isn't always worth the cost.
3. **Formalized collaboration.** Communicators are the well-established right hand to any leader. Getting them in the room early enough to drive results and align with marketing is now being formalized.

What communication strategies can help:

- ❑ **Upskill.** Get more embedded in the business. Learn to read a P&L. Understand all objectives to become a bigger part of every discussion and develop the decision-making framework.
- ❑ **Reposition press releases.** They have three values — SEO and bread crumbs, historical records, investor or partnerships announcements. They are no longer how you productively earn press.
- ❑ **Develop guardrails.** Prevent leaders from going rogue. Define and customize messaging for different platforms and use cases first. Guide leaders toward appropriate channels.
- ❑ **Stay authentic.** Employees and consumers can spot copy/paste content a mile away. Create variety and authentic insights for the leaders you work with. Build their confidence to use it.

Go deeper: [Why some leaders are bad communicators](#)



About the report



In collaboration with **Axios HQ**, **Mixing Board** captured the insights in this report at its annual live event. The event, where 90+ communication and brand marketing leaders came together, was in Austin, TX, in October 2023.

AXIOS HQ

Axios HQ started half a decade ago in a newsroom. People were blown away by what its founders were able to do with their Smart Brevity writing format and the way it turned their newsroom, almost overnight, into a neck-and-neck competitor with legends like the WSJ and New York Times. Pretty quickly, executives came knocking, asking to bottle that magic so they could bring it in-house — and make their internal comms just as smart and engaging. That's the story behind Axios HQ, a smart, secure, and AI-powered software company that makes internal comms 40% shorter, massively clearer, and a lot more likely your teams engage with what you give them.

If you'd like to learn more about **Axios HQ** and see what it — and its Smart Brevity methodology — can do for you, [check out their website](#).

MIXING BOARD

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If you'd like to learn more about **Mixing Board** and how best to partner with their community, [check out their website](#).

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