



# SHAPING POLICY. SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS.

Cutting through at the intersection of  
political and corporate communications

**EXCLUSIVE WA POLLING OF  
MPs AND BUSINESS JOURNALISTS**



**SHAPING POLICY. SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS.**

2

**GROWTH THAT WORKS: COMMUNICATING BUSINESS IMPACT TO MPs** Jennifer Gerber

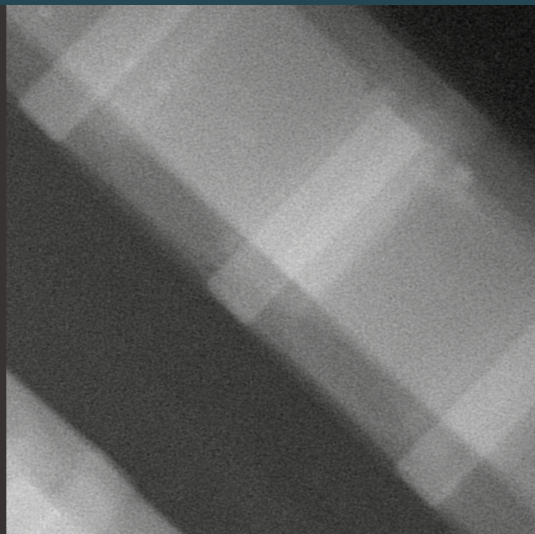
4

**NAVIGATING THE HEADWINDS** Sir Philip Rutnam

9

**RISK, REPUTATION AND THE NEW RULES OF COMMUNICATION** Rachel Ford

11



# SHAPING POLICY. SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS.

**Businesses in the UK face an increasingly fragmented communications environment. Political upheaval, economic turmoil and international instability can make it a significant challenge to convey the value they bring to the country, and to advocate for their priorities – and the messages that speak to one audience, may have little traction with, or even actively repel, others.**

How is a business to stand out in such an environment? What stories do business journalists think set the news agenda? And what subjects should companies be talking about to receive a hearing from MPs and Ministers?

To find out, we asked more than 100 MPs and business journalists what they view as the role of business, which sectors they want to hear about, and what concerns they would like organisations to address.

The results demonstrate a clear imperative for businesses to explain more robustly the value they bring.

# 1/3<sup>RD</sup>

**OF LABOUR MPs “DON’T KNOW” WHETHER ANY BUSINESS SECTOR EFFECTIVELY EXPLAINS ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE UK**

More than a third of Labour MPs “don’t know” whether any business sector effectively explains its contribution to the UK, and the party’s MPs are generally unable to say that sectors as a whole are honest, transparent and treat consumers fairly (fewer than 15% of Labour MPs would say they agree with this for any sector).

Yet the findings also indicate the strength of the appetite that MPs and journalists have to hear from business, and the critical role firms play in supporting the government’s priorities:

**“CONTRIBUTING TO ECONOMIC GROWTH” IS RECOGNISED BY LABOUR MPs AS ONE OF THE KEY ROLES OF BUSINESS, ALONG WITH “PROVIDING HIGH QUALITY EMPLOYMENT”.**

**RESPECTIVELY, 82% AND 73% OF LABOUR MPs AGREE THESE ARE “IMPORTANT ROLES FOR BUSINESS”.**

“Generating private or foreign investment into the UK”, “delivering essential services”, “treating customers fairly”, and “engaging with local communities” are all seen as lower priorities by Labour MPs – to the extent that in many cases, it is Conservative MPs that rank these societal impacts more highly.

Communicating this economic value can take many forms – our research shows that “stories in the media” are one of the strongest driver of how MPs understand and engage with business, followed by visits to firms in their local constituency. Trade unions, trade associations, and party networks all play an important role for specific sectors.

Many of the communications challenges facing businesses, however, also stem from the decisions taken in Whitehall and the White House – with business journalists keen to explore the impact, creating a tightrope for corporate and political communications leaders.

Nearly two-thirds of journalists we surveyed said recent tax changes introduced in the budget have already negatively impacted businesses’ reputations, such as through price rises or job cuts. And companies are set to face increasing scrutiny in other areas: eight in ten journalists believed the rollback of diversity and inclusiveness policies in the US would focus media attention on how businesses in the UK approach this issue, and the same number thought that a summer of public sector strikes would affect the reputation of private sector businesses in affected industries.



Of course, our findings are also underpinned by increasingly diametrically opposed public opinion on key policy issues – with rising concerns about whether we should pursue net zero, whether firms should promote DEI initiatives, and the role of private sector and international investment in essential services.

The media, in all its forms, is the intersection of this, leading and reflecting public opinion, and shaping politicians’ concerns and communications on these issues.

With the threat of recession looming, a critical spending review, and an increasingly polarised political environment, there has never been a more important time for businesses to be clear on the value they bring and explain how they are contributing to the UK’s economic performance – our research sets out the opportunities to do so.

To explore our research in more detail – including additional polling and sector-specific data – and discuss the implications for your business, please contact us:

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# GROWTH THAT WORKS: COMMUNICATING BUSINESS IMPACT TO MPs

## JENNIFER GERBER

Senior Political Adviser, WA

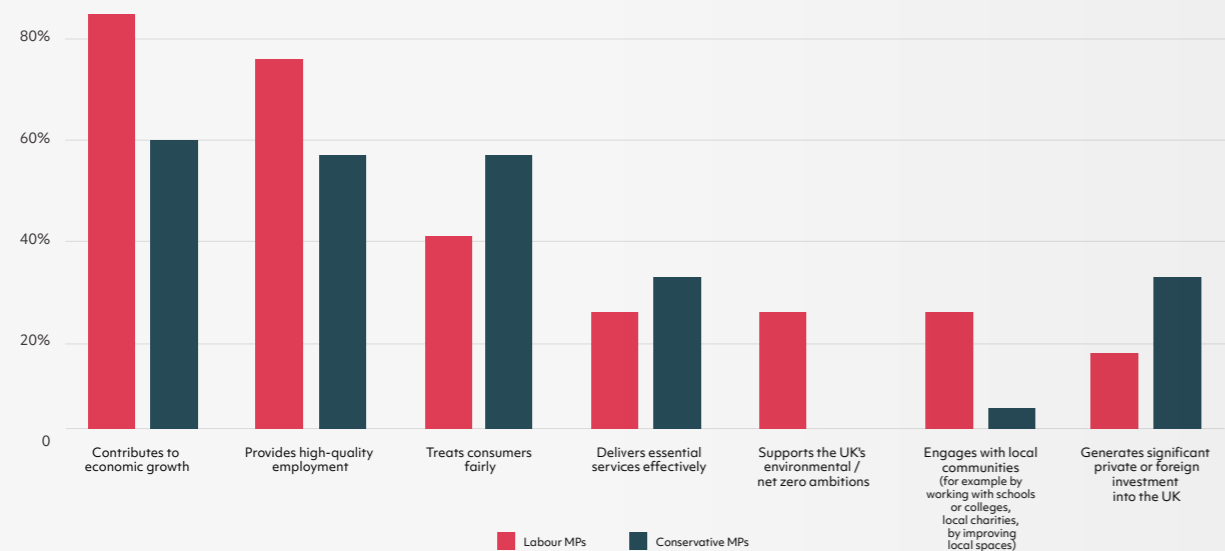


While business's relationship with HM Treasury has been fractious since the National Insurance increase last autumn, both sides will have something to smile about reading the results of our survey.

The one thing known by every CEO who goes in to meet a Minister is that growth is the overriding mission of this government, and also the key area where business can do most to support the government's agenda. Happily for both business and the Chancellor, fully 80% of Labour MPs endorse this message, and are resolutely in lockstep with Rachel Reeves on where business can add the most value.

MPs

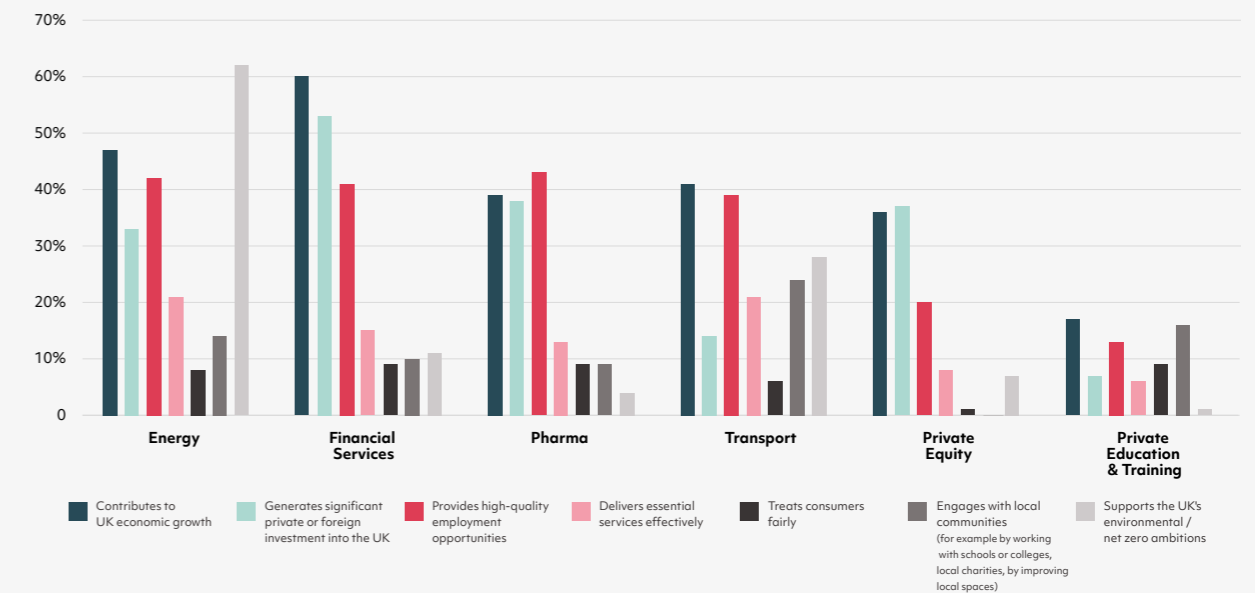
### WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING, IF ANY, DO YOU BELIEVE ARE IMPORTANT ROLES FOR BUSINESSES



At a sector level, there is a more nuanced picture – financial services, private equity and pharma firms have a strong story to tell around inward investment, and the transport sector is recognised (along with energy businesses) as key to the net zero transition. While providing high-quality employment is vital for Labour MPs, few associate this with the private education, skills and training sector.

Communicating with Labour MPs

### WHICH SECTORS DO YOU ASSOCIATE WITH EACH OF THE FOLLOWING





Unsurprisingly, Labour MPs also recognise that business has a vital part to play in providing high quality jobs for their constituents. For those wanting to influence these MPs, having a good local jobs story (quantity, but also quality) will be key. While many Labour MPs are also closely aligned with trade unions, it is worth researching the nature of these relationships and the tightness of the policy bonds between the individual Parliamentarian and the unions to which they are affiliated. Some may be little more than union mouthpieces on issues around employment and business practices, while others will have a far more nuanced view. There is no alternative to having a deep understanding of your audience and tailoring your messages accordingly.

And while we are still relatively early in the lifetime of this Parliament, there are hundreds of Labour MPs who know that they owe their seats to the electoral peculiarities of the 2024 Starmer landslide. These MPs are painfully aware that, while a Labour wave turned their constituencies red last year, the tide is likely to turn at the next election, rendering them hugely vulnerable. Some will be looking over their shoulders at Reform, while others will be worried about the Lib Dems or even Greens on their left flank. So again, different stories will need to resonate with the particular political reality in which the MP finds her or himself.

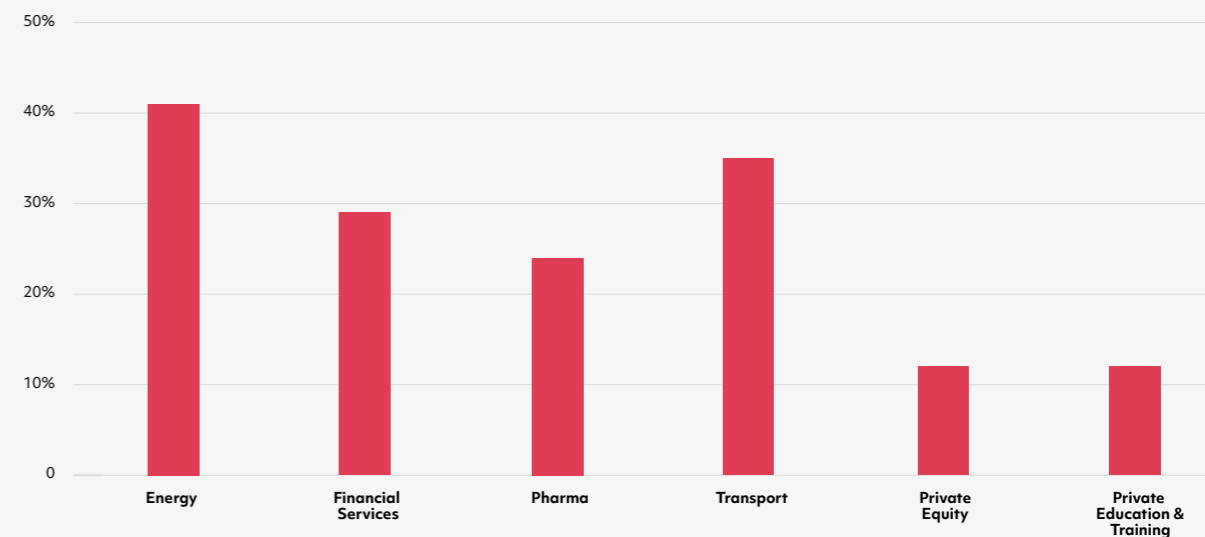
What is not in doubt is that the more local a business can make its story – not just local jobs but contribution in areas such as skills, community benefit, apprenticeships, and social impact – the easier it will be for an individual MP to become an advocate for the company in Parliament and beyond.

Our survey also finds that Labour MPs in particular have little confidence in the scrupulousness or fairness of large businesses across a range of sectors. A business with a strong reputation among staff, consumers and the public for being a good employer and solid corporate citizen will find many more doors open to it on the Parliamentary Estate, particularly among Labour MPs. As ever, the best results come from walking the walk, not just talking the talk.

During the last Labour government, **Jen** was a special adviser across three high-profile cabinet portfolios, providing strategic advice to Ministers at HM Treasury, the Department of Health, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. She has worked on several successful election campaigns, including as part of Tony Blair's team in the 2005 general election.

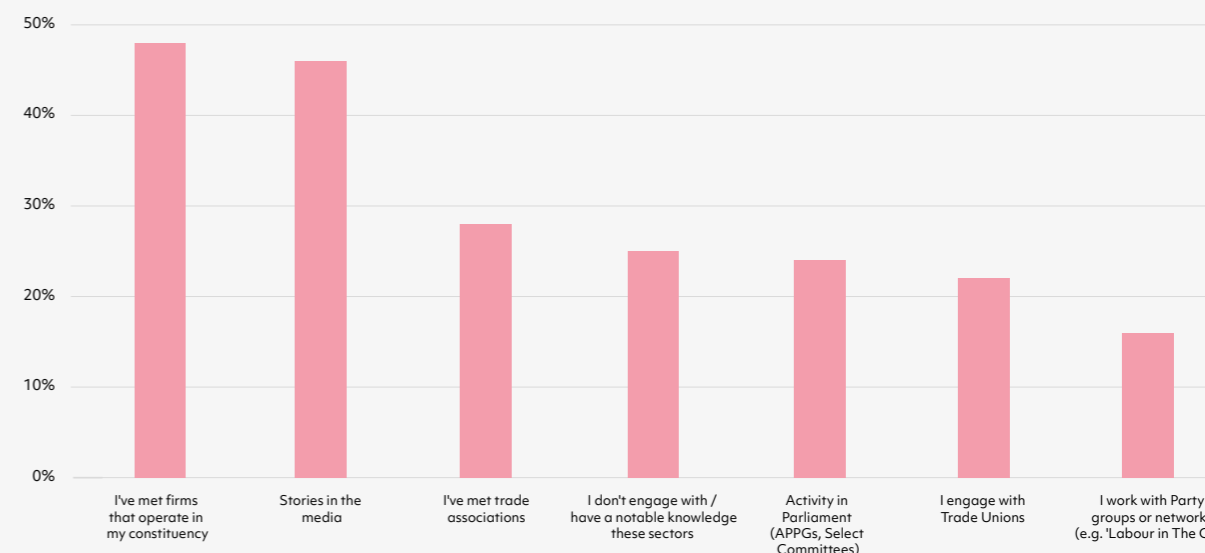
### Labour MPs

## WHICH SECTORS EFFECTIVELY EXPLAIN THEIR OVERALL CONTRIBUTION TO THE UK



### Labour MPs

## IN WHICH WAYS DO YOU ENGAGE WITH BUSINESSES IN THE SECTORS ANALYSED

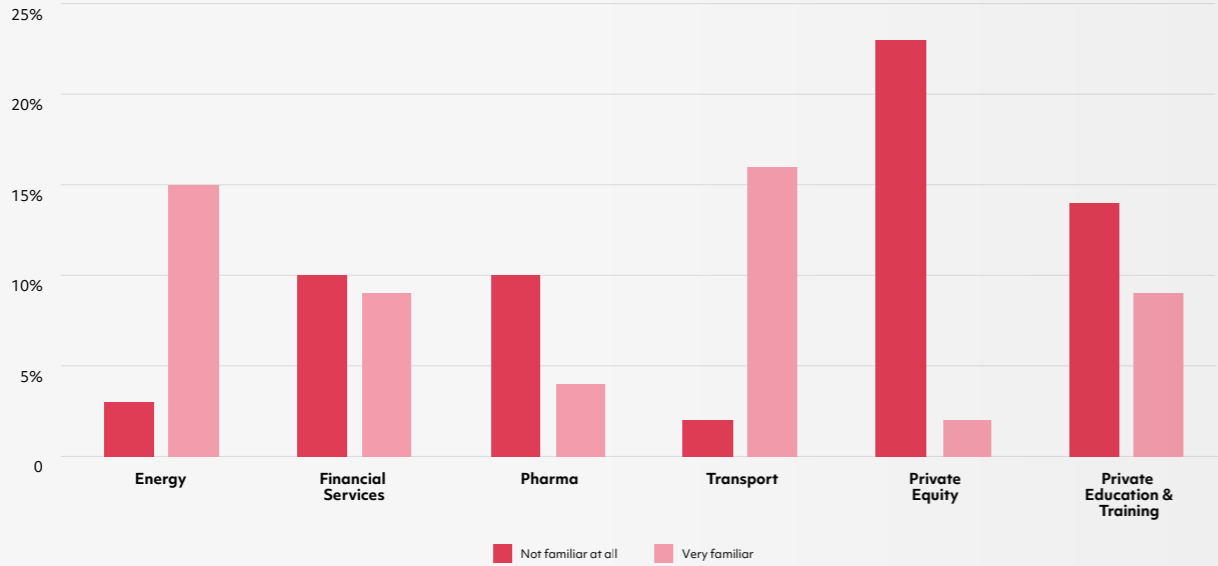




# NAVIGATING THE HEADWINDS

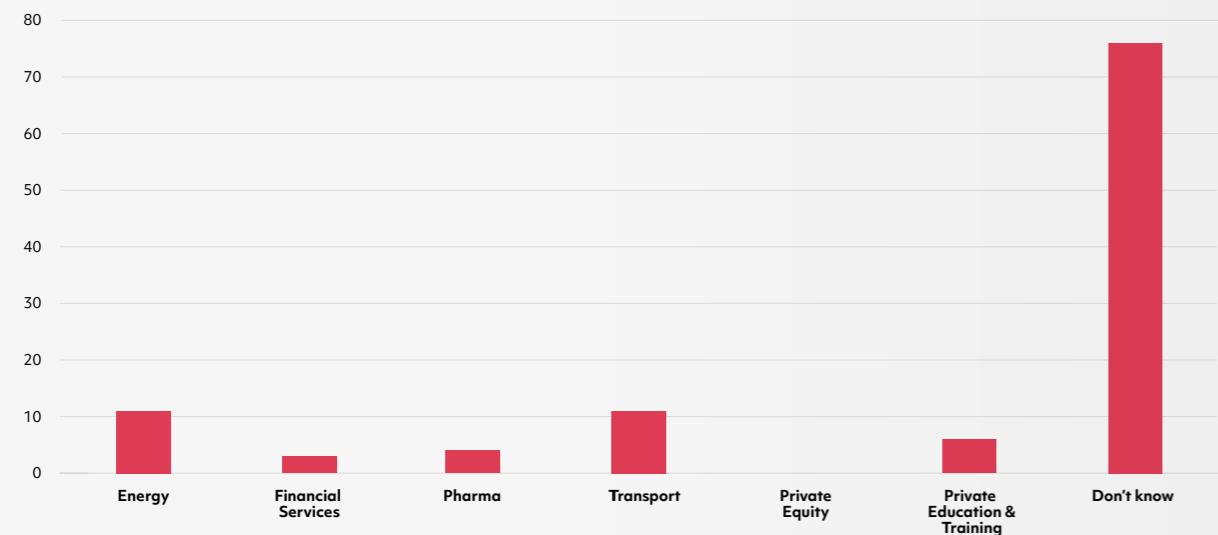
Communicating with Labour MPs

## TO WHAT EXTENT ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THE FOLLOWING SECTORS



Communicating with Labour MPs

## WHICH SECTORS DO YOU THINK "CONSISTENTLY ACT WITH HONESTY AND TRANSPARENCY"



### SIR PHILIP RUTNAM

Chair of the Advisory Board, WA



A couple of things really stand out to me. One is that this is a government facing two strong headwinds – the global instability linked to the US, and the weakness of UK growth. The first will be dominating the minds of anyone on the international or security side of government (including most of No10), and the second will be doing the same for anyone on the economic side (including the whole of HMT).

The headwinds have been getting stronger, and of course they're linked: growth forecasts around the world are falling fast as a result of US policy. Expect the same for the UK in the autumn when the OBR reports again, unless something remarkable happens.

The second is that this is a government not short of policy ideas or ambition. Look around and you can find plans for reform just about everywhere – look at planning, housing, local government, railways, integrated transport, Great British Energy, infrastructure delivery, industrial strategy and the NHS, to name a few.

My hunch is the challenge won't be lack of ambition or ideas but the bandwidth, focus and resources really to make things happen. This isn't just about money: think too about senior Ministers' time, and the capacity of the state to make really complex things happen.

The story of 2025 will be about how these two things – headwinds and ambition – play out against each other as we move through the big set piece events. That means above all the Spending Review on 11th June. The Spending Review will be the pivot for just about every major policy initiative in government – the NHS 10 year plan, the defence review, the industrial strategy. Expect enormous effort and some smart political judgement to go into making these things a success. But also expect signs of frustration as change then takes too long to happen, and good ideas risk falling by the wayside.

Here are four things any business can do in this environment.

**1.First**, recognise that this government needs growth and, maybe even more, it needs signs of confidence. That can give businesses real leverage if they speak the right language (as we outline above) but above all do it in the right way – pitched right for that particular audience, which may be more or less knowledgeable than the last.

**2.Second**, have an agenda that's great on low/zero cost ideas for boosting growth, like: less/better regulation, much more tech, moving faster on modernisation/reform/new standards. Add to this ways in which the implementation task for government can be made easier: pre-pack reforms anyone?

The government's instructions that economic regulators should prioritise growth may present one opportunity to do this – and with journalists also positive about this change, businesses can present a compelling media and political story to showcase how they will use these freedoms.

**BUSINESS JOURNALISTS AGREE THAT CHANGING THE REMIT OF REGULATORS TO FOCUS ON ECONOMIC GROWTH WILL...**

**80%** MAKE BRITAIN MORE COMPETITIVE AND ATTRACT INWARD INVESTMENT

**75%** INCREASE INNOVATION

**3.Third**, actively manage risk. Engaging in this environment needs to be about reducing the risk that good pro-business measures don't really get delivered, as well as the risk of bad decisions/unintended consequences. The right media profile helps, as well as a real depth of relationships, to reduce the risk of surprises.

**46%** OF LABOUR MPs ENGAGE WITH BUSINESS THROUGH STORIES IN THE MEDIA

**4.Finally**, recognise this is a long game. Your horizons are probably longer than most politicians, but shorter than most officials. Build those relationships and always have a narrative of good ideas ready: if they don't land this year they could do next.

**Sir Philip** was Permanent Secretary in Whitehall for nearly a decade, at the Department for Transport, the Home Office, and the Department for Business. Before this, he also spent more than 10 years as a Senior Civil Servant in the Treasury, including roles as Private Secretary to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, and Head of Transport Industries.

His deep experience of government also includes being one of the country's most senior regulators as a founding Partner and later Board Member of Ofcom.

# RISK, REPUTATION AND THE NEW RULES OF COMMUNICATION

**RACHEL FORD**

Director, Corporate Communications



**In an era where trust is hard-won and easily lost, the old adage that "today's news is tomorrow's fish and chip paper" no longer holds. A single headline or quote can echo through social media, investor briefings and select committee corridors for months.**

For businesses in politically sensitive or regulated sectors, the stakes are even higher. Every statement, silence or slip-up is ripe for scrutiny – and reputations built over years can falter in minutes.

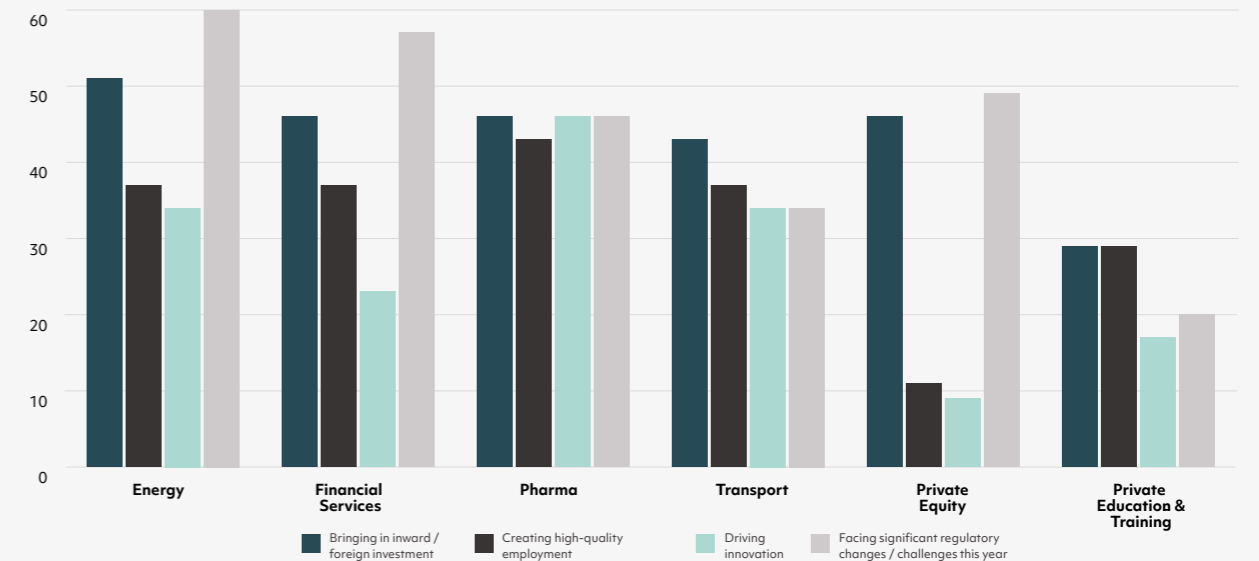
**DRIVING COVERAGE**

The press plays a pivotal role in shaping public and political perceptions of business. But what drives coverage, and can journalists be influenced?

Our polling shows investment is one of the most compelling reasons for journalists to write about a business; jobs are a secondary but still significant hook, while innovation and regulatory challenges also resonate.

Business journalists

**WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING THEMES MIGHT YOU CONSIDER WRITING ABOUT, FOR EACH SECTOR**



Sector matters. In areas like energy, financial services and life sciences, journalists are particularly alert to how businesses respond to changing regulation, while in education, people and employment carries more weight. Innovation is an attractive theme for the pharmaceutical industry, while journalists follow several issues in the transport sector – perhaps due to its widespread appeal.

## WHAT JOURNALISTS WANT

Journalists are not short of pitches – but what cuts through?



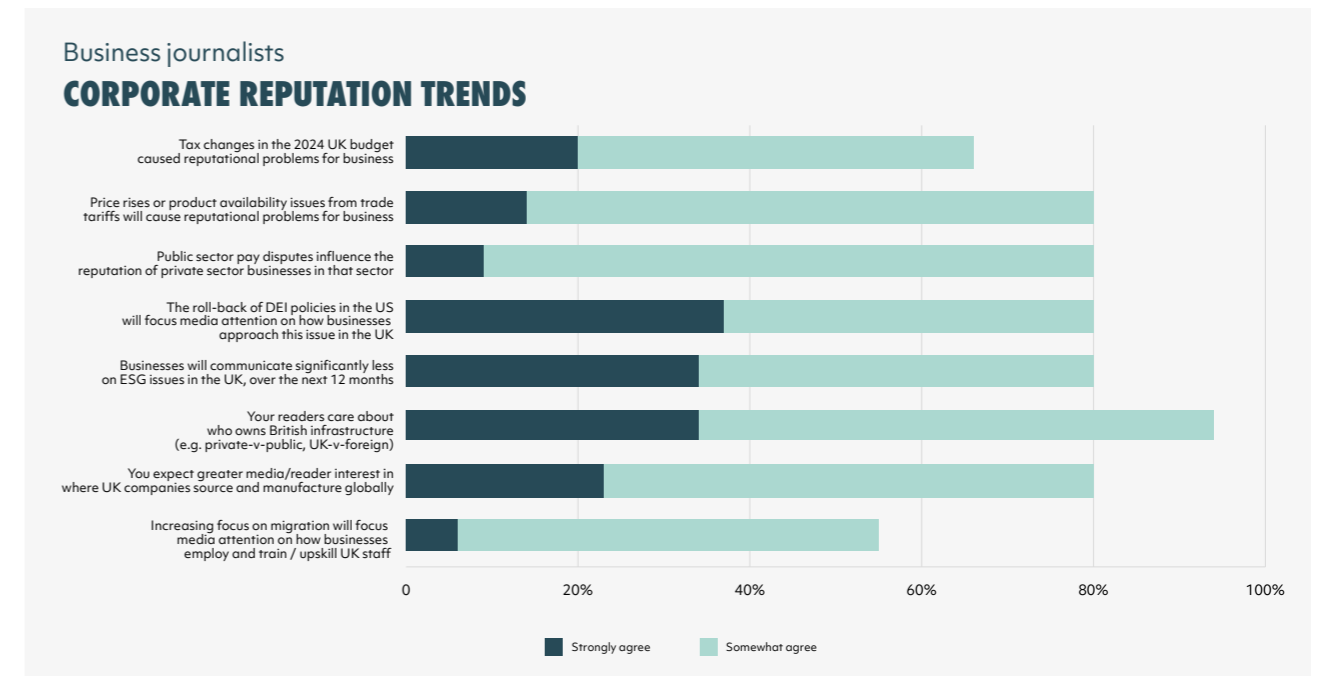
- **Access to leadership** – 97% say access to senior spokespeople, especially CEOs, make a business more credible. A factory tour is not enough – they want senior figures speaking with authority.
- **New data and insight** – journalists want evidence, research and analysis with a clear news angle. A chance for businesses to shape – not just follow – the agenda.
- **Innovative solutions** – 87% of business journalists will report on new products or innovations, although this drops to 74% when asked about interest in environmental impact.
- **Business performance** – growth, profits and pricing matter, with nearly every journalist saying how a business is performing influences coverage.

Throughout our polling it is clear journalists want stories that matter. This means grounding communications in real-world outcomes, whether that's creating jobs, investing in the UK, or innovating for a more sustainable future.

## THE REPUTATIONAL RISKS AHEAD

Journalists don't just report on financial performance – they're watching and analysing how businesses respond to the biggest social and economic issues of the day.

Our research reveals five reputational red flags rising up the media agenda:





**1. Strikes and pay disputes** remain a flashpoint and are likely to dominate headlines again this year, with 80% of journalists believing industrial action directly harms business reputation.

**2. The quiet rollbacks on DE&I and ESG policies** in some companies are already attracting media attention. 80% of business journalists expect greater scrutiny of DE&I commitments, while 71% say the same of environmental impact.

**3. Ownership structures are under the microscope,** with 94% of journalists acknowledging their readers care about who owns UK infrastructure. It's no longer what a company does, but who it is and why it operates the way it does.

**4. Price and fairness** continue to carry weight in the context of global trade wars and cost-of-living crisis. Journalists flagged tax increases, rising prices, and product availability as leading causes of reputational damage - especially if companies are seen as profiteering.

**5. Workplace practices** is a divisive issue among business journalists, with 40% agreeing proposals in the Employment Rights Bill could create reputational risks for businesses, compared to 29% who disagree. This divide reflects the increasing focus on how companies treat their workforce - especially when contrasted with high executive salaries or poor leadership.

### MEDIA STORY VS. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

One of the biggest own goals a business can make is treating political and media engagement the same way.

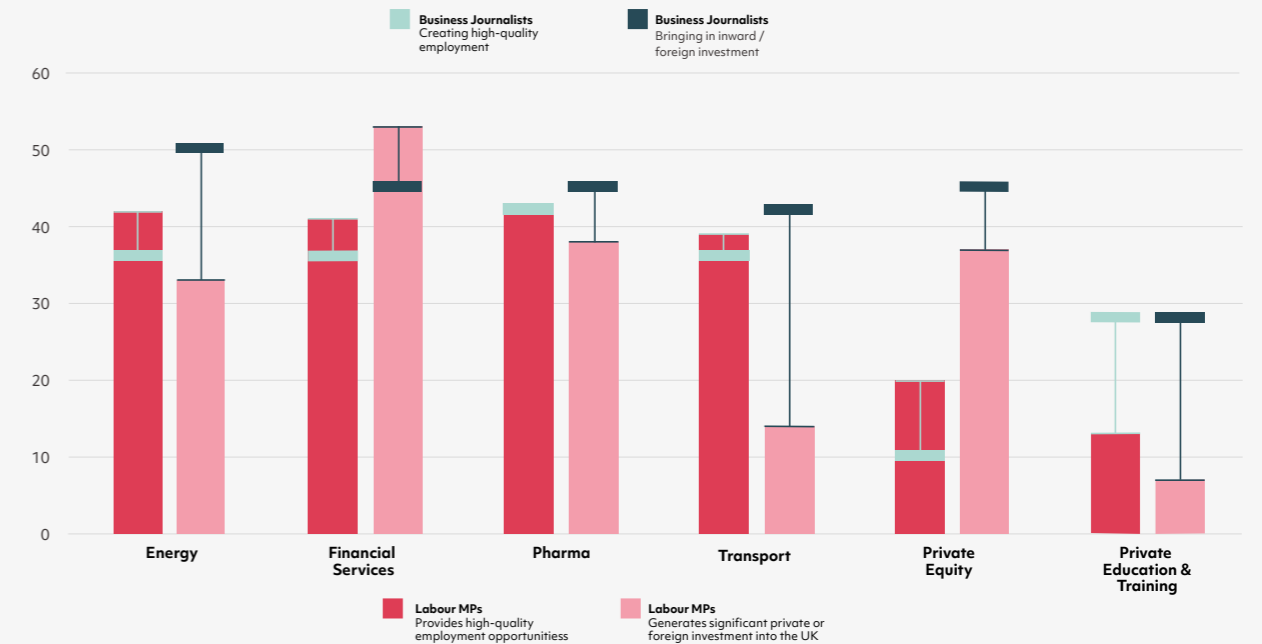
Journalists and MPs care about the same issues - growth, jobs, fairness - but they approach them differently. MPs look for local impact and political alignment; journalists want national narratives, compelling stories and policy implications.

It is important to tailor the message without losing authenticity. A message that lands on a constituency visit may fall flat in a newsroom, and vice versa.

Ultimately, both audiences value transparency and credibility. They want to see companies that aren't just making a case - but delivering on the core role of business: growth, and the benefits that flow from it.

Labour MPs and business journalists

### WHICH SECTORS DO YOU ASSOCIATE WITH CREATING JOBS AND SECURING INVESTMENT

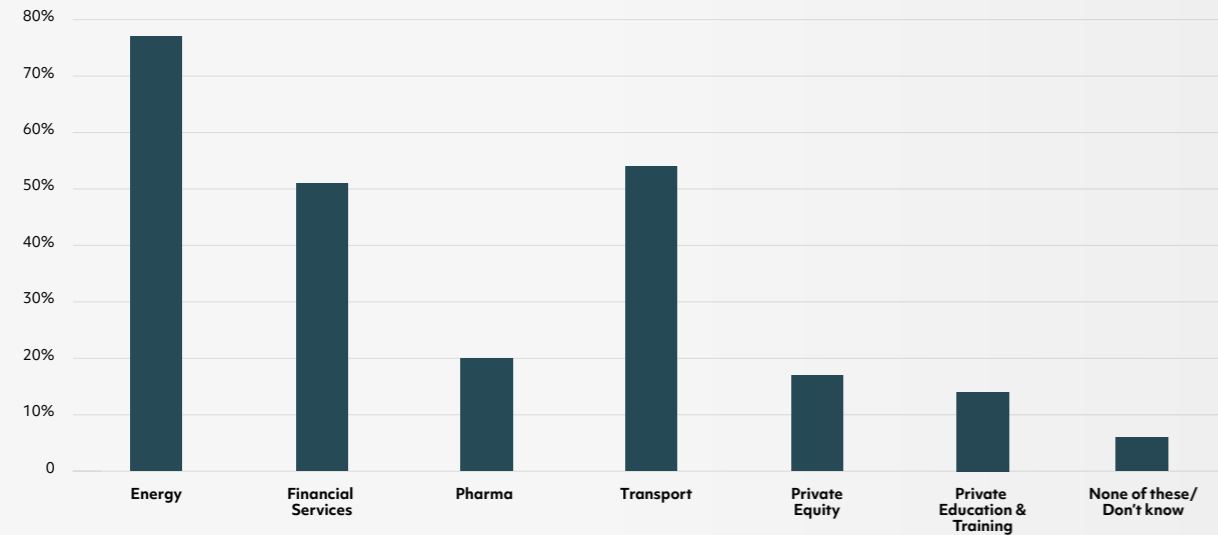


**Rachel** is a corporate communications specialist, with extensive experience promoting policy, managing reputation and influencing public opinion.

She specialises in strategic communication plans and messaging that genuinely shift the dial, as well preparing, responding to and recovering from crises.

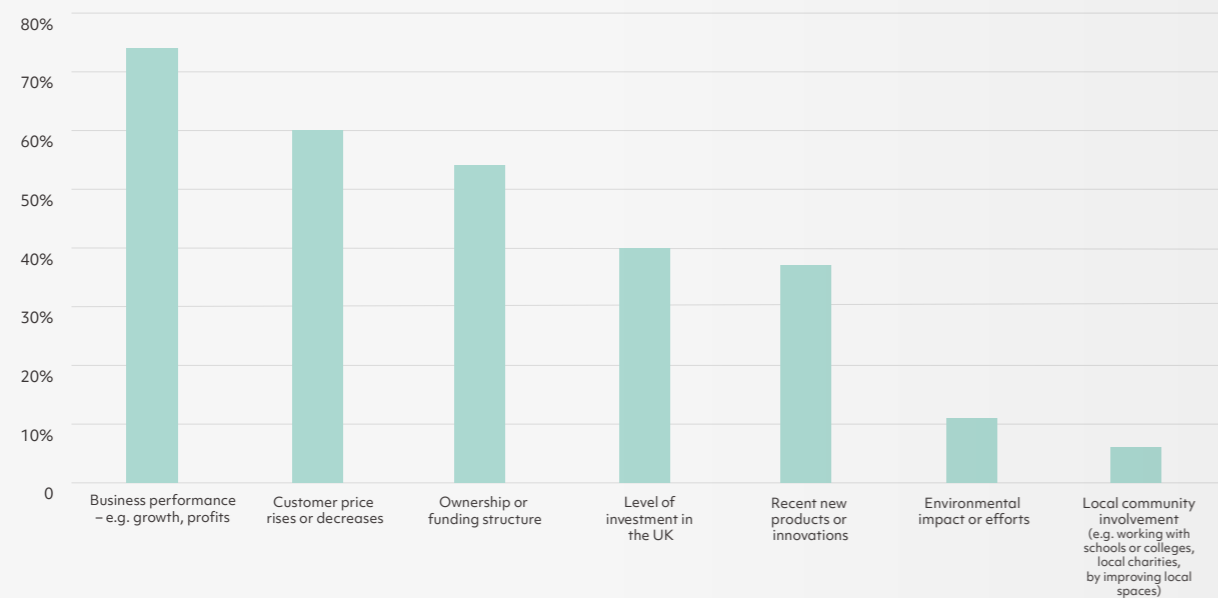
Business journalists

### WHICH SECTORS DO YOU BELIEVE GENERATE ABOVE AVERAGE READER ENGAGEMENT



Business journalists

### WHEN ASSESSING A POTENTIAL BUSINESS STORY, HOW FREQUENTLY DO YOUR READERS FIND THESE ASPECTS USEFUL AS CONTEXT



## OUR RESEARCH

### MPs

YouGov completed online interviews with a representative sample of 105 MPs, between 6th – 28th March 2025. Results for MPs are weighted by party, gender, electoral cohort, and geography to give a sample that is representative of the House of Commons.

### BUSINESS JOURNALISTS

Survation completed online interviews with 35 business and sector-specialist journalists, working at leading national and regional news outlets, between 3rd – 10th April 2025.



**WA is a strategic communications consultancy helping organisations achieve policy and reputational outcomes.**

We're integrated in approach, bringing together public affairs, corporate communications, digital, research and creative services. We're specialists in sectors where government action, media interest and public impact are often interlinked, including energy, education, financial services, healthcare and transport.

We bring about change for clients and communicate their impact in society – from strengthening involvement of patients in their treatment, to helping to secure free school meals funding, to promoting net-zero public transport.



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