

02.2026

LEADERSHIP PRESENCE:

What Employees Want from Leaders in the AI Era

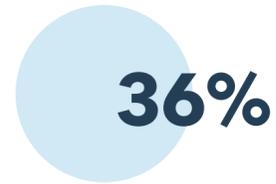
Executive Communications Research Findings

KETCHUM

How can leaders reach employees and consumers, across four generations?

Today, there are more generations represented in the workforce than any time before:*

MILLENNIALS



GEN X



GEN Z



BABY BOOMERS



Much has been made of how different these generations are in how they perceive executive leaders, shaped by their communication and technology preferences. Forward thinking communicators want to know which platforms and formats to invest in which executive engagements will have the highest impact.

What if conventional wisdom is leading communicators and leaders astray?

We wanted to gather survey data to understand **how executive leaders can best adapt to generational expectations, communicate effectively, and foster a high-performing culture**. And do so in a business landscape marked by unprecedented disruption, AI in the workplace, economic uncertainty and change.

While **most 2026 outlook surveys interview CEOs...we talked to employees and consumers** to understand what they wanted from leaders, not the other way around.

What we learned

The focus on generational differences is overblown.

While different generations may prefer different formats or channels for leader communications, they agree more than they differ. Roles and professional levels tended to be more meaningful differentiators than generations.

Gen Z doesn't want your TikToks

The surprising truth about what every generation actually values in leaders

The message from employees to their leaders is clear: Close your laptop, put down your smart phone and start walking the floor.

Listen to us, understand our world and come talk with us in-person. When you communicate with us, we don't expect a Broadway production. Tear up your script and reallocate the budget for that highly produced sizzle reel to focus on meeting us face to face. **Employees want clear, straightforward communications from company leaders.**

Perhaps not surprising against a backdrop of AI implementation and the proliferation of AI-generated content, there is **increased value placed on human interactions**, on something real. Our survey findings underscore how important engaging in person is to driving followership, **even for Gen Z.**

We found the preference for in-touch and in-person leaders to be even more pronounced for frontline workers. This is especially relevant as blue-collar industries face a labor shortage, and we anticipate the rise of the "new blue-collar" roles that will combine hands-on work with digital and AI tools. **Leaders in 2026 and beyond will need to address the frontline communications gap - the sooner the better** if they want to engage this critically important employee segment.

And does it matter to consumers if the CEOs of their favorite clothing, tech or beauty brands are highly visible? The answer is no... and yes. Product quality, word of mouth, and reviews drive brand preference. **Executive visibility enhances admiration for a company and brand advocacy but is not a primary purchase driver.**

What this means for you

Key findings for internal communicators

Being “in touch with employees” and accountable are the most important signals of leadership effectiveness.

Across all employee groups, #1 and #2 ranked leadership qualities (**50% & 47%**) - followed by transparent (42%), experienced (40%) & competent (39%).

Being perfectly scripted is working against you, leaders. Human-centric and genuine is key.

All employees prefer conversational (**72%**) over scripted, simple & direct (**70%**) over polished & produced, straightforward (**65%**) over entertaining.

The rules of content marketing do not apply; short-form and high-entertainment-value is not what employees want.

All generations prefer **in-person meetings (40-47%) and face-to-face conversations (39-43%)**. These rank in the top 3 versus receiving more “content” - whether written or video.

Anchor leader communications internally and extend thoughtfully.

Employees want to hear from their leaders via internal channels (**55%**) over mixed (36%) or external (9%), but Gen Z (**41%**) and Millennials (**42%**) more likely to prefer a mix of both.

Closing the frontline communications gap requires leaders to show up in person, not just send messages from afar.

Frontline workers value leaders who are “in touch with employees” (**54%**) more than office workers (44%), face-to-face conversations also higher (**48% vs 37%**).

Key findings for brand & executive communicators

Build brand marketing on fundamentals first.

Product quality, word of mouth, reviews drive purchase intent. **Only 11%** of respondents said highly visible executives impacted brand preference.

Consumers expect leaders to be the voice of the company and visibility impacts brand perception.

91% say it's important for leaders to be voice of the company. 47% cite major impact on admiring the company, higher for Gen Z and Millennials at **54% & 53%**.

Make leaders visible through multiple channels, not just social.

Only **31%** follow leaders of brands they admire on social platforms.

The brand is the reason consumers follow leaders on social.

#1 reason consumers track leaders on social is company/ product information (**61%**), 20 points higher than alignment to personal values.

Visual platforms outperform short copy/professional formats.

More consumers follow brand leaders on **Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok (64%, 59%, 56%, 51%)** than X (39%), and LinkedIn (27%).

For internal communications professionals, the path forward requires rebalancing resources away from over-produced content and toward face-to-face engagement, particularly for frontline workers.

While generational differences exist in what employees value in leaders, they are less dramatic than role-based differences. The challenge will be to get more of your executives' time but the data helps you make a strong business case.

For executive leaders, the message is equally clear: Your employees want to see you, hear from you and engage with you in person.

They value empathy and the ability to understand their day-to-day challenges over charisma and polish.

As organizations navigate AI implementation and an increasingly digital workplace, the human element of leadership communication becomes more valuable, not less.

The organizations that will build high-performing cultures and strong brand loyalty are those that invest in genuine leader-employee and leader-consumer connections – the kind that can only be built through presence, relevance, and real conversation.

METHODOLOGY: Ketchum partnered with Savanta to run a 10-minute survey, recruiting a sample of 530 general consumers and 1287 working consumers (part- or full-time) in the United States over the age of 18. The study ensured the general consumer panel reflects the US adult population 18+ and obtained a sizable sample of generations across both general and working consumers. This study obtained a 95.6% confidence level at a 4.4% MoE.



Thank you!

Let's continue the conversation.

Lauren Butler
Managing Director
Employee Engagement
Lauren.butler@omc.com

Kabira Ferrell
Executive Vice President
Executive Visibility & Corporate Reputation
Kabira.Ferrell@omc.com

KETCHUM

Ketchum.com