

Beyond the Backlash

Why Corporate Reputation and Trust Still Hinge on Sustainability, Social Impact, and Transparency

A GlobeScan Special Report on
the Role of Business in Society

March 2025



Introduction

Trust in business has never been more critical or difficult to earn. In an era of heightened public skepticism, the role of business in society is under intense scrutiny. ESG initiatives face mounting backlash, and the path to building a strong reputation has become increasingly complex.

Despite these challenges, one truth remains clear: sustainability and positive social impact are cornerstones of trust in business. Consumers worldwide continue to expect businesses to demonstrate genuine leadership on environmental and social issues, making sustainability a non-negotiable element of corporate reputation alongside transparency.

Since 2001, GlobeScan has been measuring societal “Thick Trust” in institutions through our annual global public opinion surveys.

We ask how much trust people have in institutions like global companies, governments, and others “to operate in the best interest of our society.”

Taking this approach to measuring trust reveals a growing trust gap between civil society and business. We also see a diverse set of public expectations of business that vary from one region to the next, demanding localized approaches to building trust.

Based on over 20 years of global public opinion research, GlobeScan’s findings underscore the pivotal role of sustainability, social impact, and transparency in earning trust.

This report provides a roadmap for businesses to navigate rising societal expectations, close the trust gap in a polarized world, and strengthen their reputation.

Beyond transactional trust, “operating in the best interest of society” translates into *Thick Trust* which captures a deeper and more enduring sense of trust between business and society.



Key Insights



There is a growing trust gap between civil society and business. GlobeScan's tracking of Thick Trust – a deep, enduring trust that extends beyond the transactional – reveals perniciously low levels of public trust in companies. Moreover, the trust gap between business and civil society (including scientific organizations/academia and NGOs) is growing, underscoring a critical challenge for companies.



Sustainability, delivering social impact, and transparency are key drivers of trust in business. Our research underscores that trust in business is strongly tied to environmental and social performance, as well as transparency. These findings reaffirm the central role of ESG in shaping corporate reputation and building trust.



A regional mosaic of public expectations and perceptions demands localized trust-building strategies. GlobeScan's research shows public expectations of business vary from one region to the next, meaning that localized trust-building strategies are essential to corporate reputation.





1.

THERE IS A GROWING TRUST GAP BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND BUSINESS

GlobeScan's long-term tracking of Thick Trust in institutions shows that global businesses are consistently ranked lower than other institutions such as scientific/academic organizations, NGOs, and even the UN.

Our research reveals that distrust in large global companies primarily stems from perceptions of inadequate social and environmental responsibility, as well as a lack of transparency and accountability.

Business Ranks Lower than Civil Society on Thick Trust

When it comes to Thick Trust, business ranks relatively low, with a +12 percent net trust rating for global companies and a +22 percent net trust rating for national companies.

In contrast, Thick Trust in scientific/academic institutions remains very robust, with a +69 percent net trust rating followed by NGOs with a +45 percent net trust rating.

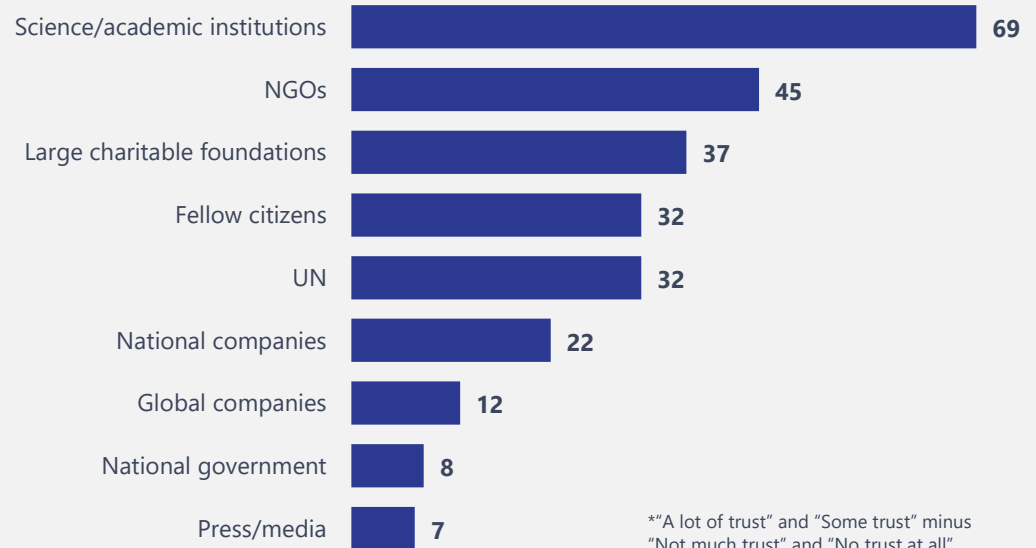
How does GlobeScan measure Thick Trust?

To go beyond the transactional, we ask respondents how much they trust an organization or institution to act in the best interest of society.



Trust in Institutions

Net Trust,* Average of 31 Countries, 2024



Q. Please indicate how much you trust each of the following institutions to operate in the best interest of our society. Would you say you have a lot of trust, some trust, not much trust, or no trust at all in...?

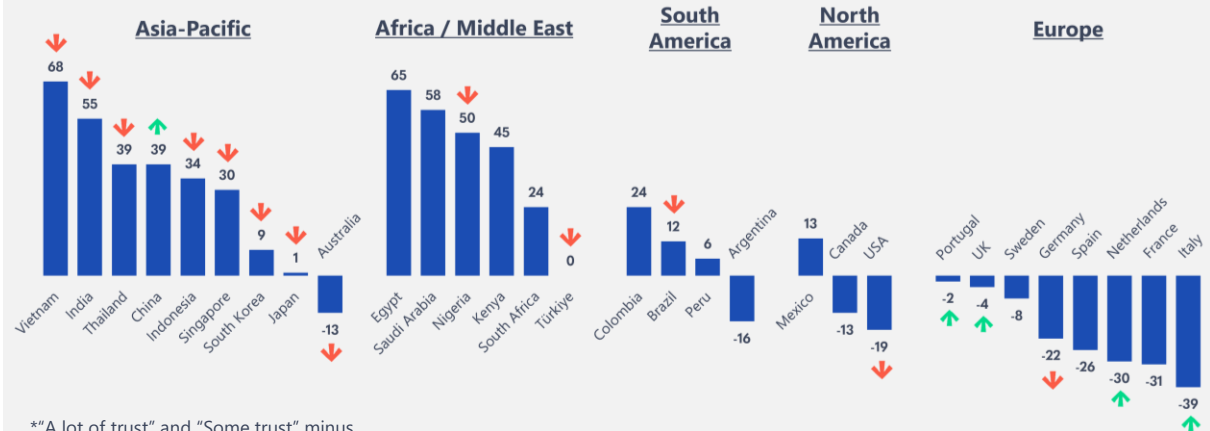
Significant Declines in Thick Trust in Global Companies across Many Countries

Across all 31 countries surveyed, only five have shown an increase in Thick Trust in global companies since 2023 while there have been significant declines in 13 countries, illustrating the ongoing challenge of the reputational context for business.

Global companies operating around the world need to understand their local context and tailor reputation management, communications, and policy advocacy strategies accordingly.

Trust in Global Companies

Net Trust,* by Country, 2023–2024



Q. Please indicate how much you trust each of the following institutions to operate in the best interest of our society. Would you say you have a lot of trust, some trust, not much trust, or no trust at all in...? – Global companies operating in my country

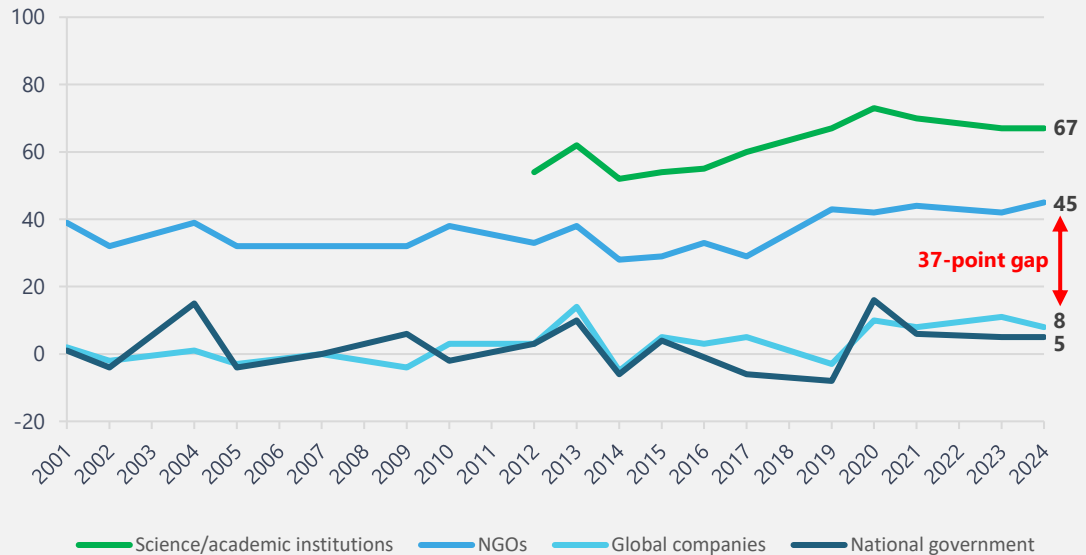
A Widening Trust Gap between Civil Society and Business

As Thick Trust in business declines, the trust gap between civil society and global companies is widening. Trust in NGOs among 16 consistently tracked countries increased from 42 percent to 45 percent between 2023 and 2024, while trust in global companies fell from 11 percent to 8 percent over the same period.

When comparing trust in global companies to trust in NGOs across key countries, the largest gaps are found in developed nations. In 2024, 41 percent of Americans said they had at least some trust in global companies compared to 67 percent who trusted NGOs, resulting in a -26-point corporate-NGO trust gap. This corporate-NGO trust gap is much smaller in most developing countries. However, there is a notable convergence in developing countries toward the trends seen in the West.

Trust in Institutions

Net Trust,* Average of 16 Countries, 2001–2024



*"A lot of trust" and "Some trust" minus "Not much trust" and "No trust at all"

Q. Please indicate how much you trust each of the following institutions to operate in the best interest of our society. Would you say you have a lot of trust, some trust, not much trust, or no trust at all in...?

Six Key Factors That Erode Trust in Global Companies

So, what is holding businesses back? We asked respondents why they distrust companies and in a summary of their own words, they shared six key factors that consistently erode public trust in large corporations worldwide:

1. **Profit-driven motives:** Many believe global companies prioritize profits over societal well-being, often at the expense of ethical standards and social responsibility.
2. **Lack of transparency and accountability:** Respondents frequently cite dishonesty and lack of transparency and feel that companies often hide their true intentions.
3. **Environmental harm:** Environmental concerns are prevalent, with many viewing corporations as major contributors to pollution and environmental degradation, often without sufficient efforts to mitigate their impact.

4. **Exploitation and unethical labor practices:** Many express concerns over labor practices, believing companies exploit workers in developing countries or engage in harmful business tactics.
5. **Excessive influence and power:** There is widespread unease about the undue influence of global corporations over governments and policies, often prioritizing corporate interests over the public good.
6. **Historical misconduct:** Trust takes years to build and seconds to lose. Many respondents cite scandals, fraud, and other negative experiences in the past that have further eroded trust, reinforcing the perception that these companies prioritize profits over ethical practices and social responsibility.



Reasons for Distrust in Global Companies: Respondent Comments

Profit-driven motives

"Companies must act in accordance with maximizing their benefits; their purpose is the profit." **Female, 35–44, Argentina**

"I think they put profits ahead of our best interests." **Female, 45–54, Australia**

Lack of transparency and accountability

"There is no transparency in what they do." **Male, 65+, Italy**

"No trust because they are global, not specific to my country. No transparency in who funds them and where the money goes." **Female, 65+, USA**

Environmental harm

"They are looking for financial gain and do not care about environmental consequences." **Female, 35–44, Sweden**

"Many of the world's biggest companies are responsible for extreme levels of pollution and over-consumption of natural resources. I do not trust them to act in a way which helps alleviate the climate crisis." **Male, 55–64, UK**

Exploitation and unethical labor practices

"They are most likely the ones to impact our society with unethical practices such as forced labor and child labor while benefiting from government incentives to set up business here." **Male, 18–24, UK**

"Multinationals trade with profit in mind. Maximum profit can only be achieved through the exploitation of people." **Female, 18–24, Netherlands**

Excessive influence and power

"Large companies have used their power to influence governmental bodies." **Female, 65+, Canada**

"Because companies want control, power, and money no matter what." **Male, 45–54, Brazil**

Historical misconduct

"We have had very bad experiences in Nigeria over the past years with multinationals coming to exploit our resources with our government without giving back to society." **Female, 25–34, Nigeria**

"Mistrust in global companies often arises from corporate misconduct and negative past experiences." **Male, 25–34, India**

Q. [Asked to those who do not trust global companies] Why do you NOT trust global companies to operate in the best interest of our society?



2.

SUSTAINABILITY, DELIVERING SOCIAL IMPACT, AND TRANSPARENCY ARE KEY DRIVERS OF THICK TRUST IN BUSINESS

Our analysis of reputation drivers reveals that trust in businesses is most strongly linked to their environmental and social responsibility as well as their transparency.

Although companies often receive lower ratings in these areas compared to other performance attributes, our data indicate that these factors significantly influence trust in businesses.

Core Dimensions of Corporate Reputation That Drive Trust

To assess the drivers of corporate reputation, we developed a simple methodology that yields meaningful insights.

We asked people worldwide to name a large company, then rate their level of trust in it and evaluate its performance across nine core dimensions of corporate reputation.

Using regression analysis, we found that being environmentally friendly, being socially responsible, and being open and honest are the strongest drivers of trust. However, companies are often given low ratings on these attributes, making them key areas for improvement to drive corporate reputation and trust.

Conversely, companies are rated relatively high on their performance in being innovative, creating jobs, treating employees well, and providing high-quality products at a fair price. However, these attributes are less influential in driving trust and are instead areas where performance should be maintained.

Trust in Companies: Perceived Performance vs Importance

Average of 31 Countries, 2024



There Are Regional Variations on What Drives Trust in Business

Being purpose-driven (making a positive difference in society through products, services, and operations) is both a strong driver of trust and an area where companies receive relatively positive performance ratings, as shown in the matrix on the previous page. Investing in this area can significantly enhance corporate reputation, though there are differences by region.

In North America, companies are perceived to be performing somewhat worse on making a positive difference, even though this remains a relatively strong potential driver of reputation. In Europe, being seen as making a positive difference in society is relatively less linked to increased trust than it is in other regions.

Supporting charities and good causes receives modest performance ratings and should be monitored, as the importance of this metric varies by region. In emerging markets, this attribute is more critical for driving trust than in Europe and North America.





3.

A REGIONAL MOSAIC OF PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DEMANDS LOCALIZED TRUST-BUILDING STRATEGIES

Public expectations of business vary from one region to the next, meaning that localized trust-building strategies are essential to ensuring a resilient corporate reputation.

Perceptions of companies also vary strongly by sector, and views of different sectors differ across geographies, further emphasizing the need for customization of trust-building strategies.

Expectations of Large Companies Vary by Region

Despite the similarities in what drives trust, there are notable differences in what people say they expect from companies in different regions.

While individuals across all regions primarily expect large companies to ensure their products are safe and healthy and that workers are fairly compensated, environmental protection ranks in the top three expectations in every region except North America, where environmental protection does not even rank in the top five. Instead, North Americans prioritize the fair treatment of employees and job applicants, regardless of gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation.

In Asia-Pacific, fair treatment of employees, regardless of gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation is not prioritized as highly as in North America. However, product transparency is instead one of the top expectations that people have of business.

Expectations of Large Companies

Rank Order of Net Expectations,* by Region, 2024

North America	Europe	Asia-Pacific	Latin America	Africa / Middle East
Safe/healthy products	Safe/healthy products	Safe/healthy products	Providing fair wages	Safe/healthy products
Providing fair wages	Providing fair wages	Providing fair wages	Safe/healthy products	Don't harm environment
Treating employees fairly	Don't harm environment	Don't harm environment	Don't harm environment	Providing fair wages
Quality products/services	Providing good jobs	Product transparency	Providing good jobs	Treating employees fairly
Providing good jobs	Treating employees fairly	Providing good jobs	Treating employees fairly	Vision to make world better

*"Held completely responsible" (4+5) minus "Not held responsible" (1+2)

Q. Below are things some people say should be part of the responsibilities of large companies. For each one, please indicate to what extent you think companies should be held responsible.

People Also View Sectors Differently

Our research also shows that there is great diversity in how people around the world view companies in different sectors in terms of fulfilling their responsibilities to society compared to other types of companies.

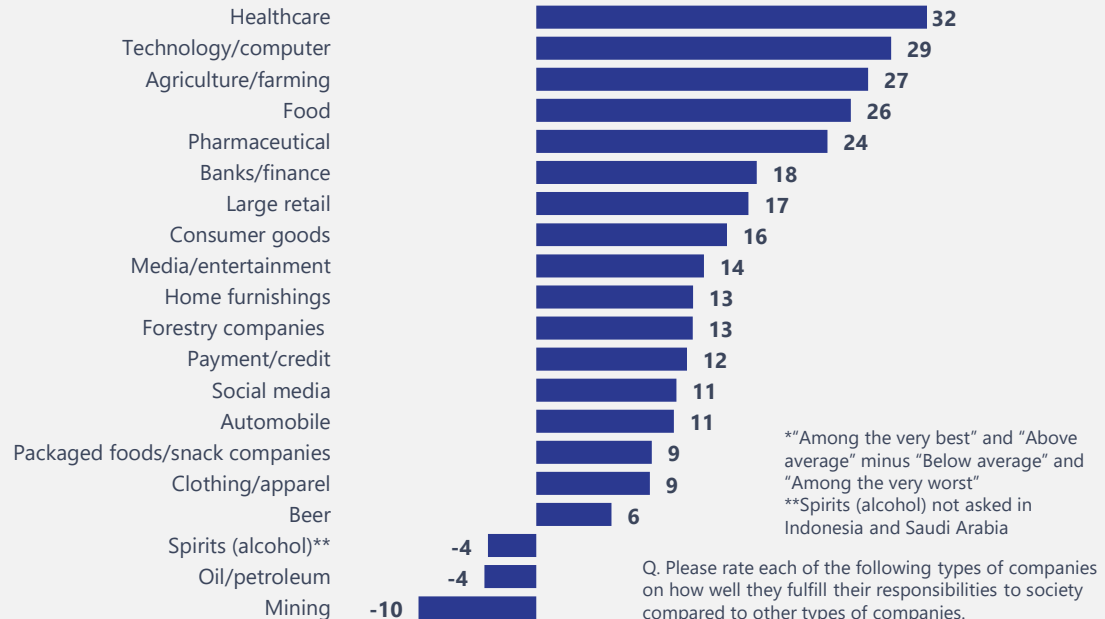
At the global level, the healthcare, technology, and agriculture sectors are seen as best-performing, while extractives and alcohol are seen as worst-performing.

However, views vary across regions. For example, clothing and apparel companies rank relatively high in some countries, such as Colombia, Türkiye, and the USA, but are among the lowest-ranked in the European countries surveyed.

This kind of regional variation in perceptions applies to many sectors.

Performance of Sectors in Fulfilling Their Responsibilities to Society

Net Performance,* Average of 31 Countries,** 2024



Implications

To close the trust gap, businesses should:

- **Stay committed to sustainability despite the backlash:** Focus on the most material issues that impact both your business and society and stay the course even amid external pressure.
- **Enhance transparency amid anti-greenwashing scrutiny:** Proactively communicate efforts and progress toward meeting societal expectations, ensuring honesty and clarity in all disclosures.
- **Collaborate with trusted partners:** Build credibility by collaborating with NGOs, scientists, academics, and other civil society organizations on meaningful initiatives.
- **Act with integrity:** Consistently demonstrate ethical behavior and avoid superficial gestures or empty promises.

- **Tailor strategies locally and by sector:** Adapt approaches to meet regional priorities that matter most to local populations, taking into account the specific perceptions that people have of companies in different sectors.

Corporate reputation is not about managing image; it is about **aligning business practices and performance with the values and expectations of society.**

To build lasting trust and manage risks, companies must embrace their role **as responsible societal actors, demonstrating real commitment to sustainability, social impact, and transparency.**



GlobeScan's Three-point Plan to Build Trust and a Resilient Reputation:

For further information and support in these areas, contact us to find out how we can help you:

insight@globescan.com



1.

Understand your stakeholders' expectations –

Assess the level of trust in your organization and identify the key drivers and barriers influencing it. Regularly consult and engage with your stakeholders to stay aligned with their concerns and priorities.

2.

Develop an integrated trust-building strategy –

Building trust requires a company-wide approach, ensuring alignment and integration across key strategies, including sustainability, stakeholder relations, and people and product strategies.

3.

Engage your most important stakeholders to foster dialogue, collaboration, and advocacy –

This involves creating a clear plan that outlines your organization's position on material and emerging issues, drives systemic change, and strengthens trust.

Methodology

The public opinion data shared in this report are based on over 30,000 interviews conducted across 31 countries and territories, capturing issues, societal trends, and public expectations for business.

Representative online samples were surveyed in each country, with approximately 1,000 respondents per country (500 in Hong Kong, Kenya, Nigeria, and Singapore, and 1,500 in Brazil and the USA) totaling 30,216 participants. Samples are representative of the online population in each country and weighted to align with general population census data.

The online surveys were conducted in July and August 2024.

Participating Countries and Territories

2024





Know your world.
Lead the future.

GlobeScan is an insights and advisory firm specializing in trust, sustainability, and engagement.

We equip clients with insights to navigate shifting societal and stakeholder expectations, crafting evidence-based strategies that reduce risks and create value for their organizations and society.

Established in 1987, we have offices in Cape Town, Hong Kong, Hyderabad, London, Paris, San Francisco, São Paulo, Singapore, and Toronto. GlobeScan is a participant of the UN Global Compact and a Certified B Corporation.

Our purpose is to co-create a sustainable and equitable future.

Learn more: www.globescan.com