Communicating on Climate and DEI

How communicators and consumers see the business case for each

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In Partnership with:
maslansky + partners | Bully Pulpit International | Potential Energy Coalition

Today, senior communication leaders find themselves in the crossfire of an increasingly polarized political environment. Two of the most hotly contested topics in the conversation today are "environmental, social, and governance" ("ESG") and "diversity, equity, and inclusion" ("DEI") initiatives and commitments.

On one hand, both are seemingly well-intentioned efforts to minimize or negate the negative byproducts of business, amplify the positive ones and contribute to a business playing field on which everyone has the same opportunities. On the other, both have been swept into a broader culture war that opposes anything that might be seen as projecting one group's moral preferences onto those of another, especially when doing so is perceived as disadvantaging a business' ability to compete. As an example, Robby Starbuck's crusade to get major brands to scale back or eliminate DEI programs continues to gain steam, with Walmart being the latest to do so.

With this report, we draw on the collective expertise of Page member chief communication officers (CCOs) to understand:

1. What is the current state of DEI and ESG communication?
2. What common challenges are we facing?
3. With the help of original consumer research from maslansky + partners and the Potential Energy Coalition, what messages can help solve these challenges?

This study represents new, primary research with Page member CCOs, conducted *before* the U.S. presidential election. It provides a valuable view of the landscape, offers actionable messaging insights, and, crucially, can serve as the starting point for a constructive conversation as we look to the future.

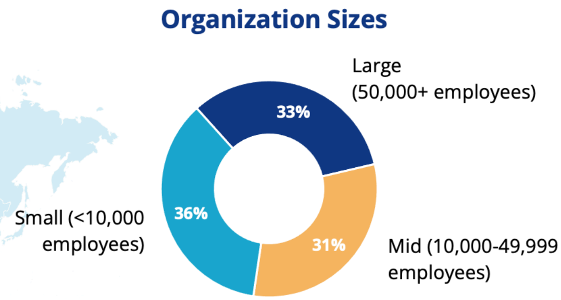
Methodology

This anonymous survey was fielded with Page member CCOs between August 8th and September 8th, 2024.

A total of 84 member CCOs completed the survey.

Together, these participants represented a range of…

Regions, Organization Size and Industries



Regions

- 56 U.S. organizations
- 28 non-U.S. organizations (predominantly European with a handful of members from North America, Asia and the Middle East)

Sizes

- 30 smaller organizations with under 10,000 employees
- 26 mid-size organizations with 10,000-49,999 employees
- 28 larger organizations with 50,000 or more employees

Industries

- Over 30 different industries, from textiles to biotech to education

All participants were asked to speak candidly about their own organization, and all responses were anonymous.

Key Findings

The following pages will provide the data and insights of both this study and a few select related studies, all of which lead to the following conclusions:

1. **Rumors of ESG's death have been greatly exaggerated.** While news stories are kicking dirt on "ESG," it is clear that organizations continue to invest in its underlying components.

2. **Most consumers will reward, not punish, organizations for corporate climate action.** Overall, consumers want *more*, not less, concrete corporate action on climate-related issues. The same is true to a lesser degree on DEI-related efforts.

3. **Stakeholders who *are* skeptical can be appeased when you frame action through the lens of good business.** There's baseline support for environmental and climate initiatives and potentially more support for a message rooted in profitability.

4. **A shift in framing can allow organizations operating in the U.S. to move from cautious continuation to profitable progress.** Using the right language paired with the actions already being taken can earn credit while minimizing backlash.

The Responsible Business Series

Since the beginning of 2023, more than 320 "anti-ESG" bills have been introduced at the state level across the U.S. While only 30 of these bills passed, they represent a new wave of pressure from the political right and raise questions about the resilience of "ESG" as both a topic and as a term.

In response, Potential Energy Coalition and maslansky + partners embarked on a multi-phase and multi-country research effort. The goal was to assess the contemporary state of ESG and to help organizations effectively navigate in a highly polarized environment. This joint research with Page is the latest installment of this larger effort.

In several places in this report, you will see references to consumer and investor data drawn from *previous* waves, including...

Phase 1 U.S. Consumer Survey

Date: August 2023 | **Scale:** 1,597 U.S. consumers

Phase 2 U.S. Consumer Survey

Date: August 2023 | **Scale:** 1,524 U.S. consumers

U.S. Affluent Retail Investor Survey

Date: April 2024 **| Scale:** 1,000 U.S. affluent investors

Global Consumer Survey

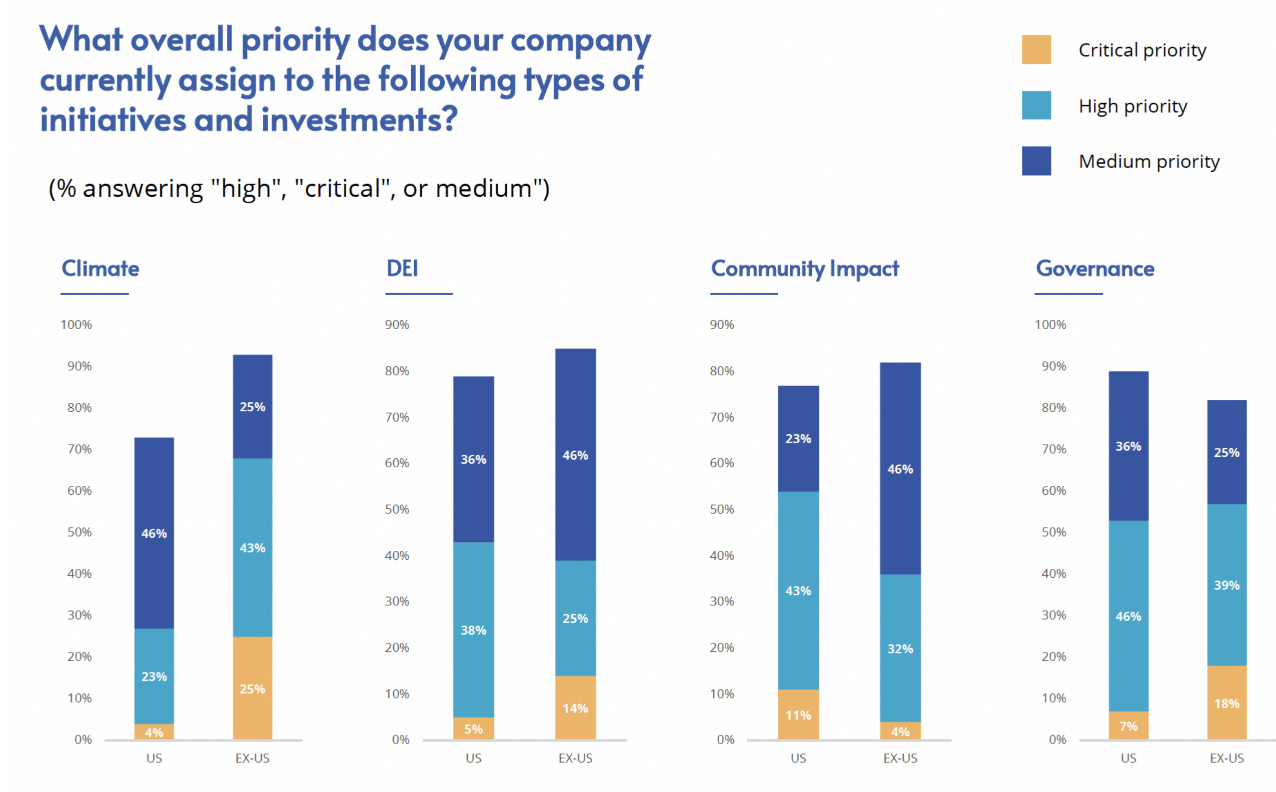
Date: July 2024 | **Scale:** 4,509 consumers in U.S., UK, DE, JP, BR, and FR

Parallel Worlds

U.S. organizations remain cautiously committed to climate and DEI, while non-U.S. ones appear to be all in.

Across regions, at least 70% of surveyed CCOs say that both DEI and ESG remain areas of at least "medium" priority for their organizations.

Relative priority by region and issue



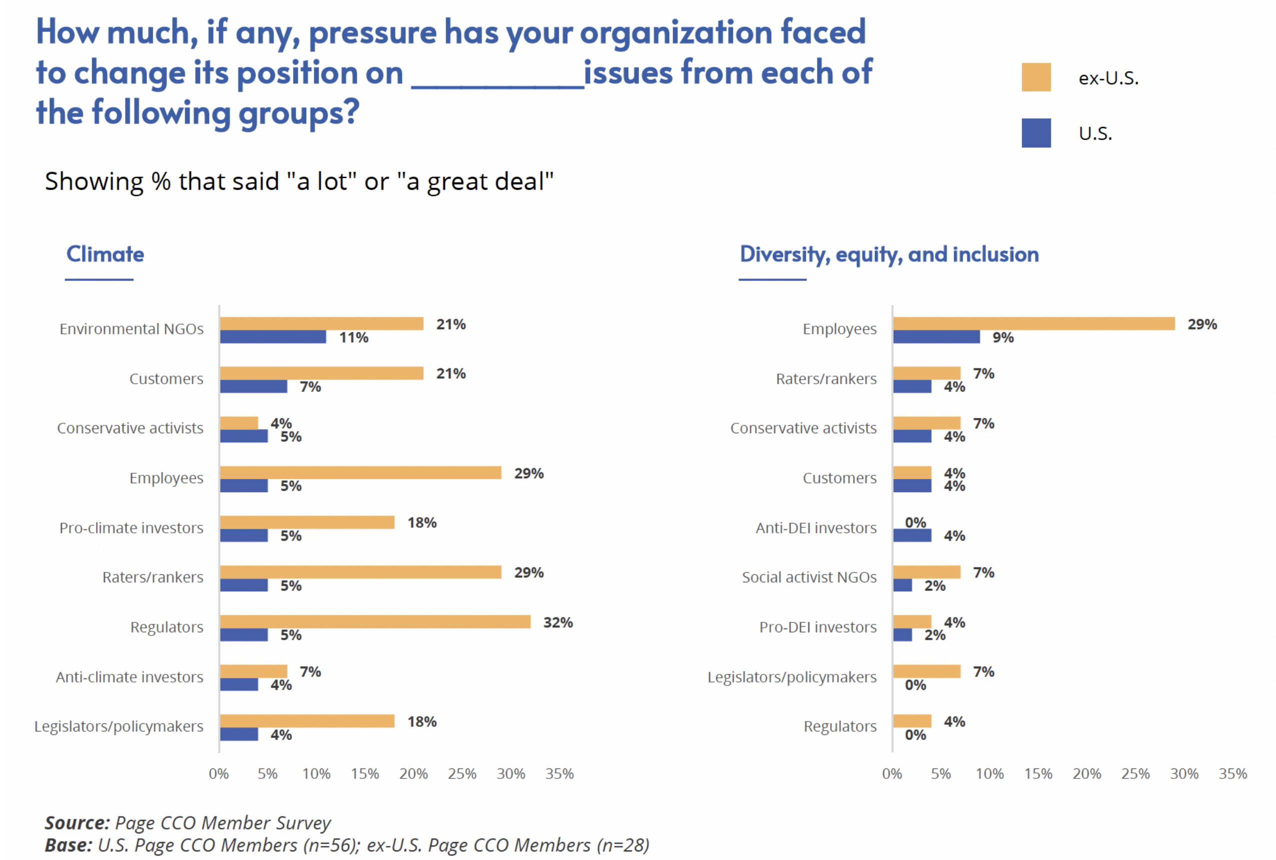
Source: *Page CCO Member Survey*
Base: *U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)*

However, an overwhelming 93% of non-U.S. organizations report climate is at least a medium priority, compared to 73% in the U.S. A quarter of non-U.S. respondents even call it a "critical" priority.

Despite DEI looking slightly different outside the U.S. – it's viewed as a "critical" priority by three times as many non-U.S. members (14%) as U.S. members (5%) – this gap in prioritization is likely related to a gap in perceived external pressure.

Just 5% of U.S. organizations say they've faced a "great deal" or "a lot" of pressure on climate from regulators compared to over 30% of non-U.S. organizations. Similar pressure disparities appear across groups, including customers and employees, which are seen as much greater sources of pressure for members outside the U.S.

Perceptions of external pressure by region and stakeholder type



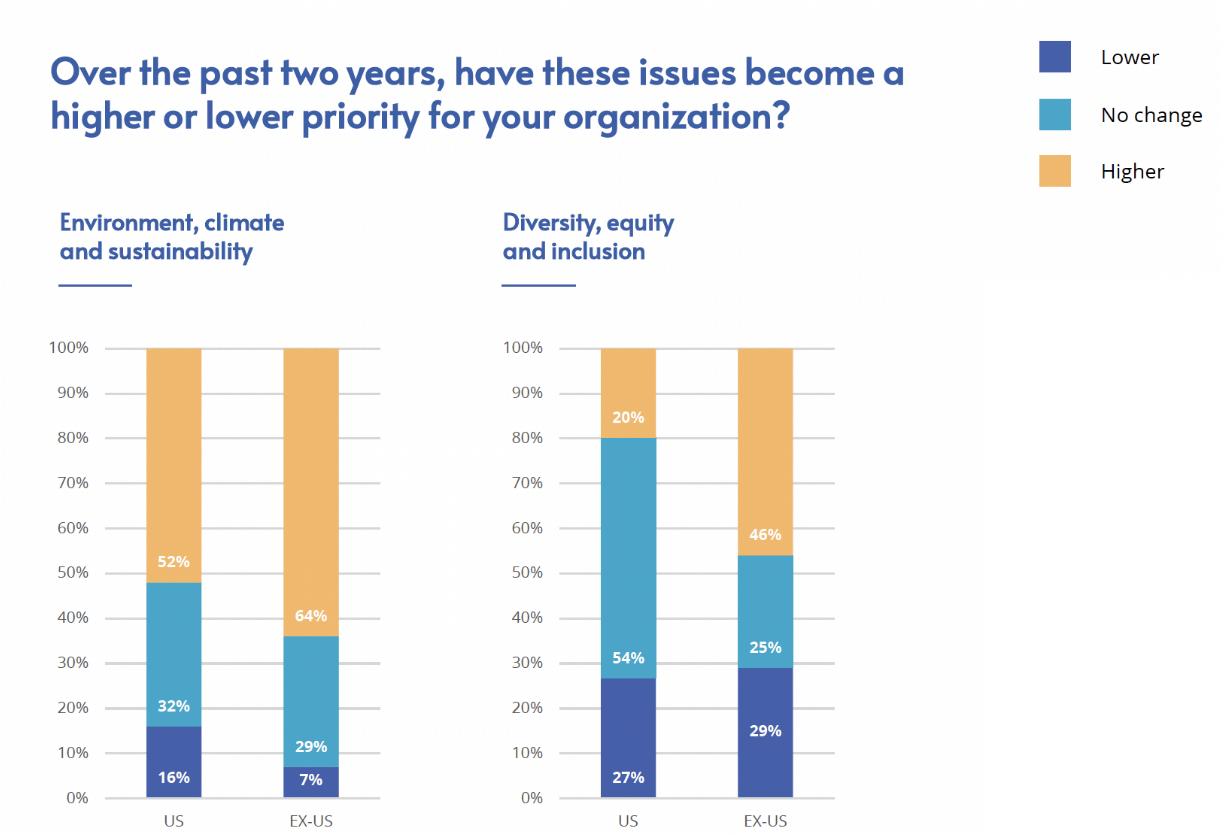
Though the overall highest-pressure stakeholder groups for U.S. companies were NGOs and advocacy groups; only 11% reported experiencing significant pressure from these actors.

While perceived pressure to act on climate and DEI in the U.S. is perhaps lower than media coverage suggests, so is anti-ESG and anti-DEI pressure. Only 5-7% of U.S. organizations reported facing a “great deal” or “a lot” of pressure from opposition stakeholders.

Climate communication continues to rise cautiously

More than half of U.S. respondents say climate issues are a higher priority than two years ago.

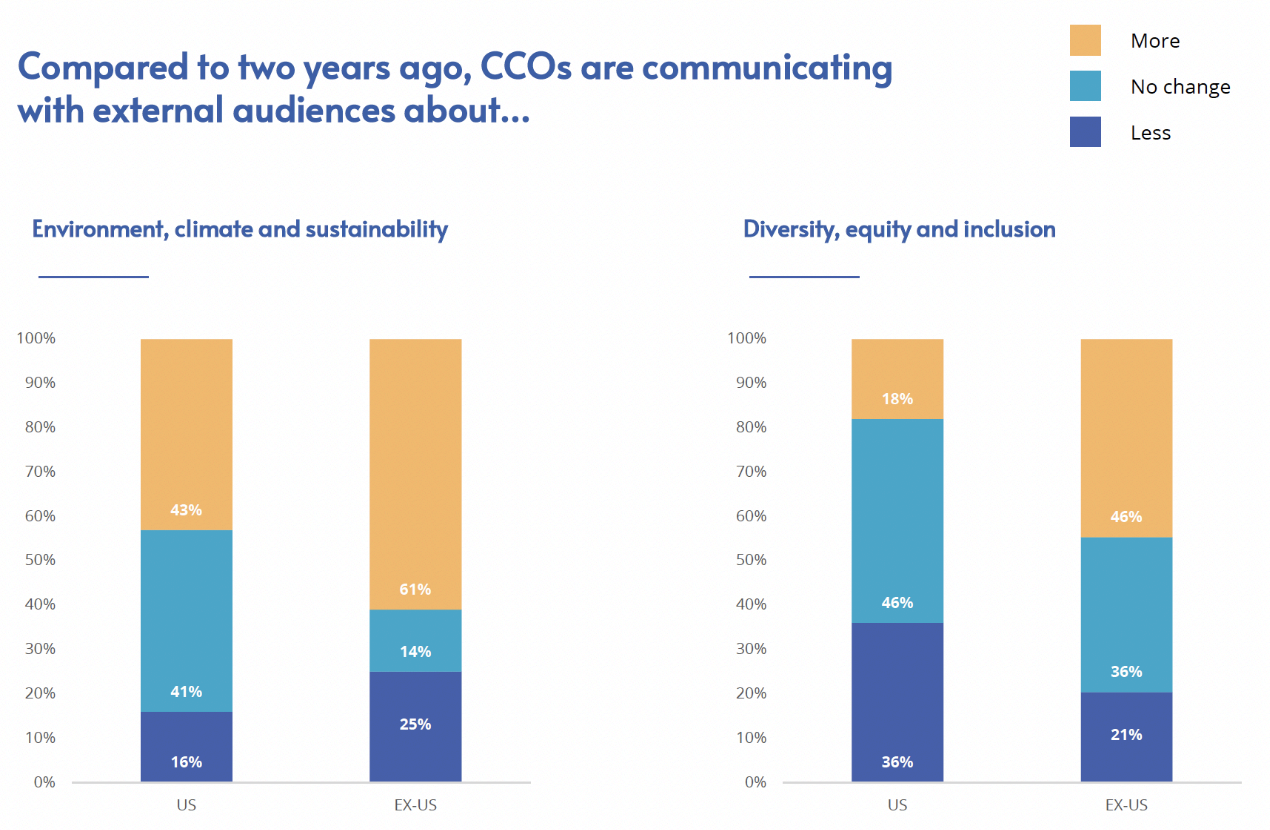
Priority change over the past two years



Source: *Page CCO Member Survey*
Base: *U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)*

Contrary to the reported phenomenon of "greenhushing," only 16% say they are actually communicating less about climate than they were two years ago. In fact, over 40% say they're communicating *more*.

Communication change over the past two years



Source: *Page CCO Member Survey*
Base: *U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)*

The story on DEI is slightly different. Where the focus on climate is increasing, DEI is, at best, holding steady. While the overall priority of DEI doesn't seem to be markedly decreasing, messaging around it does. Approximately two-thirds of U.S. respondents report "no change" in the level of priority placed on DEI, but one in three say they're communicating less about it than two years ago.

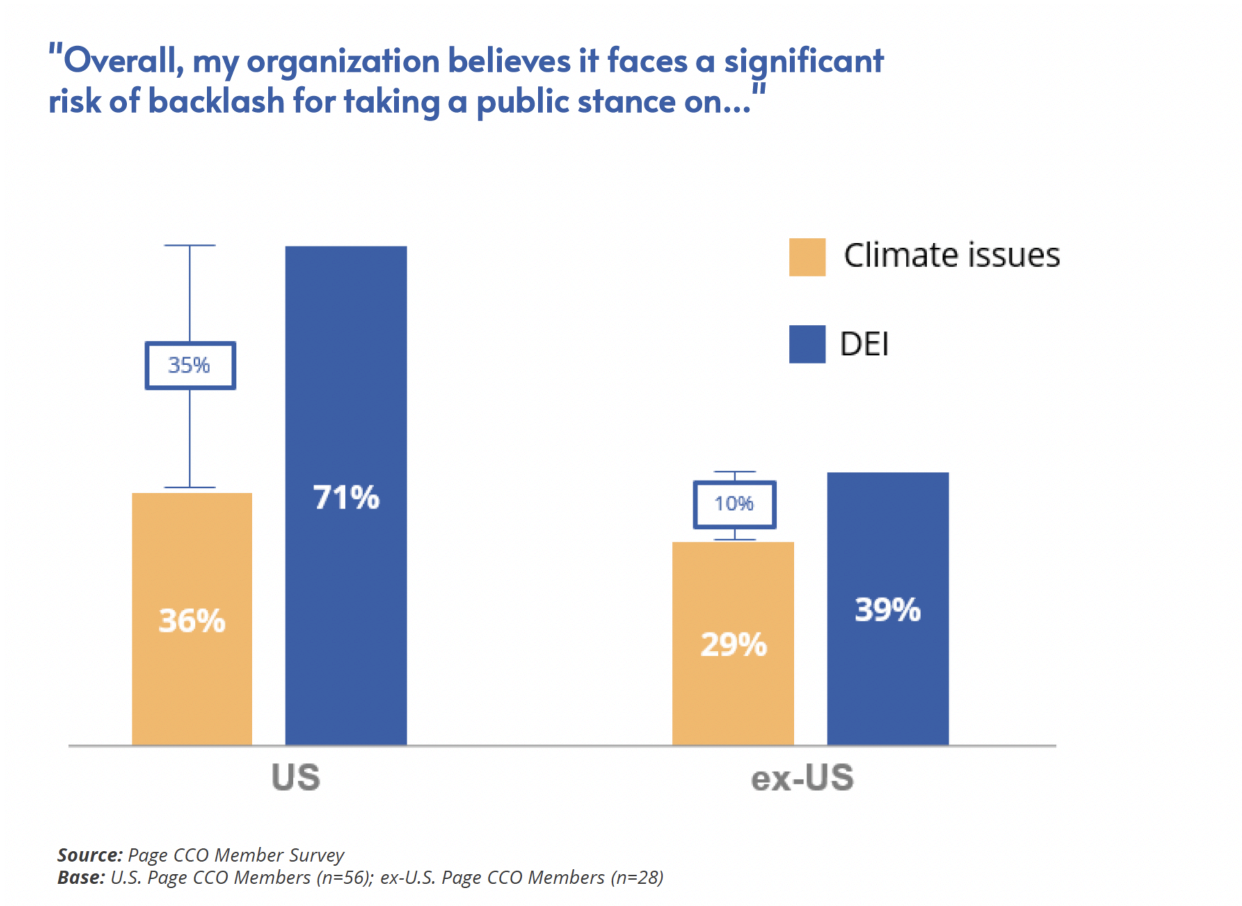
On both climate and DEI, the non-U.S. story is more straightforward. Non-U.S. respondents resoundingly report increased priority and communication on DEI and climate issues compared to two years ago.

Climate communication is seen as significantly safer

The explanation for the divergent trendlines in DEI vs. climate communication likely has a single, simple explanation: perceived risk of backlash.

Overall, U.S. respondents perceive a relatively low level of reputational risk associated with public stances on climate— with about 1 in 3 seeing a “significant” risk of backlash.

Perceived backlash risk



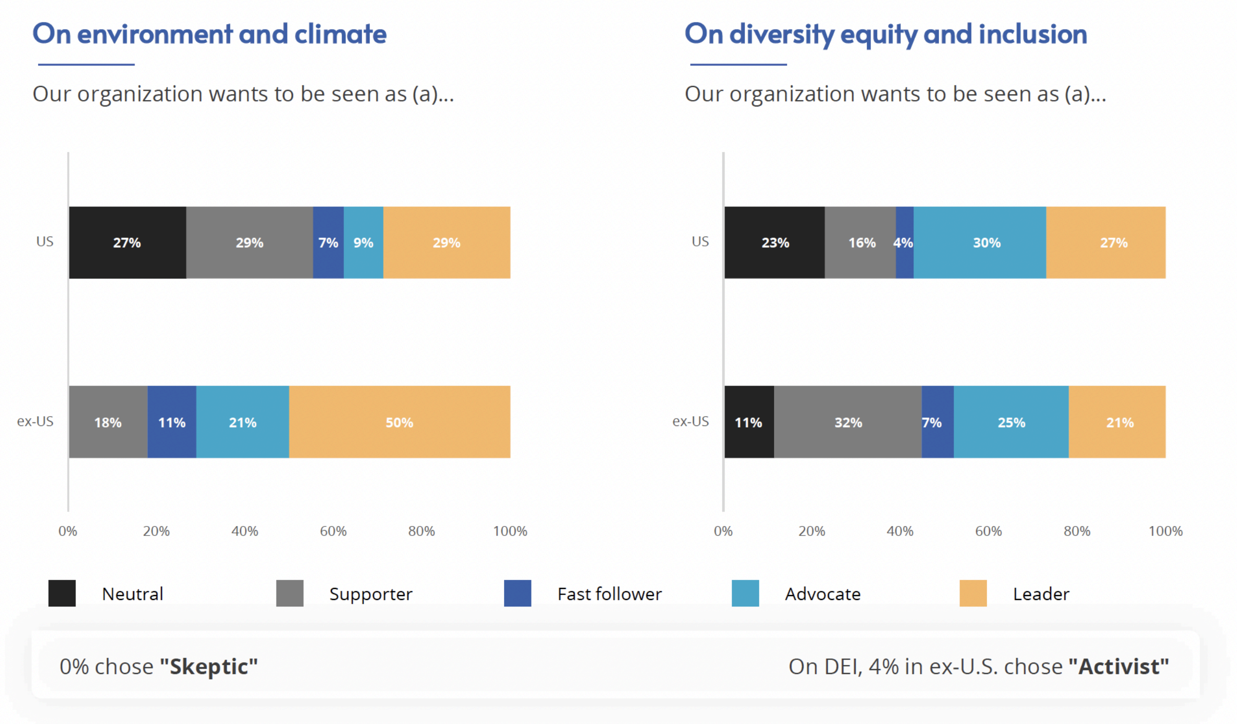
For contrast, this number doubles when you move from “climate issues” to “DEI.”

Among non-U.S. audiences, this gap is far less pronounced, reinforcing the finding that the U.S. is uniquely politicized.

U.S. organizations look to support rather than lead

In the non-U.S. context, the ambition to actively "lead" on climate is high, with 50% of respondents reporting their organization actively wants to be seen as a "leader."

How organizations want to be seen



Source: *Page CCO Member Survey*
Base: *U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)*

In the U.S., this commitment exists but is more cautious; 75% of U.S. respondents say their organizations want to at least be seen as "supporters" on climate issues, but the number who aspire to "leadership" drops by about half.

For both U.S. and non-U.S. members, overall support for DEI is comparable to the level seen on climate issues. However, non-U.S. organizations display less of a desire to be seen as leaders than they do on climate-related issues, which is more in line with U.S. respondents.

It's noteworthy that virtually no respondents selected the most extreme positions on these issues. Only one respondent in the entire survey sample, a non-U.S. organization, reported a desire to be an "activist" for either issue. Just as importantly, zero respondents selected "skeptic" on either topic.

Organizations are ***doing*** more than they're saying

Overall, the consensus among CCOs is that they need to be doing and saying more, rather than less, on climate. This commitment is reinforced by their intention to take *more* action in the coming years.

Likelihood to take climate-related actions in the next two years

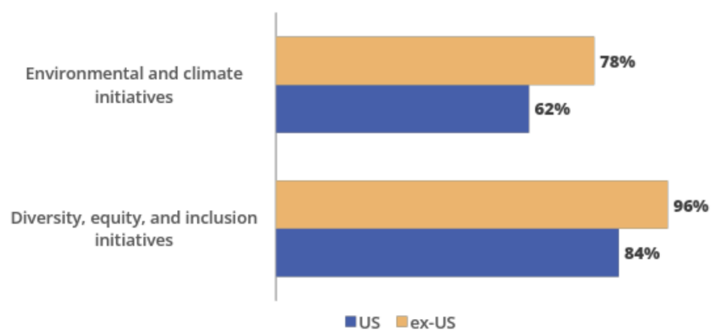
% who say their organization is likely to take each action over the next two years

Source: *Page CCO Member Survey*
Base: *U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)*

However, it's equally clear they feel a degree of trepidation about doing so. This hesitance is underlined by the fact that most respondents report a gap between how much they're *doing* and how much they're *saying*.

How much organizations do vs. say

Overall, we invest in ________ MORE than we talk about publicly



Source: *Page CCO Member Survey*
Base: *U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56); ex-U.S. Page CCO Members (n=28)*

Even if climate communications haven't declined, overall, it is clear CCOs are still self-censoring, or at least stopping short of communicating the full extent of their climate-related activities.

The remainder of this report will focus more specifically on climate-related communications, looking to understand some key obstacles contributing to this "do/say" gap and share insights to help resolve it.

The Business Case for Climate

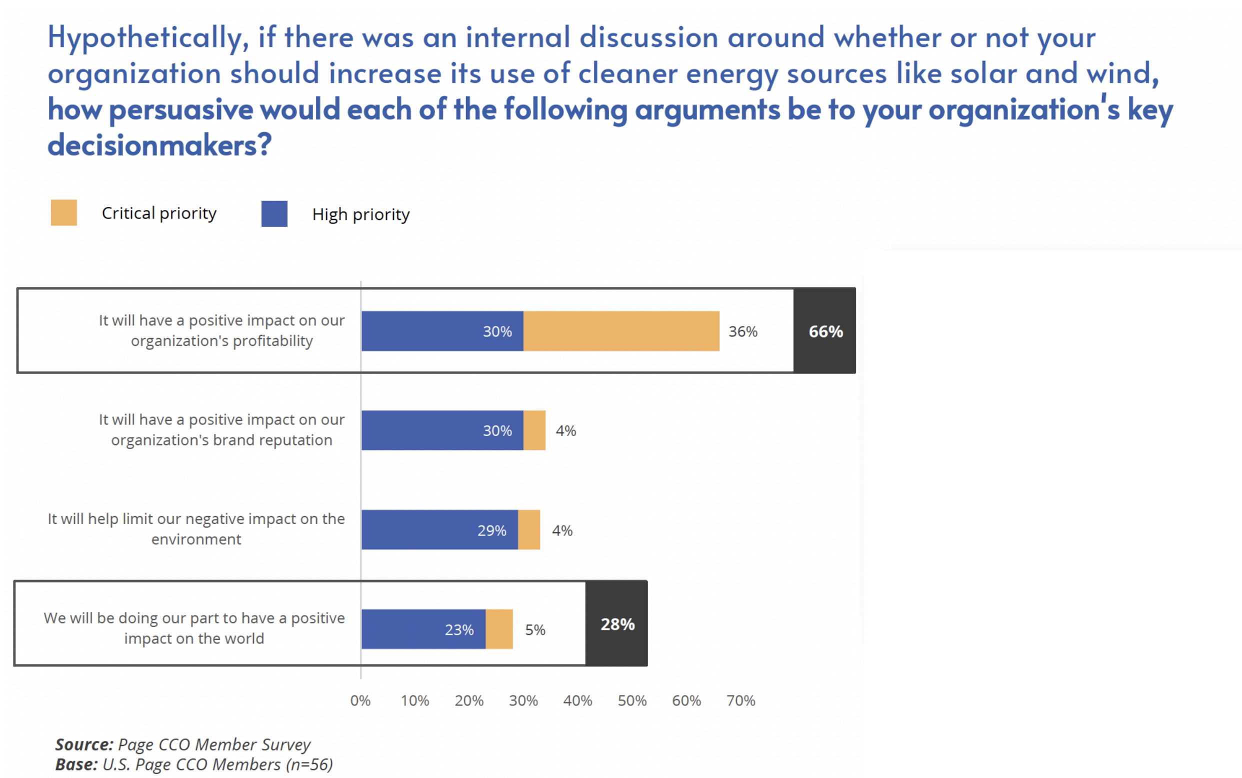
Organizations may be behind consumers when it comes to seeing the business case for climate action.

A clear business case is a crucial tool for consensus

As U.S. organizations weigh the pros and cons of continued climate communication, it's clear that the business case for climate is a critical consideration.

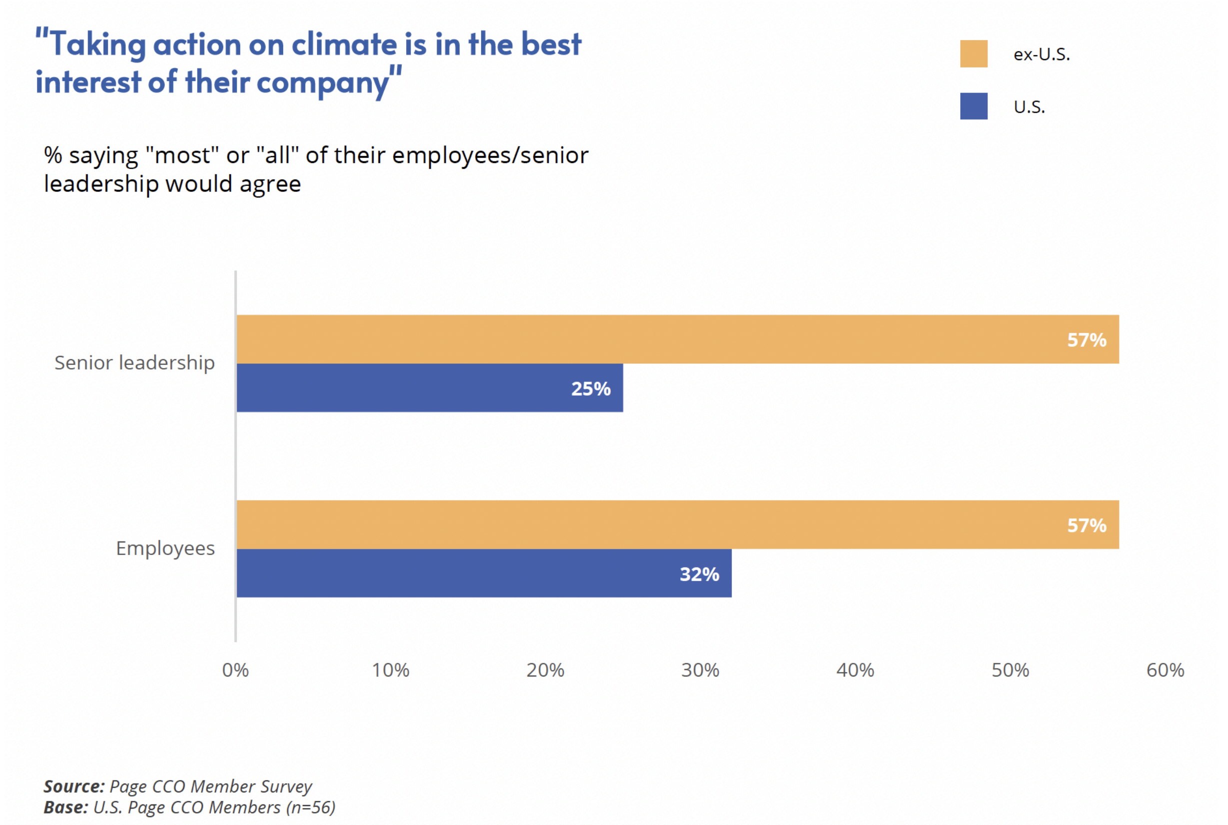
U.S. respondents overwhelmingly report that internal stakeholder groups respond most strongly to messages about the *business materiality* of climate action rather than its *morality*. Two-thirds suggested a "profit"-based argument would be most persuasive internally compared to only one in four who said the same of a "positive impact on the world" argument.

Perceived strength of internal business arguments for climate action



Internally, the business case is not always clear. Today, U.S. respondents believe that only a minority of senior leaders and employees at their organizations see taking action on climate as "in the best interest" of their organization.

Climate action vs. company interests



Consumers see a clear business case for climate

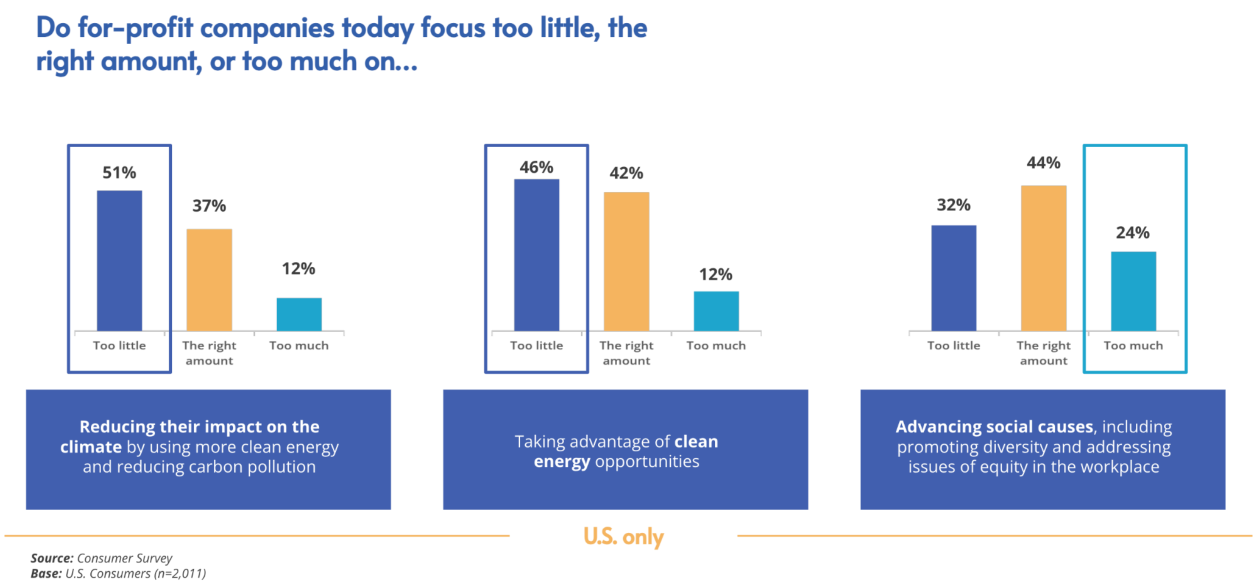
From this latest round of Page research, we know U.S. internal stakeholders don't always see the business case for climate. From the U.S. consumer research conducted separately by maslansky + partners[1], however, we know that these incentives are much clearer from an external view.

[1] Maslansky + partners survey of 2,011 U.S. voters in August 2024

Overall, very few U.S. consumers today say companies are doing “too much” on climate. At worst, they feel companies are doing the “right amount,” with around half saying for-profit companies are still doing “too little.”

Compared to their responses on climate, fewer U.S. consumers say companies are doing “too little" on DEI and more say companies are doing “too much.” However, the number saying “too little” or “the right amount” on DEI is triple the number saying “too much.”

Level of focus on climate and DEI



Consistently, consumers report they are more likely to work for, speak well of, and buy from companies they know are acting positively on climate.

Consumer preference based on climate action

REVENUE AND TALENT	REPUTATION
Customers. **52%** **are more likely to buy** *from a company reducing their carbon pollution (only 8% say less)*	**Standing.** **60%** **are more likely to speak well of a company** *reducing their carbon pollution (only 8% say less)*
Talent. **53%** **are more likely to consider working for a company** *reducing their carbon pollution (only 7% say less)*	**Perception.** **68%** **are more likely to view as a leader in their industry** *a company reducing their carbon pollution (only 9% say less)*

As organizations build their plan for communicating around climate heading into 2025, this consumer data may help provide valuable context for an internal business case.

The language of ~~ESG~~ Responsible Business

Language is evolving towards less polarizing terms, but progress is slow.

In the U.S., the terms DEI and ESG are on the decline

Among U.S. CCOs surveyed...

- 37% say they're using "ESG" less than two years ago
- 41% say they're using "DEI" less than two years ago
- 30% say they've changed the name of their corporate reports or web pages related to these topics

Changes in Usage of Terminology and Corporate Report Names

37%

say they're using
"ESG" less than
two years ago

41%

say they're using
"DEI" less than
two years ago

30%

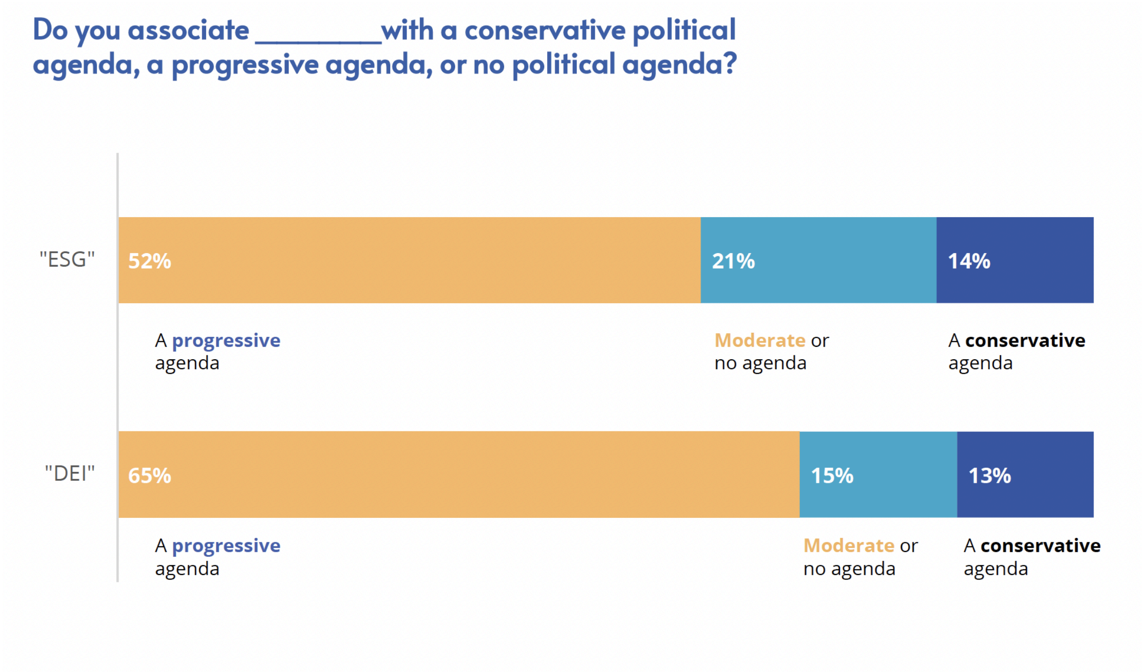
say they've changed the
name of their corporate
reports or web pages
related to these topics

Source: *Page CCO Member Survey*
Base: *U.S. Page CCO Members (n=56)*

Consumers view DEI and ESG as "political" terms

This shift in member terminology use makes sense in the context of the broader U.S. consumer data. U.S. consumers view "ESG" and "DEI" as terms with a specifically progressive political connotation.

Political associations of key terms



Source: *maslansky+partners Global Consumer Survey*
Base: *U.S. Consumers (n=1,002)*

"Responsible business" offers a less political term

In contrast with the more politically charged terms in use today, "responsible business" is a term that avoids partisan affiliation.

Political Associations of Responsible Business

Do you associate "responsible business" with a conservative political agenda, a progressive agenda, or no political agenda?

	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Progressive agenda	47%	27%	24%
Moderate or no agenda	31%	42%	28%
Conservative agenda	16%	20%	43%

Source: *Maslansky partners Global Consumer Survey*
Base: *Democrats (n=758); Independents (n=532); Republicans (n=714)*

Consumers intuitively associate this term with businesses both doing good and doing well, offering a happy medium between material and moral benefit.

When you say “responsible business” in a focus group, people hear…

Over two-thirds of consumers strongly associate “responsible business” with a company offering a good consumer experience, being a good place to work and succeeding financially. Nevertheless, only about one in four CCO survey respondents says they’re using the term “responsible business.”

The language of responsible business

A business-focused messaging approach to sensitive topics

1. A single, essential shift in frame.

MORALITY vs MATERIALITY

Across all audiences – consumers, retail investors and CCOs – the most effective messaging to build support for climate action connects these actions to business objectives and outcomes.

This approach significantly reduces backlash risk, often focused on companies advocating for social change and a political morality that is rejected by many customers or employees, especially in the U.S.

2. Link actions to R.O.R.: responsibility, opportunity, risk.

Responsibility: Use the language of “responsible business” by explicitly connecting actions to benefits for customers, employees, communities or other stakeholders.

Opportunity: Consumers believe the future is “clean.” Focus on where you are going, including “clean energy,” “clean technology,” and “reducing carbon pollution.” Avoid focusing on fossil fuels, which are highly polarizing.

Risk: Climate risk is viewed as real business risk. Actions that are explicitly connected to how they reduce a company’s physical and financial risks are more likely to resonate.

3. Make the language more inclusive

The language of ESG, DEI and sustainability was largely created by subject matter experts. It is filled with jargon that alienates or excludes many of the people it is intended to engage.

To broaden support, start with understanding. Eliminate jargon and replace it with plain language. For example...

LESS LANGUAGE LIKE	MORE LANGUAGE LIKE
Establishing strong governance practices	Holding our leaders accountable
Supporting the circular economy	Reducing waste and recycling more
Protecting biodiversity	Protecting plants, animals, and habitats
Reducing our scope 3 emissions	Helping our partners are reducing pollution
Multi-stakeholder capitalism	Considering everyone who depends on us
Managing water stress	Using water responsibly

For further reading

For more guidance on reframing your "ESG" messaging, check out maslansky + partners' Responsible Business playbook here.

maslansky + partners is a Language Strategy consulting and research firm with one sole focus: finding the right language to make audiences listen, care, and act. Our team of Language Strategists have built an entire discipline focused on framing and messaging, and for over 20 years, we've been renowned for our ability to shape commercial speech, policy debates, and public opinion.

For more information on using the ROR framework to spell out the business case for climate-related action specifically, check out maslansky + partners' and Potential Energy's Return on Responsibility report, released in partnership with the We Mean Business Coalition, here.

Potential Energy is a nonprofit marketing firm driving public demand for climate solutions. Leveraging deep analytics and creative storytelling, Potential Energy connects with people on a human level to tip the balance on the policies that will dramatically accelerate the energy transition. Our campaigns are backed by extensive audience research, yielding data-driven insights that shift the climate narrative to win the fights that matter. Founded in 2018, Potential Energy has a track record of transformative campaigns that capture audiences and mobilize support for climate action.

Special thanks to our partners: