COMMUNICATION TRENDS AND HOW TO SPEND

2024 guide

AMBITIOUS

insight, ideas & impact.

For PR that connects.

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AN OVERVIEW FROM OUR STRATEGY LEAD...

You could start this report every year with some variation of the phase ‘there will be an unprecedented change in how businesses approach their PR and marketing strategy’. You could also throw in that ‘the market is volatile, with a whole host of new threats to be aware of and new opportunities to take advantage of’. It’s safe to say this will probably be the case every year to come as well.

We need to start becoming accustomed to the fact that an ever-increasing level of change is a given. And importantly, we need to embrace this change. With change comes opportunity. If you can be forward-thinking and ambitious with your approach to PR, you can get ahead.

This report will delve into the trends that the team have predicted are going to have a significant impact on how you should allocate your spend in 2024. But first, let’s dive into some of my predictions for the year ahead and how you can prepare for them from a strategy perspective...

Joe Wright, Strategy Lead

LET'S GET IT OUT THE WAY AND TALK ABOUT AI

We are barely a few paragraphs in and it would be remiss to not mention AI when talking about key trends.

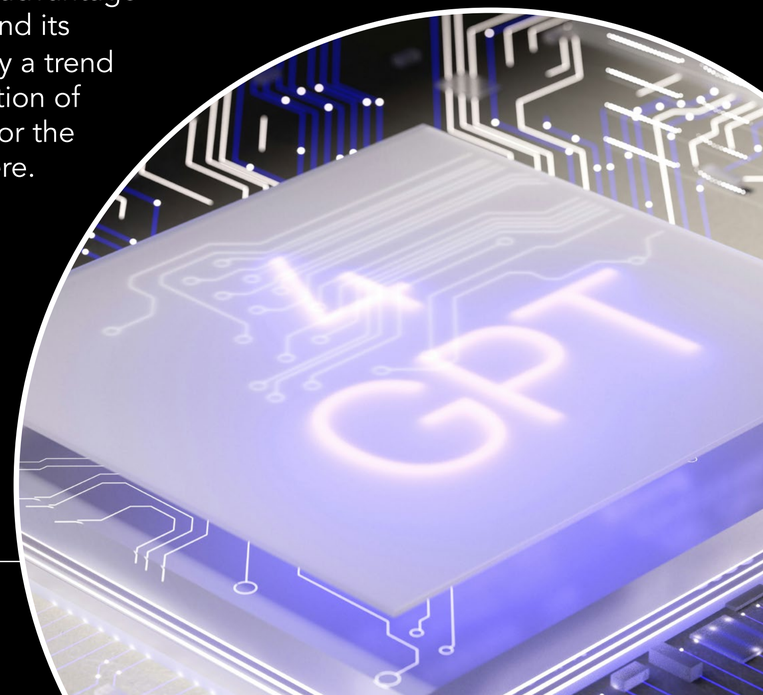
In any given month there are around 2 million mentions of AI in English-speaking media. That's 78,000 mentions every day, it's safe to say that the conversation is at fever pitch.

For the PR and comms industry, AI is already having a significant effect. For us at AMBITIOUS for example, we are using AI tools to enhance and improve our media monitoring, and insights work. We are deploying tools that allow us to optimise content for search faster and with pinpoint precision. And generally, on a day-to-day basis, we are using AI to streamline our ways of working and ensure more resource is available to do the work that is going to make a difference to our clients.

It's also safe to say that AI will affect every single business to varying degrees. But you know this already. And looking at the number of mentions, another think piece about how AI might revolutionise business in 2024 isn't something we need. So, for the purposes of this, we will simply use AI as a metaphor for the changes we are seeing in the market more broadly.

- **AI is disruptive and will grow exponentially more disruptive as time goes on.** You could say the same about Google's search algorithm.
- **AI offers both opportunities and threats to how businesses operate.** There is an ever-growing number of threats to a business and a greater need for reputation management than before. There is also a long list of digital opportunities that many businesses aren't fully taking advantage of.
- **AI systems are constantly learning and improving themselves.** Something businesses will also have to do at an unprecedented rate as market changes come thick and fast.

Keeping up with AI and using it to your advantage should be a priority for every business and its emergence and development is certainly a trend for 2024. It's indicative of the intensification of digitalisation and sets the scene nicely for the rest of the trends we will be covering here.



DIGITAL TRUST SIGNALS WILL GROW IN IMPORTANCE

Before committing to a purchase, both consumers and businesses will look for trust signals online.

Using both owned and third-party digital channels to their full potential is how you showcase to customers that you are a brand they should be confident investing their money in.

It's no longer enough to tick boxes: do we have a LinkedIn account? Do we have a keyword strategy? This is now the norm, so elevating your strategy and having a campaign-led approach is essential. You can start doing this by viewing everything through a digital lens.

The need for this is only going to intensify, so you must start thinking this way now.

Here are a few examples:

- You have your annual conference coming up: stakeholders are gathered, and the agenda is set. Networking and fostering relationships are key. However, think about how you can leverage the event online and play it back on digital channels. Set up a social squad to cover the event, film Vox Pops in the break, write a blog series around what the conference means for the future of your company, and have the keynote filmed and put on your website. This can be repurposed and reused throughout the year, giving the content a long potential shelf life.

- You want to start publishing content on your website: you have experts in your company, and you want to start using their voices in content, perhaps starting a blog on your website. This is a great start but if no one can find your content then you are missing out on a massive opportunity. Ensure you are researching search trends, ranking difficulty and are writing specifically for SEO. Consider running a digital PR campaign alongside this, repurposing the content for your site and securing links from online media outlets.

- You are getting some great feedback from clients: this is something that every company relishes. However, if you are getting this feedback over the phone or by email then it's not turning the dial for your brand's online reputation. Positive reviews need to be replayed online. Set up a strategy to generate positive Google reviews, or commission a third-party review site profile and direct your happy customers there to give their customer feedback in key for digital trust signals.

It's all about the lens you look at things through. A digital-first mindset will allow you to make the most of all your communications and ensure that you are sending trust signals to your customers wherever possible. Investing in strategically curating trust signals across channels should be a priority in 2024.

WHAT ON EARTH IS GOOGLE GOING TO DO NEXT? THE ALGORITHM CHANGES AREN'T GOING TO SLOW DOWN

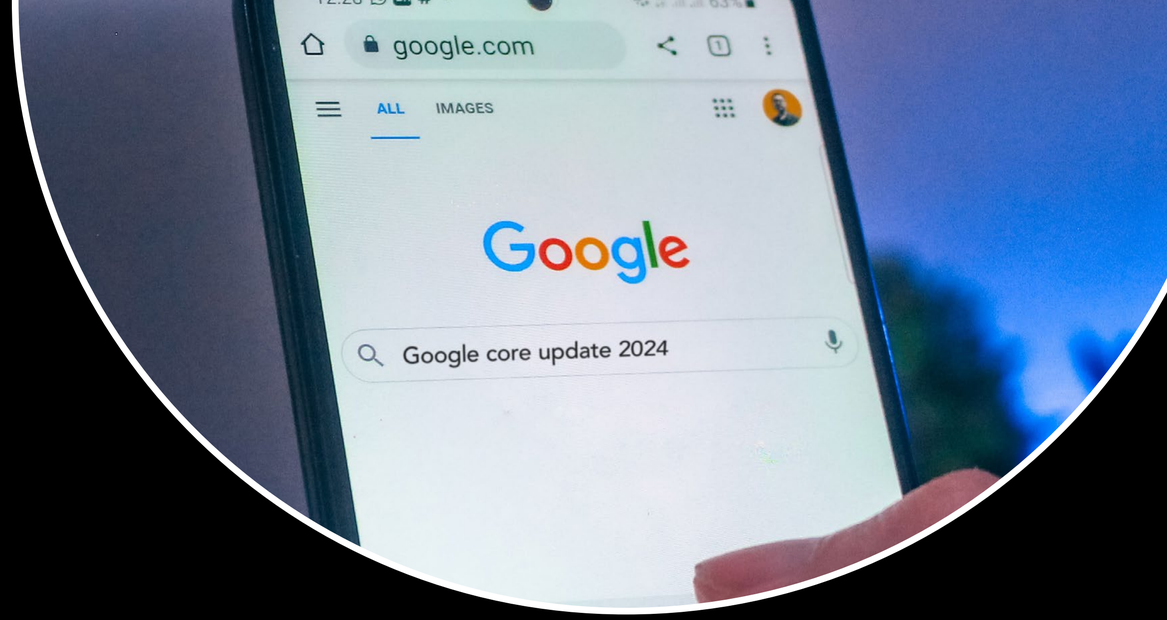
Google has been on a rampage of late when it comes to algorithm updates.

The latest core algorithm update that came out in September is the second in two months and the fourth in 2023. That's a lot of change and a lot for businesses to digest and adjust to. A lot of this has been around Google's ever-impactful E-E-A-T guidelines. Experience, expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness are all key things that content needs to showcase to get ranked highly.

It's also important to note that Google has changed its language around AI and the E-E-A-T guidelines. Previously, it specified this was relevant to content written by a human. That subsequently got changed and no longer specifically references humans, leaving the door open for AI-led content as long as it meets the guidelines. We'll see AI introduced into search more and more.

Unfortunately, we are probably in for a whole host of more updates from Google in 2024. They seem to be comfortable with rolling out updates at a far greater pace.

And we haven't even got onto the biggest trend yet...



That's the hidden gem update, which was announced in May but will be rolled out into 2024. This update will seek to showcase personal opinions on the SERP (search engine results pages), which means that we could see social media accounts getting airtime on SERPs, blog posts being returned, and even forums such as Reddit could get page one visibility.

And just like that, a whole host of reputational threats will appear.

Before a hostile actor tweeting about your business unfairly was just that, an X/Twitter account often talking in an echo-chamber. With the hidden gems update, this could all change. Suddenly that post if it gathers some momentum, could end up on the first page of results for your brand SERP. That's a scary prospect and brings us on nicely to my next trend.

GROWING GLOBAL UNREST MEANS A GROWING NEED FOR ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

The hidden gems update will intensify the need for online reputation management in 2024, but the need was already there regardless.

Online reputation management is about ensuring that your digital profile is resilient against online threats. Digital PR can help with this as well as a proactive SEO approach. However, negative feedback, hostile actors, disgruntled customers, misinformation and disinformation, are always going to be threats to your reputation. That's why you need to be proactive about protecting your brand image and ensure you're prepared for a crisis from a messaging and operations perspective as well.

It's no secret the world is in a period of unprecedented unrest. With this comes disruption and ultimately more avenues through which your business could become involved in a reputational crisis. The first step in being properly prepared is to ensure you have as much information and intelligence as possible. Consider a reputation audit, designed to surface any and all potential reputational threats that could be lurking on online channels. This will allow you to map and prepare for all threats with a crisis comms plan. It's also worth expanding this out to your senior leadership team and any key spokespeople, as these are often also the target of hostile actors.

Also, consider a full audit of your communications and internal processes around responding to a crisis to ensure proper preparedness. Finally, make sure that your search results are resilient to unfavourable content by investing in SEO and digital PR.

DIGITAL PR WILL BECOME MORE POWERFUL THAN EVER

Traditional PR is all about building strong ties with journalists and editors, who can feature a brand in an article or cover significant news releases.

These relationships involve personal communication and even face-to-face contact, and their impact is centred around the improvement in a brands reputation.

On the other hand, digital PR is more anonymous, relying on online first publications, social media, blogs, forums and review and comparison sites. Just like with traditional PR, you require strong news hooks, data led content and strong opinions and views to cut through. One of the key differences though is impact. Digital PR helps to improve reputation, but it is also about driving traffic to a website and building high authority back links.

The lines between digital PR and traditional PR are increasingly blurred these days. This convergence is set to become more of a trend in 2024, as the media landscape continues to operate more exclusively online.

Why digital PR?

Google's John Mueller once said that digital PR is "just as critical as tech SEO, probably more so in many cases". That still rings true today and with Google's drive to devalue spammy, low-quality links, then high-value digital PR will only become more important in 2024. A digital PR campaign will allow you to secure the high DA links that are going to make a difference to your site's ranking, as well as naturally drive traffic to your site.

Leaning into digital PR and understanding the places where your audience are online, what they are searching and how you can become more visible in those places will serve to drive traffic and ultimately enquiries and leads to your business. Digital PR also helps to meet your sites SEO goals, which will only serve to drive even more interest in your business.

Going into the new year, you need to ensure you are blending your SEO efforts with digital PR strategies. You can no longer just rely on one or the other.

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY MUST BE PRIORITISED

This trend overarches the rest. It can be applied across the board. If you commit to it, it can take your brand's reputation to new heights.

Across industries, brands are screaming to be heard. The market is crowded and so are the channels to communicate through. The media landscape is shrinking and what's left is being filled with ever more salacious content, everybody has a flash website now and is investing in SEO and brands with self-deprecating, bold TikTok posts or Twitter accounts that emulate Aldi's are a dime a dozen. While this is mainly seen the B2C world, B2B businesses are catching up fast and the ones that are successful are already there. It's going to become even harder to stand out going into 2024.

So, how can you possibly stand out?

Investing in quality is how. Less is often more if the less is properly invested in. Often the temptation when trying to keep up with the market is to look for quick results when it comes to PR. But more often than not, this will only lead to short-term gains and hollow results that you can't measure the success of. Invest time and money into creating campaigns that are done properly.

Budgets are being squeezed and due to the market crowding, the temptation will be to look to compete across the board. If you are forward planning and looking to allocate your budget in 2024, make sure you are investing in an agency that doesn't skip steps, that constructs creative PR strategies that are based on data-led insights that contain truly original and engaging ideas and can be properly measured.

WHAT PR AND COMMUNICATIONS TRENDS SHOULD YOU KEEP AN EYE ON IN 2024?

Effective communication is essential to all businesses.

From your wider messaging to your employer brand, your communications cover all aspects of your company. Knowing how to maximise their effectiveness comes down to keeping up with trends.

When the comms landscape moves so quickly, it can be hard to stay on top of the trends your business needs to react to. Here at AMBITIOUS, our experts are well-equipped to adapt to the latest market and sector shifts to move with the times...

1. Businesses will become more proactive with their contingency planning and dealing with crises. Preparedness for external threats will be essential to a coherent strategy.

Chloe Tonkin, Senior PR Consultant at AMBITIOUS, observes,

“Today’s large-scale problems, such as extreme weather events, political unrest and cyber threats, can impact organisations of all sizes, across all sectors. Organisations that would never have previously considered their messaging around the impacts of flooding, protest action or online hacking, now have a responsibility to plan for these risks.

Negative events, and how an organisation deals with them, can affect reputation, financial stability and the safety of staff. By proactively considering different scenarios, determining the steps required to minimise damage, who is responsible for what, and how this will be communicated both inside and outside your organisation, you’ll be better prepared for any challenges that come your way.”

Chloe Tonkin, Senior PR Consultant

2. The need for more authentic, empathetic engagement has never been more vital as clients, customers and consumers navigate a world overloaded with sales pitches and brand communications.

Dani Andres, Associate Director

Dani Andres, Associate Director at AMBITIOUS explains,

“In 2024, the landscape of public relations and communications will see empathy emerging as the central tenet of successful strategies. This shift is propelled by a confluence of factors, including rising prices, ongoing societal stressors, and a collective exhaustion from the constant barrage of promotional content.

As the communications landscape continues to evolve, embracing empathy in your approach will help you connect with audiences on a deeper level, encouraging loyalty, while positioning you as socially responsible and genuinely customer-centric, making it a win-win strategy for 2024 and beyond.”

3. Corporate purpose will remain central to employee engagement and retention within businesses.

Liam, People and Culture Lead at AMBITIOUS comments,

“Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental, social and governance (ESG) commitments across all sectors are now an absolute must and it’s not ok to simply ‘talk the talk’ anymore, employees expect real purpose backed up by real action.

We have seen corporate purpose overtake many other ‘perks’ of a job as the single most important factor to employees, especially amongst Gen Z. Businesses will continue to find that members of staff who feel that their employers actively promote corporate purpose and social value, will reap the rewards by having a more productive and engaged team, as well as see employee retention improve.”

Liam Britnell, People & Culture Lead

4. Client service will be scrutinised like never before and client-agency partnerships will have to become more transparent.

Helen Embleton, Client Service Director

Helen, Client Service Director at AMBITIOUS notes,

“It’s no longer sufficient just to be seen to be helpful, responsive and good to work with; clients want to better understand the ‘how’. What are your ways of working? What processes are in place behind the scenes? When you say you plan, what do you mean by that, what does it look like? How do you measure success?

This scrutiny is being driven by many factors. It could be that the person you report to at the client needs to justify this to others within their business; it could be for good governance, especially in highly regulated industries. Or, more likely, a simple matter of justifying budget.”

5. Video content will continue to be a key aspect of communications outputs. In particular, videos that are authentic and resonate with your audience.

Simon, Marketing Operations Manager at AMBITIOUS explores,

“Behind-the-scenes content has played a big part in businesses’ social strategies in 2023, that’s going to continue into 2024. Especially for those looking to use TikTok as part of a wider employer brand strategy.
“There is obviously still a place for larger-scale production and video content. Audiences still want to be wowed by content. But that kind of strategy can’t really be maintained.

This is going to be a balancing act for businesses. Keeping the day-to-day content output low-key, relatable and authentic will help businesses build trust and authenticity with their audience. Making those big hero content moments all the more effective.”

Simon Boddy, Marketing Operations Manager

6. With 2030 carbon neutrality commitments approaching, 2024 can expect to see a focus on the issue of communicating carbon offsets as a business.

Katy Barney, ESG and Sustainability Lead

Katy, ESG and Sustainability Lead at AMBITIOUS discusses,

“The appropriate use and framing of carbon offsets is increasingly contentious, even though there are often genuine social benefits to these projects to consider as well.

For PR professionals, the challenge will be keeping up with current trends around carbon offsetting and advising clients on the right messaging around their carbon offsetting (or decision not to invest) as part of wider net zero transition plans.”

7. AI-assisted content can be expected to accelerate efficiency and productivity in 2024, rather than replace human creativity.

Izzy, Content Manager at AMBITIOUS highlights,

“Despite concerns regarding its impact on creativity, the reception of AI in content creation is largely contingent on how we use it. The primary role of AI in content creation should not be to mimic creativity but rather to streamline workloads.

Creators will have more time to refine their ideas in areas where human ingenuity remains indispensable as AI becomes an ally to tasks. AI can help tailor the tone and style of writing to suit target audiences and serves as a great source of visual inspiration and references.”

Izzy Bryant, Content Manager

8. PR's stock is on the rise. CEOs are beginning to recognise that while marketers speak to prospects and customers, PR professionals engage with all audiences.

Sarah Woodhouse, Director

Sarah, Director at AMBITIOUS says,

"There is growing recognition of the ability that public relations has to speak to people on a variety of levels. This could include stakeholders, suppliers, investors, analysts, think tanks, regulators, and prospective and current employees.

In this age of purpose, storytelling and bringing people on a journey with you, PR has a key role in driving strategic communications and building understanding and earning trust signals from an organisation's publics."

SUMMARY

Businesses are in for another turbulent year but hopefully this report starts to demystify some of the trends that we need to prepare for and demonstrate the importance of effective communications in 2024.

It should also highlight the need for businesses to invest in comms properly – in times of change and uncertainly, consultancy from experienced and effective comms professionals can help you stay ahead of the game and ensure that you are connecting with your customer base at every stage of the buyer journey.

At AMBITIOUS we are committed to staying at the cutting edge of developments in our industry. With our comprehensive approach that follows our insights, ideas and impact model, we have the structure, expertise and services to ensure you are resilient to any market changes and are primed to take advantage of the opportunities that the market presents.

If you'd like to get your PR and communications plan for 2024 into action, then get in touch.