CEO Confidence Plummets Worldwide, Global Study Finds

Confidence in United States Down 51 Percent; China Down 21%

CommPRO Editorial Staff

The confidence of global business leaders plummeted in 2019, according to the second annual Worldcom Confidence Index (CI) from The Worldcom Public Relations Group (Worldcom), the leading global partnership of independent public relations firms. In an analysis of online content from more than 58,000 chief executive and chief marketing officers, the overall confidence among global CEOs and CMOs is down more than 20 percent, with the most significant drops in the United States (51 percent) and China (21 percent). Japan bucked the trend, moving from last to first in the Confidence Index, with a rise of 74 percent.

"High levels of uncertainty globally, including talk of trade wars between the United States and China, have not helped assuage the fears of business leaders, and our research shows that global trade agreements and tariffs are undermining confidence," said Roger Hurni, chairman of the Worldcom Public Relations Group. "Since our last Confidence Index in 2018, leaders have also encountered Brexit, protests in Hong Kong, the proliferation of global warming, famine, and the re-emergence of diseases such as measles. This combination of factors may help explain why confidence levels have fallen so dramatically over the past year."

This year, Worldcom engaged Advanced Symbolics Inc., a market research firm that uses artificial intelligence to track and interpret publicly available social media content. This year's report examined data from nearly 60,000 business leaders, showing how their opinions and intentions have changed over time.

"Worldcom used artificial intelligence to perform important market research for this year's confidence index, showing that they are innovative and understand the key benefits AI provides PR firms and professionals," said Erin Kelly, chief executive officer of Advanced Symbolics Inc. "Our AI tracked a sample of nearly 60,000 business leaders from 15 different countries – a big increase from previous years."

Along with global confidence, the report measures the importance of reaching specific audiences and the confidence levels that c-suite executives have in reaching those audiences. In 2018, CEOs were most concerned with reaching customers, but respondents in the 2019 research report are most concerned with influencers, which grew 160 percent from 2018 to 2019, followed by customers and employees. However, CEO confidence in reaching influencers remains quite low. Leaders are more confident in their abilities to reach shareholders, customers, suppliers, and even government officials.

"Influencers were an audience in decline in 2018 but leaped to the front of the pack in this year's report," said Hurni. "The growth of this audience could suggest that leaders feel they need the support of influencers to help them navigate their way through turbulent times."

Upskilling Now a Major Focus in Battle for Employee Engagement and Retention

Another issue CEOs and CMOs are managing is the retention of current employees. Leaders have low confidence in their abilities to retain talent. Firms in the United Kingdom and the United States rank last and second-to-last respectively, in their confidence to retain employees. This is just one of five employee-related issues that feature in the top six topics discussed globally. Economic migration is a cause for concern globally — most notably in the U.S., which had the lowest Confidence Index score. The number one topic aired by leaders is upskilling and reskilling employees. The U.K. had the lowest score for this topic, and Japan the highest. Improving skills is just one of many areas leaders are exploring to keep employees loyal and engaged.

"Just like last year, what is keeping CEOs up at night is retaining top talent. This year they also want to ensure employees have the right skills in an evolving and dynamic workplace," said Hurni. "What's also clear from the report is that employment benefits need to be a part of a retention and attraction strategy."

The Worldcom Confidence Index highlights concerns/confidence across 23 topics and six audiences. We have outlined the top 10 findings in what we call, "The Worldcom Confidence 10."

The Worldcom Confidence 10

#1 Confidence levels implode — down 21 percent

- The United States is the biggest faller (down 51 percent) and Japan the biggest riser

#2 Influencers become #1 audience for leader attention but have the second-lowest Confidence Index score

- The impact and role of the media has the lowest CI score

#3 Employee related topics dominate leaders' agenda

- Upskilling and reskilling the most discussed topic
- Employee related topics take five out of the top six topic places
- The Worldcom Confidence Index score for employees lowest of all audiences

#4 Leaders have concerns about their corporate image and brand reputation and their ability to protect it in a crisis

#5 Global trade agreements and tariffs undermine confidence

#6 Confidence declines in the ability to satisfy customers – especially in the U.S. – but remains higher than other business topics

#7 Global Worldcom Confidence Index scores show that events that affect us all, like global warming, trigger very different reactions in our leaders

#8 Government and legislators getting much more attention and their changes are a cause for concern

#9 A marked shift in attitude to the impact of the way political leaders communicate on social media

#10 Cybercrime no longer a global cause for concern but a big issue for South American leaders

Methodology

The study was able to operate at this scale, and in nine different languages, because the data was captured using a breakthrough approach powered by artificial intelligence (AI). The chosen research firm, Advanced Symbolics Inc (ASI), has developed a patented method of building representative samples and then capturing information with their AI tool.

"We are delighted to be the first organization to use AI in

this way and on this scale," said Hurni. "It's further proof of the way Worldcom partners around the world use innovative solutions to deliver immediate results and lasting solutions for clients. We chose ASI's approach because it's proven to be incredibly accurate. Only last month, they were the only research firm to accurately predict the outcome of the Canadian elections by using their AI tool. We will be adding to this research over the coming months to deliver invaluable insight to our clients in particular and business leaders in general."

The full report and other media assets can be downloaded here.