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# NAVIGATING A CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

INSIGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH CCOS  
AND MEDIA RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS

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# INTRODUCTION

The changing media landscape is a critical area of focus for Chief Communications Officers (CCOs) and media relations professionals as customer preferences and the state of journalism evolves. While high-profile earned placements remain valuable, there is growing recognition of the importance of targeted trade media, digital platforms, and owned and paid content that resonates with specific audiences.

In 2023, Pew Research Center reported that 86% of adults said they at least “sometimes” get their news from a smartphone, computer or tablet – a stark increase from 49% in 2022.<sup>2</sup> Also, half said they at least “sometimes” get their news from social media. However, the traditional media landscape is diminishing. Since 2005, the U.S. has lost nearly 2,900 newsrooms and is on track to lose one-third of all newspapers by the end of 2024. As of 2023, 204 counties have no local news outlets, creating “news deserts.”<sup>3</sup>

In this research report, the Institute for Public Relations and communications and marketing firm Peppercomm interviewed 22 CCOs and 22 media relations professionals to explore their perspectives on the shifting media landscape.

This report investigates how executives are adapting their media strategies to address challenges such as shrinking newsrooms, increased sensationalism, and the rise of misinformation.

By examining current trends and future predictions, this research provides insights into how organizations can navigate the complexities of media relations and enhance and maintain their reputational integrity in an increasingly fragmented information environment.



1. Pew Research Center. (2023, November 15). News platform fact sheet. Pew Research Center.

2. Northwestern University Medill. (2023). [More than half of U.S. counties have no access or very limited access to local news - Medill - Northwestern University](#).

# 6 KEY FINDINGS

Below are key findings based on the Interviews with CCOs and media relations experts:

- 1 The Shrinking Newsroom is Real**

Shrinking newsrooms have significantly impacted media relations strategies. Journalists are now tasked with covering more stories across broader beats, leading to less in-depth reporting, more misinformation, and limited time for building relationships with media professionals.
- 2 Personalization is Key**

As newsrooms continue to shrink and journalist turnover rates increase, media relations professionals are required to engage in more personalized and proactive outreach. This includes educating less experienced reporters on industry-specific topics and being more creative in securing coverage.
- 3 Increased Shift Toward Paid and Sponsored Content**

With traditional earned media opportunities becoming scarcer, many organizations are increasing their budgets for paid ads and digital placements. There is also a growing reliance on owned channels and social media.
- 4 Rising Sensationalism and Misinformation**

The shift toward "clickbait" content and the rise of AI-generated media have heightened the need for vigilance in media monitoring. Professionals are increasingly focused on combating misinformation and disinformation through strategic planning, rigorous fact-checking, and maintaining strong media relationships.
- 5 Mixed Adaptation to the Evolving Media Landscape**

Expectations that the C-suite and Board of Directors (BOD) will adapt to changes in the media landscape varies widely. While some executives are proactive in embracing new media strategies, others remain focused primarily on traditional media approaches, often due to a lack of awareness or education about emerging trends. CCOs and media professionals predict the media landscape will create more challenges with the decline in traditional media and the increase in polarization.
- 6 Emerging Role of AI in Media Relations**

While still in its early stages, AI is expected to play a transformative role in media relations, but currently that role is limited. Executives are just beginning to explore AI's potential for ideation, content creation, and media monitoring, though concerns remain about its impact on disinformation and the erosion of journalistic standards.



# CHANGES TO THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

***The decline in beat reporters and the increased turnover in journalists have made it more challenging for companies to build media relationships, requiring more strategic, personalized outreach and proactive content delivery.***

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## Shrinking Newsrooms

Nearly all said that shrinking newsrooms have created challenges, affecting their media relations strategy and their relationships with journalists. Reporters seem to be tasked with more stories than ever with less time to write them and less availability, resulting in less coverage, less in-depth reporting with expanded beats, more confusion and misinformation, and less time with the media.

One external communications executive at a manufacturing company discussed some of the challenges. “We have to be much more creative and patient with reporters,” he said. “There are less of them, and they are overworked. We have to set expectations inside the organization because it can take much longer for stories to land.”



# CHANGES TO THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE (CONTINUED)

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*We're often dealing with someone covering a catch-all finance beat, which has meant we aren't necessarily dealing with someone super seasoned and experienced with the nuances of our industry. It creates more of an onus on us as media relations professionals to do the legwork to educate those reporters.*

*— Communications Director at an insurance company*

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One communication executive at a construction company said it's increasingly difficult to get reporters to “visit and see things firsthand.” Similarly, an external communication manager at a transportation company said, “We, as media relations professionals, must spend more time explaining an industry to reporters, at times, as they don't know what they're covering.”

Executives noted that reporters are increasingly stretched thin, with higher turnover rates and a lack of experience, leading to a significant loss of industry expertise and knowledge.

Many executives discussed the importance of relationship development and being more strategic about what they pitch, relying heavily on specialized media relations professionals on their teams. However, as one global communications director in the healthcare industry said, “It's been challenging to establish strong relationships for consistent coverage.”



## Paid and Influencer Media

A few interviewees mentioned influencer partnerships as a media relations strategy. One communications executive at a utilities company said, “Social media influencers really don't have an expertise in the subject they are covering.”

One executive noted they have had to increase their budgets for paid content and sponsorships due to shrinking newsrooms. Others talked about turning more to digital and owned channels. One CCO at an energy company did note on social media there were “more voices and channels” along with a “toxic social media climate.”



One senior PR manager at a financial services company discussed the “significant shift” to paid opportunities. She said, “Many of the podcast relationships we've developed over the past few years have transitioned to sponsored or paid, limiting some of our outreach.”

One external communications leader at a manufacturing organization noted how the media are moving away from “true earned media opportunities.” He said, “Reporters are short-staffed and want content written for them to run. This often leads to pitches resulting in heavily sponsored content, which can be uninteresting for readers.”



# CHANGES TO THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE (CONTINUED)

## Increased Sensationalism

Media relations professionals noted the shift to more “clickbait” type content. A senior communications manager at a financial services company said, “The reporting has diminished, and quality outlets are closing so less earned media opportunities [mean] more clickbait reporting to get web traffic.”

The head of communications at an automobile company who manages media relations also talked about a major shift in content generators that use AI. He said, “Some are presented as earned media outlets with staff profiles which are later to be discovered as a digitally created veneer. This adds a need for additional vigilance in monitoring coverage to ensure media relations efforts are properly reflected.”

A communications manager at an investment management company who manages media relations said he is having to be more proactive in finding stories. “Social and news consumption is increasingly confined to echo chambers, so media inquiries are becoming less predictable and more sensational. We are responding less to incoming inquiries and looking for opportunities for proactive opportunities to tell our story.”



# HOW CCOS ARE ADAPTING TO THE CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

*The C-suite's adaptation to the changing media landscape varied widely, largely relying on the CCO's guidance, with many executives primarily focused on traditional media.*

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## C-Suite

Results were mixed in terms of how well the C-Suite and Board of Directors are adapting to the evolving media landscape. Most acknowledged the importance of the media in telling the organization's story and their power to influence an organization's reputation. With some organizations, traditional media was most important while in others, digital played a more powerful role.

An external communication executive at a law firm said adaptation has to do with the CEO and their willingness to learn or try new strategies as technology evolves. Others said the C-Suite is not ready yet for changes to the media landscape. In fact, some said the C-suite adapts "not very well" or "poorly." One communication executive at a utilities company also said, "The C-suite doesn't usually adapt well."

Some CCOs said their CEOs were aware of the changes in the media environment, however, much of what they know is surface-level and only comes from what their CCO has shared. This can present new opportunities for CCOs to introduce different forms of media, such as podcasts.





# HOW CCOS ARE ADAPTING TO THE CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE (CONTINUED)

## Board of Directors

Some CCOs face similar challenges in educating their Board of Directors (BOD), but thought their BOD was less knowledgeable than CEOs with a fixed mindset. Some CCOs said their BOD is not aware of the media landscape, have outdated expectations, and/or place a heightened focus on traditional media. One executive in the transportation industry said their BOD's expectations look more like "2004 or 2014 rather than 2024."

"[The BOD is not] tuned in to the media landscape except for highly positive or highly negative stories about the company, which are contextualized for them by the CEO and CCO," said a CCO at an industrial company.

But while BODs were thought to be less adaptable, a few respondents did say their BOD was adept, primarily due to education from their communications function.

"The Board has a solid understanding of the shifting landscape. Each year during our board and executive team strategy retreat, we spend time on the topic, usually with an outside expert," said a CCO in the healthcare industry.

Across the board, most CCOs said their function was the primary information source for their C-suite and BOD to learn about the media environment. Executives also mentioned ongoing education, communication, and setting realistic expectations were also important.



# HOW COMMUNICATORS ARE EDUCATING THE BOARD AND C-SUITE (CONTINUED)

***Regular education, updates, and detailed reporting on media trends and strategy are crucial for keeping the C-suite and BOD informed and aligned with the evolving media landscape.***

As the external communications executive at a law firm said, “Prudent CCOs keep the CEO, fellow C-suite, and company decision-makers as informed as possible on emerging trends and results of the comms strategy.”

Similarly, a CCO in the transportation industry said, “Our team briefs them on changes in the media landscape, what the latest pitfalls are (like deepfakes), how to gauge media influence (bloggers versus traditional journalists), trend of hyper local coverage, etc.”

The responsibility falls on the CCO and media relations experts to educate the BOD and C-suite on the media landscape and practitioners have been approaching the task in different ways by providing:

- Ongoing training for current media relations professionals, which keeps the media professional on an expert level, and maintains trust between executives and practitioners
- Workshops and webinars on essential media-related relations topics
- Newsletters/quarterly reporting on key coverage, metrics, and articles on the changing landscape
- Monthly “PR issues” and media relations education at board meetings



***Executives value high-profile earned media placements, but they also recognize the importance of targeted trade media, digital placements, and stories that effectively reach and resonate with specific audiences.***

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Regarding the most important media placements to the C-suite, the responses of CCOs and media relations professionals were varied depending on the type of organization and their priorities. While some focused on traditional broadcast and print media, including local and national, others were more concerned about industry/trade and business publications.

Some respondents said digital placements and social media were also important, and in a small number of cases, more important than traditional media.

Regarding the most important media placements to the BOD, most responses by executives mirrored the placements that the C-suite finds important. However, several executives noted that the BOD does not place importance on earned media placements compared to the C-suite, partially due to a lack of knowledge.

### Measuring Media Relations

Below are some of the metrics CCOs and media relations professionals are using or would like to use to evaluate media relations efforts. One CCO noted the importance of the strategy informing how efforts are measured and evaluated. Overall, the following metrics were listed the most often:



- Tonality
- Executive Media Reach
- Reach and impressions
- KPIs
- Competitive analysis
- Message Penetration
- Volume
- Sentiment
- Message pull-through
- Quality of coverage/reach/impact

A head of communications in the manufacturing industry said they were using measurement and evaluation to guide strategy. “Executives [in my organization] rely on real-time data to gauge public sentiment, measure the impact of media coverage, and adjust their strategies accordingly,” she said.

On the other hand, one communications executive at a utilities company said her company is turning to other metrics. “Actually, we are moving away from traditional media sentiment/volume and paying more attention to customer-centric metrics such as customer satisfaction, news awareness, brand perception studies, etc.,” she said.

# COMBATTING MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

***Companies are increasingly focused on combating misinformation through strategic planning, fact-checking, transparent communication, and proactive content dissemination, while also preparing for future challenges through scenario planning and social listening.***

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Organizations are at risk of being negatively impacted by the spread of misinformation and disinformation.<sup>4</sup> However, how organizations are combatting disinformation is inconsistent, if they are combatting it at all.

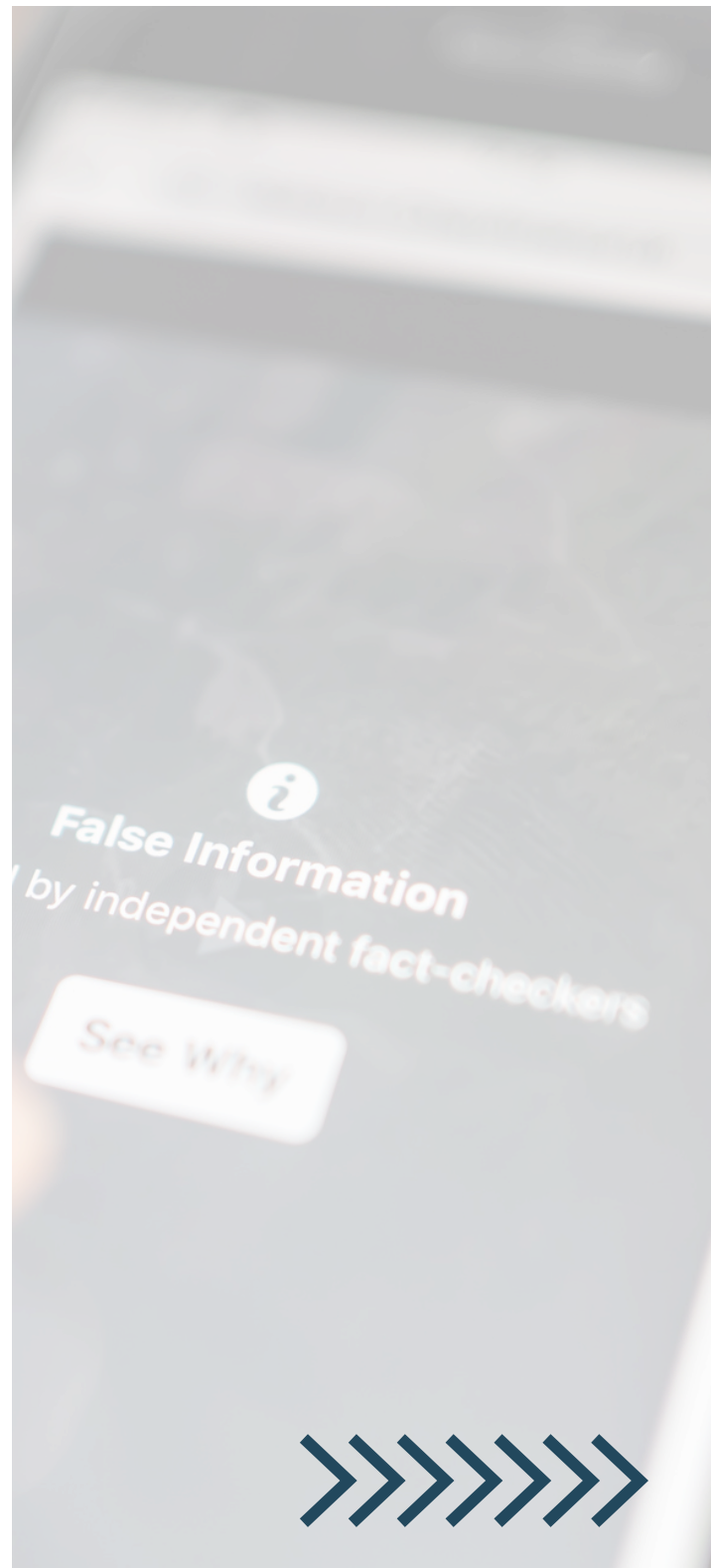
Creating a playbook, social listening and monitoring, and rigorous fact-checking were among the most popular strategies communicators use to stop the spread of disinformation. Others include:

- Primary research on stakeholder perceptions
- Responding quickly
- Pre-bunking<sup>4</sup>
- Oversight by non-communication functions

Strong media relationships were also noted as being important for helping combat misinformation and disinformation. “We have great relationships with the platforms (X, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok,) so we can react quickly if we need a parody site or handle taken down,” said one senior executive in the transportation industry.

A head of communications in the transportation industry discussed the importance of credibility and transparency. “We uphold rigorous fact-checking and verification processes before disseminating information to ensure accuracy and maintain credibility,” he said. “Transparency is key in our communications, as we strive to build trust.”

A couple of CCOs noted that with the rise of AI, the amount of disinformation will increase so executives must be prepared.



<sup>3</sup> The Institute for Public Relations defines misinformation as “false or misleading news or information” while disinformation is “deliberately false or misleading news or information” with the main differences between the two being the intent of the sender.

<sup>4</sup> Pre-bunking is defined as a proactive strategy to prevent people from believing or spreading misinformation and/or disinformation through identification of content or attack strategies.

# LOOKING AHEAD: MEDIA RELATIONS STRATEGIES

*Through 2025, CCOs discussed building deeper media relationships, integrating marketing strategies, and aligning communications with business objectives, while media relations professionals talked about maximizing media reach and managing reputation while building brand visibility.*

CCOs most often said their top priorities through 2025 were strategy execution, building relationships with key audiences, and telling the organization's story. Refining current systems and expanding to new outlets were mentioned as well.

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*From a big picture perspective, we are also investing time and resources in better delivering our omni messaging,” she said.*

*“I’m seeking a new platform that will help us plan, project manage and publish content across channels, so I can free up more tactical time for strategic initiatives.*

*— External Communications Director at a Law Firm*

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Only a couple of leaders mentioned AI and how to leverage that as part of their strategy. For those using generative AI, the technology is used to ideate and brainstorm as well as edit and plan. Also, a couple of media relations professionals were using it for pitching and creating reporter recommendations. Most said they were not using it at all or were not using it to its fullest potential.

A PR manager in the telecommunications industry summed up the overall sentiment. “The role of generative AI is still very much undefined in media relations,” he said. “I think the value is definitely there and I think it has the potential to be as transformative as the spreadsheet was for accountants, but the 'rules of play' have yet to truly be defined.”

Media relations professionals emphasized the importance of “quality” coverage and expanding the consideration of outlets while “nurturing” and “growing” key relationships with an overall goal of positively impacting the organization's reputation. Several leaders mentioned the importance of their agencies in building relationships and securing placements.

Some noted the importance of having a global strategy in multiple markets. To be successful, one CCO at a pharmaceutical company said “multi-language, multi-source media and social monitoring” is critical. Others recommended localized teams, local agencies, and a strong understanding of market differences as part of their global media relations strategy. Strong and consistent communication across teams and being an integral part of the planning process were also noted. One leader said they were using AI to help assess how messages are being received across markets.



# PREDICTIONS: THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE THROUGH 2029

*Over the next five years, leaders predicted the rise of AI-driven content, continued decline of traditional journalism, increasing reliance on social media and citizen journalism, and greater polarization, all of which will demand more strategic and adaptive approaches from communications professionals to maintain credibility and effectively engage with diverse audiences.*

While AI was not often mentioned in terms of what organizations are currently using for media relations, AI was more likely to be mentioned as influencing the media landscape down the road.

A mid-level manager in the transportation industry said, “Right now, it's still too early to say what type of role generative AI will have, but there's no doubt that it'll become a commonplace tool in the not-so-distant future.”

For the most part, AI was seen to positively impact news creation, even though a couple of leaders did mention the increase of disinformation and deepfakes due to the technology. Outside of AI, most of the leaders saw a grim outlook for the future of news, especially with traditional media.

One CCO in transportation predicted that there will be:

“[The] continued balkanization of public information sources and therefore public awareness and sentiment [along with the] continued erosion of journalism standards and growth of news-as-entertainment clickbait mindset. [There will be] even further dumbing down of cable news producers and wire service editors. Publish first then ask questions later (maybe).”

Shrinking newsrooms and increased polarization were often mentioned. Additionally, narrow consumer feeds and media aggregators were predicted to increase divisiveness and tailored news content. Media outlets will seek more clicks and sensational stories.

“Traditional media outlets will continue to grapple with declining advertising revenues and competition from digital platforms. Consolidation within the industry may lead to fewer but larger media conglomerates, potentially reducing diversity of voices. Trust in media, already strained, could further erode amid concerns over misinformation and biased reporting. The shift towards digital consumption will accelerate, posing both opportunities and threats to established news organizations

— Head of Communications in the  
Manufacturing Industry

Similarly, a CCO in the transportation industry predicted, “Much more pollution from disinformation and misinformation as infotainment will become the more common currency.”



# PREDICTIONS: THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE THROUGH 2029 (CONTINUED)

The head of communications at an automobile company said the changing news landscape raises “existential questions in how media should be defined for full transparency.”

With narrower agendas, people are increasingly losing trust in media, having an impact on PR.

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*An overall distrust in media causes many to reject what's reported, thus making the role of PR more challenging in where and how to place stories without distortion. This highly fragmented media has also created multiple realities where people have become divided, believing in a range of alternate realities. This makes it very difficult for organizations, institutions and governments to manage a clear and concise message without leading to chaos and discord. It is in this chaos, that nefarious entities can gain undue influence, leading to uncontrolled stability.*

*- Head of Communications  
at an auto company*

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On the other hand, a couple of leaders saw a different media outlook. One media relations professional in the telecommunications industry said even though some mainstream media will struggle, they are hopeful:

“Journalists who have good business senses will still find a way to continue their career even if they aren't affiliated with a major publication. That means, PR folks will continue to have opportunities to place valuable earn coverage if they are strategic and resourceful and put an effort into developing relationships with key reporters and editors.”

Similarly, a mid-level manager who manages media in the transportation industry said, “All that being said, there will always be a need for the news industry. While some say it's a dying industry, I argue that it's an industry in constant change.”



# CONCLUSION

The evolving media landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for CCOs and media relations professionals. As traditional newsrooms shrink and customer preferences shift toward digital and social media platforms, media relations strategies must also adapt. The findings from this research highlight the importance of targeted earned media placements that resonate with specific audiences, whether through high-profile business press, trade publications, or digital channels. Moreover, the rise of misinformation and sensationalism underscores the need for strategic, transparent communication and strong media relationships to safeguard organizational reputation.

Looking ahead, the role of media relations professionals will become increasingly complex as they navigate a landscape characterized by rapid technological advancements, particularly in AI, and growing media fragmentation. To thrive in this environment, CCOs must prioritize ongoing education for both the C-suite and Board of Directors, ensuring they are equipped to understand and respond to these changes. By embracing a proactive approach, leveraging data-driven insights, and fostering adaptability, organizations can maintain their credibility and effectively engage with diverse audiences in an ever-changing media environment.

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## Methodology

The Institute for Public Relations and Peppercomm conducted online, written interviews with 22 Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) from a wide range of industries and organizations and 22 media relations professionals from June to July 2024. The respondents' information has been white-labeled to protect confidentiality and offer an opportunity to provide candid responses.

## About the Institute for Public Relations

The Institute for Public Relations is an independent, nonprofit research foundation dedicated to fostering greater use of research and research-based knowledge in corporate communication and the public relations practice. IPR is dedicated to the science beneath the art of public relations.™ IPR provides timely insights and applied intelligence that professionals can put to immediate use. All research, including a weekly research letter, is available for free at [instituteforpr.org](https://instituteforpr.org).

## About Peppercomm

Peppercomm, a Ruder Finn company, is an award-winning, strategic, integrated communications and marketing agency headquartered in New York City with offices in San Francisco and London. With 29 years of expertise serving blue chip and breakout clients, the firm has made a science of communication, combining wit and wisdom with proven public relations discipline and innovative offerings to break through, build deeper connections and ensure our clients' success. Peppercomm has received numerous accolades throughout its history, most recently being named one of the top 30 Crain's Best Places to Work in NYC 2023, the PRNews Agency Elite 100 and PR Daily's Top Agencies, as well as recent campaign award recognitions from the Provoke SABRE Awards (Integrated Campaign), PRNews Platinum PR Awards (Media Relations), PRNews Digital Awards (CSR), and the Bulldog PR Awards (Media Relations), among others. Contact us at [connect@peppercomm.com](mailto:connect@peppercomm.com).

