

Doing the right thing, beating the rhetoric and embracing activism



By [Jordan Rittenberry](#)

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For 21 years now, Edelman has been measuring trust as a metric of success. Trust between employees and employers, the private sector and government, individuals and organisations. Ultimately, all worthwhile communication should take levels of trust into account and as we look ahead to 2022, we're noticing more and more that across all sectors, work being done is focusing more on building these vital connections.



Jordan Rittenberry, chairman for Edelman Middle East and Africa

Even the World Economic Forum (WEF) has recognised that trust ties directly to more equitable economies and overall better societies – with the 2022 theme of 'Working Together, Restoring Trust'.

The world has recognised that when trust breaks down, so too do governments, economies, relationships and morale. Sadly, this has been visible throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, where disinformation has led to a lack of faith in governments, the media and other public institutions.

It's why we're seeing such a shift towards the promotion of more purposeful work in our industry because much of the communications and public relations sector realises that we're going to be central to rebuilding trust in the people we serve.

- **Doing the right thing is going to be mandatory – not just expected**

If there's one place where South Africa is forging ahead, it's the expectation that organisations must take more action towards positive social change. [Edelman's 2021 trust barometer](#) research has shown that 89% of surveyed South Africans believe that brands need to act beyond their business. It's an attitude that we believe should be adopted globally, because when governments struggle to address societal issues, it's up to the private sector to pick up the slack.

The pandemic has shown us how a single person's actions – or a single country's actions – can affect the majority, meaning organisations are going to have to go beyond rhetoric and push for social change in whatever way they can.

With trust in governments, the media and NGOs decreasing yearly, our research has shown that people are turning to the people closest to them for vital information – particularly their employers and business leadership. By pushing for our clients to take a firm stance on issues of health, governance and sustainability, they, in turn, can help shift societal attitudes for the better.

- **Less CSR, more ESG – the numbers don't lie**

The shift from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to ESG (Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance) is already happening, but it's going to be ramping up over the next few years. CSR was the precursor to ESG, with the former focusing more on pure philanthropy in the corporate space. Companies were committing to improving their communities, society and helping to protect the planet, but not really providing the real data on exactly how.

However, as we've seen in recent years with numerous brands being accused of green-washing, white-washing, trust-washing – to name a few – the expectation is tangible evidence of an organisation's efforts to 'do better'.

ESG requires plans of action, concrete numbers that can be seen by investors and consumers alike and quantifiable indicators that highlight a company's stance on the related issues. Our job is to insist that our clients do not rely on rhetoric. With 89% of South Africans saying they believe they can force a brand to change its company's societal impact, waiting is no longer an option.

- **Employees (not leadership) will be the key to success in every sector – ours included**

We are going to be seeing a continued trend of workplace activism across the world. 76% of our global survey participants responded that they would take action to motivate or pursue necessary organisational change, meaning it's time for companies to realise that they need to be making positive change – externally and internally. And the organisations that choose to do this are rewarded, with belief-driven employees who are more loyal, committed to their work and who promote their employers' products and services. Employees are the ones with the power to make or break a business and this applies to the world of PR as well.

We must continue to push for a better work/life balance, promote societal change and address the issues that directly affect the people we work with. Because if we ignore these factors, retaining talent becomes impossible and trust breaks down. By holding trust at the core of our own industry, we can help do the same for our clients, hopefully creating an environment where purposeful work becomes the norm, not the exception.

Jordan Rittenberry serves as the Chairman of Edelman Africa. An Edelman veteran with 15 years of service, Rittenberry has held numerous leadership positions at the firm. Prior to his role in Africa, Rittenberry lead Edelman's Technology & Business Marketing practice in the firm's co-headquarters of Chicago. He has also served as the client relationship manager for multiple global engagements across some of the firm's largest clients.

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