

# TRUST IN COMMUNICATORS

How the general population trusts journalists, public relations professionals, marketers and other communicators: A comparative study in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom



#TICS19



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# TOPICS



01

How the general  
population trusts  
professional  
communicators

02

How the general  
population trusts  
organisational  
advocates

03

What the general  
population thinks  
about public  
relations activities

04

How PR  
practitioners  
misperceive the  
public's opinion

“

The traditions and institutions, the power of public opinion and the definition of the position which inescapably stamps the individual, have become so solid and reliable that one has to know only certain external facts about the other person in order to have the confidence required for the common action. The question is no longer some foundation of personal qualities on which (at least in principle) a modification of behaviour within the relation might be based: motivation and regulation of this behaviour have become so objectified that confidence no longer needs any properly personal knowledge.



*Georg Simmel, 1950, p. 319*

# Introduction



Public trust is indispensable for any organisation. In today's globalised and mediatised world this is mainly based on information published in traditional and social media. Previous research has mainly focused on the role of professional communicators like journalists, public relations practitioners or marketing experts in this process. They need to be trusted as well – otherwise any efforts to support trust building will fail. However, times have changed. Intermediaries such as social media influencers are gaining in importance (Borchers, 2019). CEOs and board members twitter themselves. And even regular employees have become more important within the paradigm of the so called “communicative organisation” (Heide et al., 2018). Many argue that organisations should use those advocates instead of professional communicators. But does the general population trust them? And how does trust in them compare with trust in established actors?

This study dives deeper into these issues. A representative poll of the general population in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom unveils the perceived trust in journalists, PR and marketing professionals, and other groups speaking on behalf of organisations. A parallel survey among communication professionals in the same countries shows how practitioners assess public trust in those parties. It becomes clear that communicators overestimate their own role and the role of their leaders. They misjudge and ignore public trust in external advocates.

Communication professionals are encouraged to read these results carefully, as new actors like activists or internal and external influencers are becoming more important for all kinds of organisations. We hope that readers will gain new insights into the complex processes and antecedents of trust building from reading this report.

  
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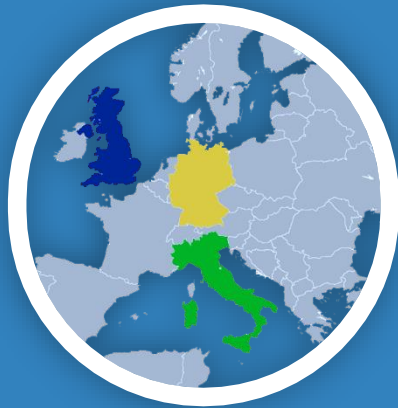
  
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# Research design and methods

## Trust in Communicators 2019 study in key European markets



 General population (Kantar TNS)		 Communication professionals (ECM 2019)
n = 1,051		n = 155
n = 1,050		n = 168
n = 1,029		n = 171

### Objectives

The aim of this study is twofold: On the one hand, we have been interested in different types of communicators and how the general population trusts or distrusts them in key European countries. We compared this with the trust perceptions of communication professionals in the same countries. On the other hand, we were interested in perceptions of the general population about public relations activities and whether this affects the trust in public relations and communication professionals.

### Research questions

The study asked for the perception of trust and distrust in professional communicators by the general population in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom (RQ1). Moreover, trust and distrust in other organisational advocates by the general population have been investigated (RQ2). Another question focused on the understanding of public relations activities by the general population and how this may influence their trust or distrust in communication practitioners (RQ3). Last but not least, the public's opinion was compared with the trust levels perceived by communication professionals in the same countries (RQ4).

### Design and survey method

Based on former studies and existing literature on trust in communication professionals, a statement list was constructed to survey the amount of trust or distrust in all kinds of public communicators who can speak on behalf of an organisation as well as journalists when they report about organisations. Also, statements regarding public relations activities were outlined. To survey trust and distrust as well as the different concepts of public relations we used five-point Likert scales (shown below every result chart).

### Population and sample

The survey is based on a representative sample of adults aged 16 to 64 from Germany, Italy and the UK (interviewed via an internet omnibus in March 2019 by Kantar TNS). These countries were chosen because they represent Western, Central and Southern Europe and reached the highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in their region in 2018. In addition, communication professionals have been surveyed as part of the annual European Communication Monitor in March 2019 (Zerfass et al., 2019, p. 11).

### Data analysis

The data were analysed with descriptive and analytical statistical methods using IBM SPSS software.

01

# Trust in professional communicators

# Trust in journalists, public relations practitioners & marketing professionals

For decades the public sphere and what the general population perceives to know about organisations was influenced by two antagonists: journalists, who report on organisations from an external standpoint, and public relations and marketing professionals, who communicate on behalf of their organisations or clients (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010; Ryan & Martinson, 1988).

While journalists have been highly trusted by the general population in the Western hemisphere, public relations practitioners and marketers have been distrusted to a much higher extent, according to various studies on trust and distrust in communication professionals (GfK Verein, 2018; Larsson, 2007; Rawlins, 2007; White & Park, 2010).

The results presented in this section demonstrate that the contradiction between trusted journalists and distrusted communication and marketing professionals still exists in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

But the gap is much smaller than expected. The decline of trust in mass media across Europe (Commission européenne, 2019, pp. 40-43) seems to impact journalists as well. Marketing communicators are least trusted.



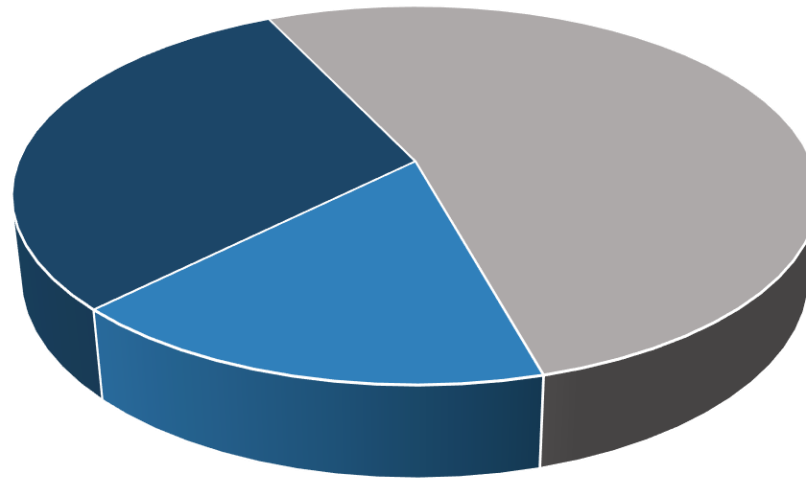
# One third of the general population distrusts journalists when they report about organisations

**30%**

distrust journalists

**17%**

trust journalists



**53%**

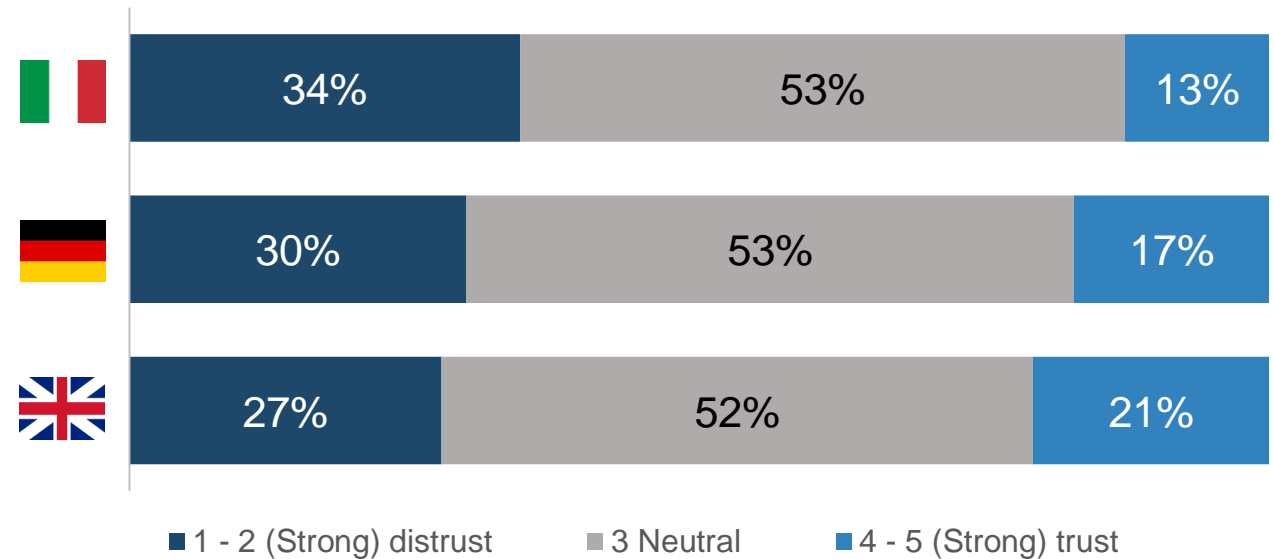
neutral view



The *neutral* answer can be interpreted as “reliance”, “confliction”, “indifference” or “wariness” according to Rusk (2018, p. 107).

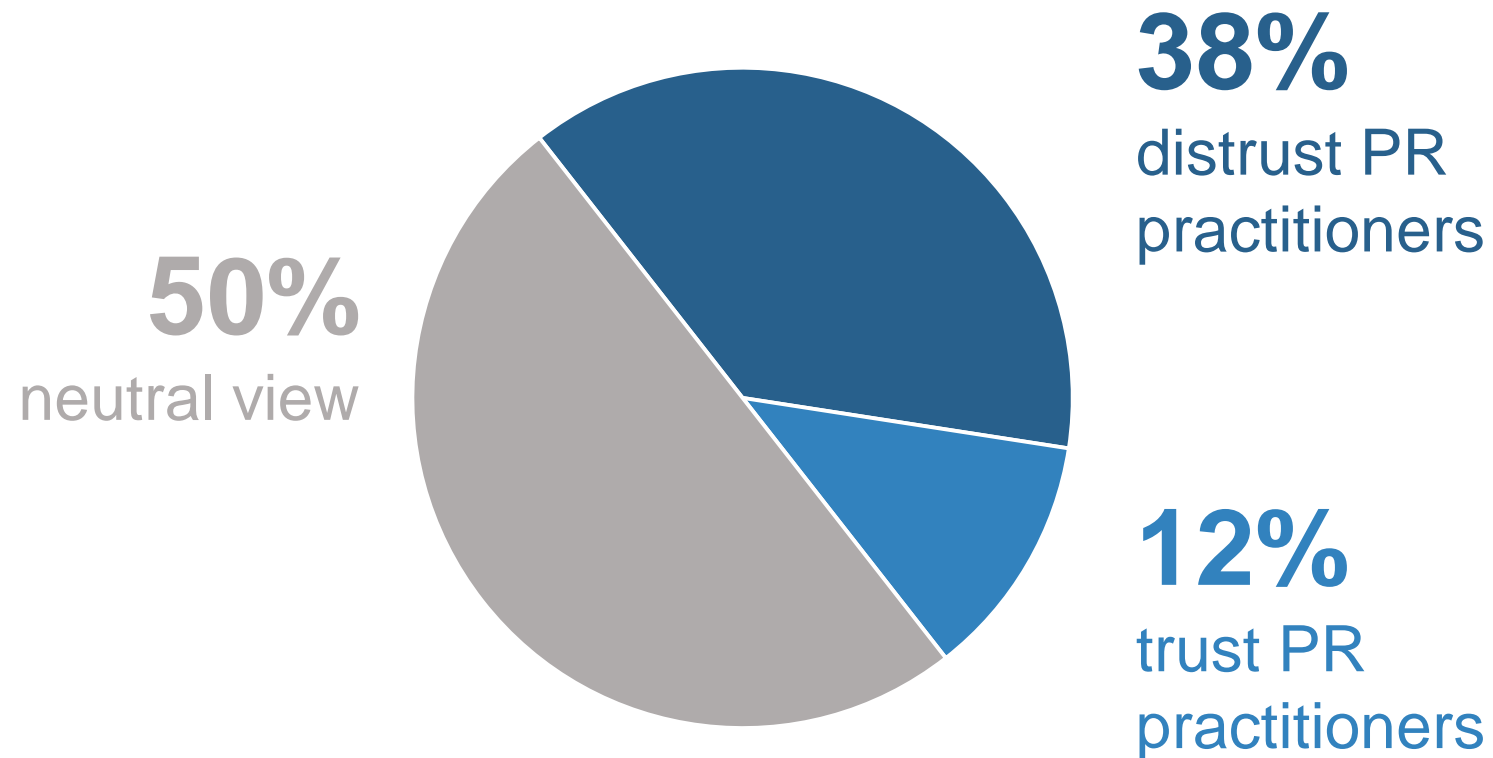


# Italians are most critical of journalists in their country



TICS19 © www.euprera.org.  $N^{UK} = 1,029$ ,  $N^{IT} = 1,050$ ,  $N^{GER} = 1,051$  adults aged 16-64 (representative sample). Question: How much do you trust journalists when they report about organisations? Scale 1 (Strong distrust) – 5 (Strong trust). Highly significant differences between countries (chi-square test,  $p \leq 0.01$ ).

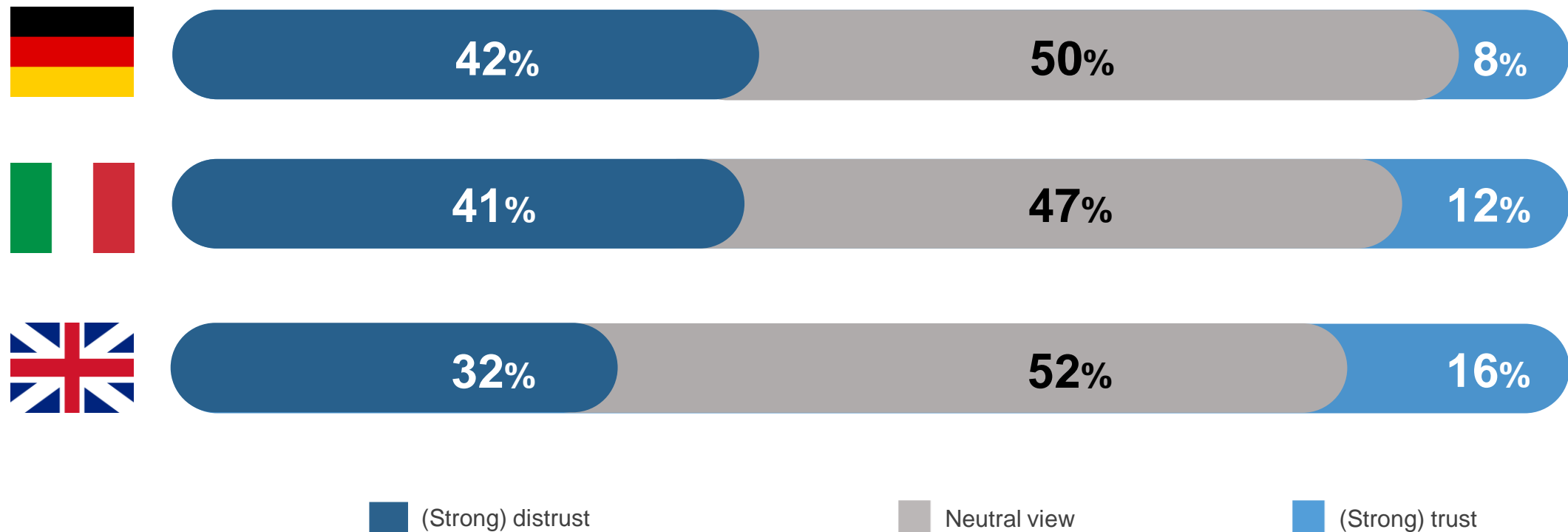
# High level of distrust in communication and public relations professionals in the general population



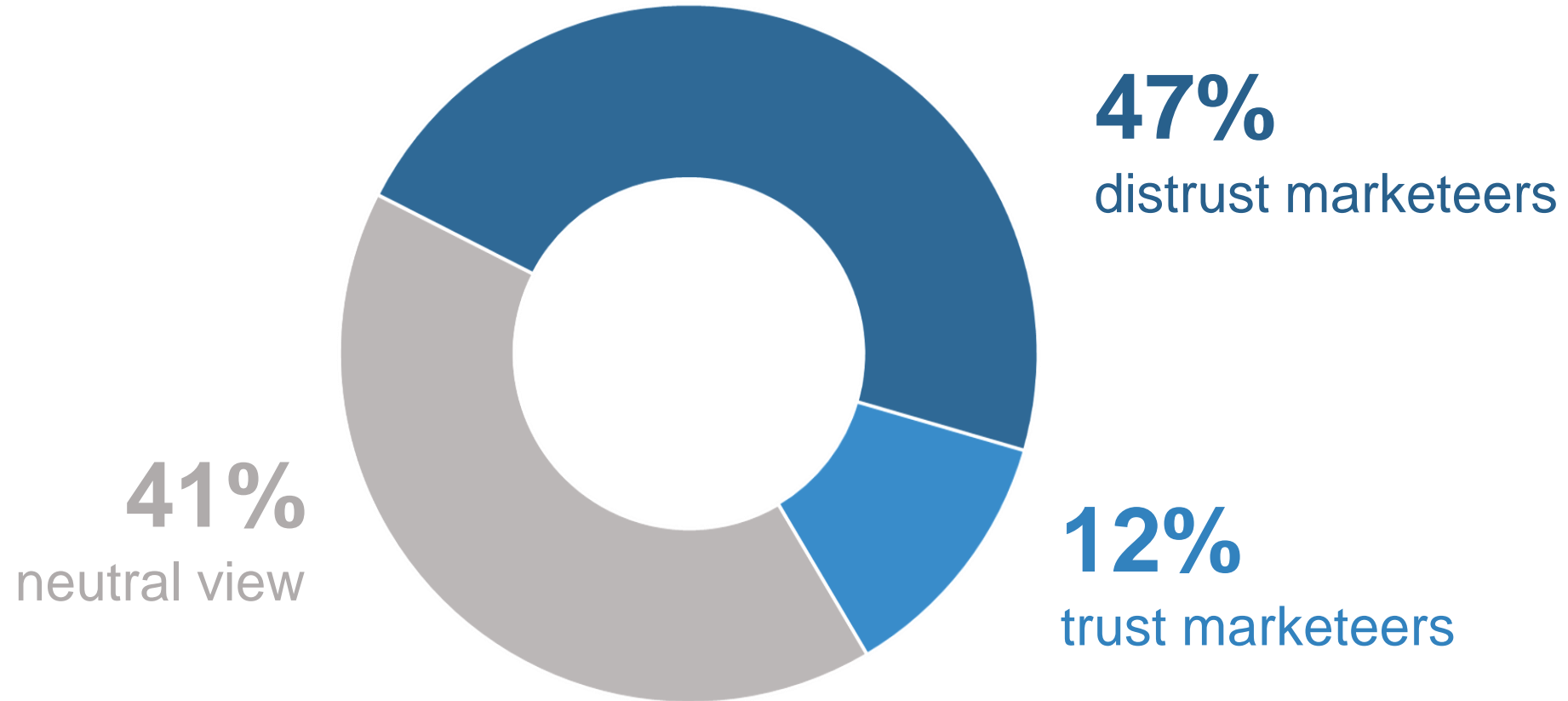
## Age matters

The older the people, the more they *distrust* communication and public relations practitioners

# Distrust in PR professionals is highest in Germany and trust is the strongest in the United Kingdom

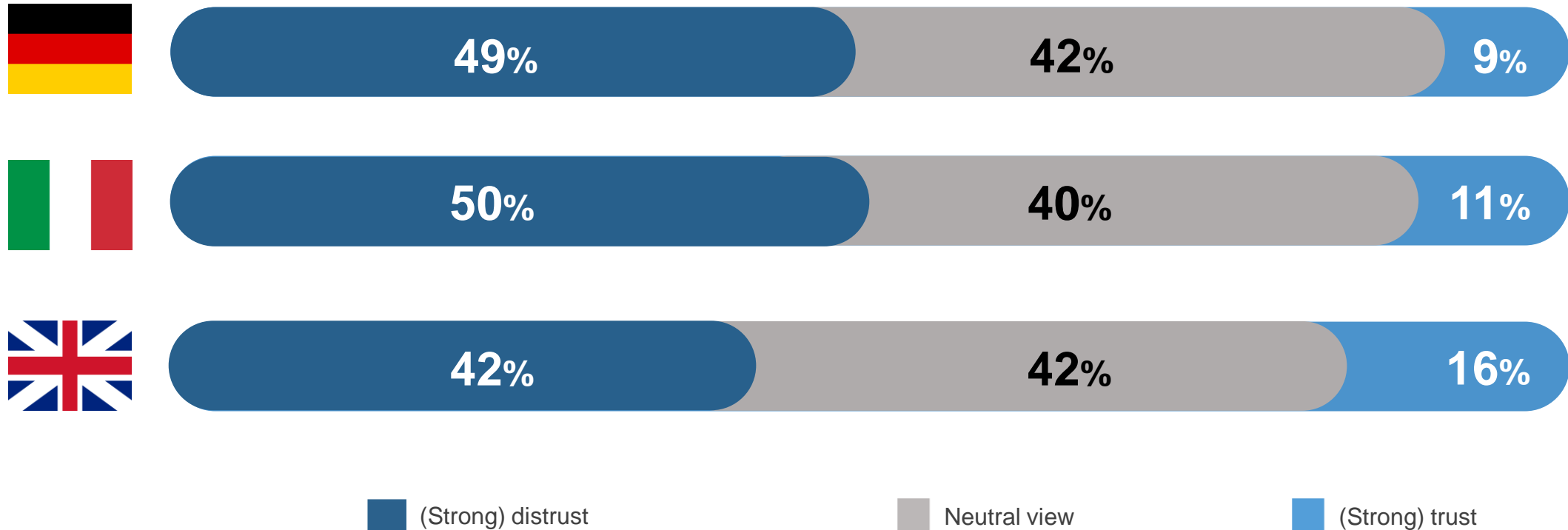


# Nearly half of the population in Germany, Italy and the UK distrusts marketing and sales representatives

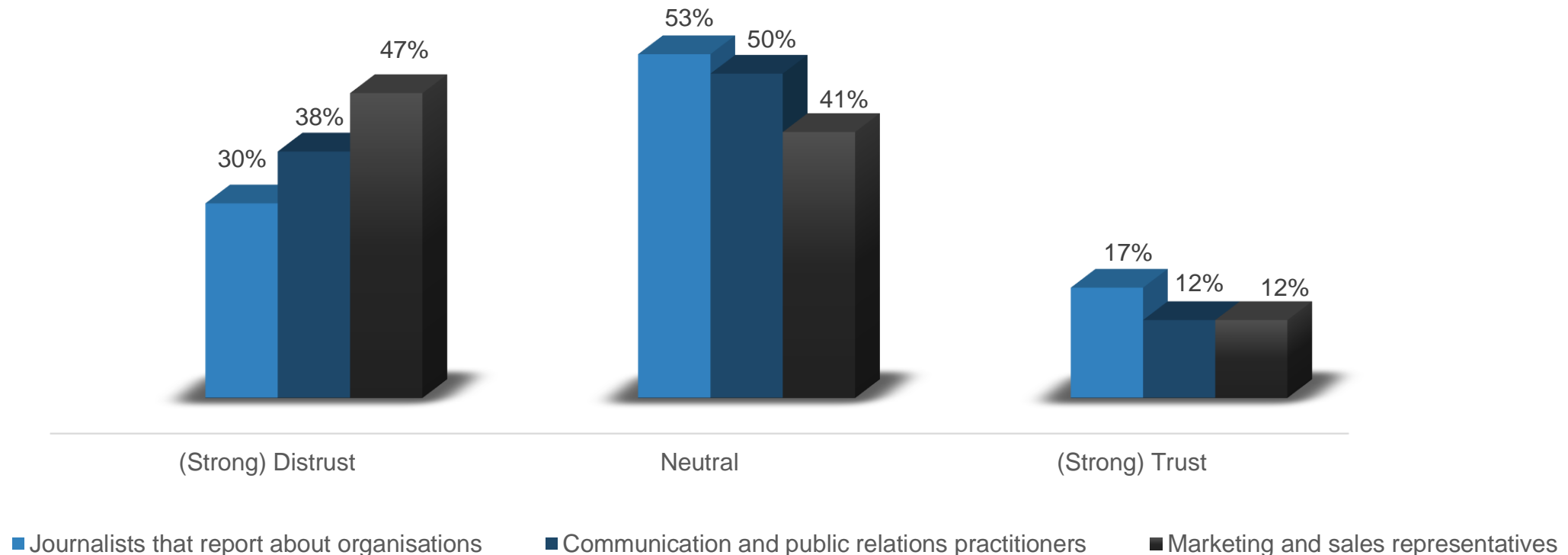




# Distrust in marketers is the strongest in Italy






# Journalists are more trusted than PR and marketing practitioners – but differences are rather small



# Large trust gap between journalists and PR practitioners in Germany, less in the UK and Italy

(Strong) trust of the general population in:

				Overall
Journalists that report about organisations	17.1%	12.7%	20.7%	16.8%
Communication and public relations practitioners	8.3%	12.3%	16.1%	12.2%
Marketing and sales representatives	8.6%	10.7%	16.0%	11.7%

02

# Trust in organisational advocates



# Trust in top management, ordinary employees, external experts, fans, customers, and activists

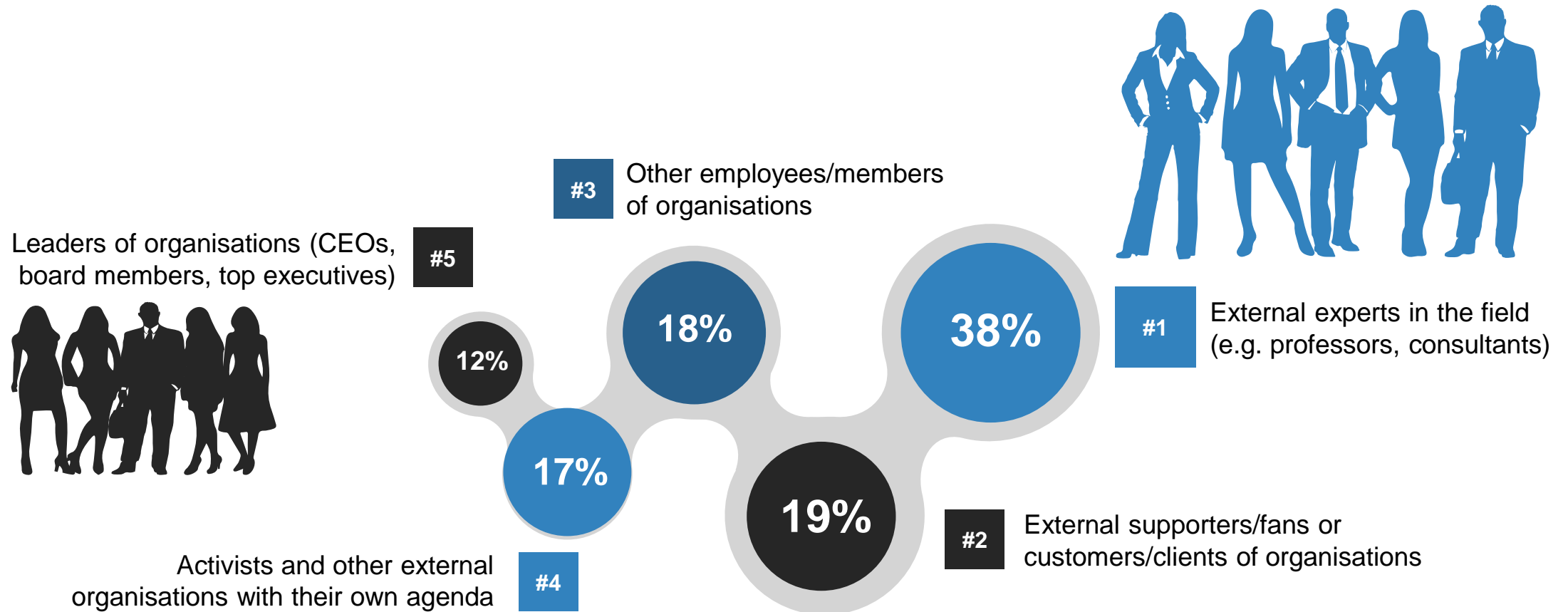
Information, rumours and comments about organisations are often spread by people who are not acting in a professional communication role. This includes leaders of an organisation as well as all employees who interact with stakeholders or communicate on social media. They act on behalf of the organisation. But they are seldom trained, mostly not aware of public opinion building, and rarely classified as wordsmiths and spin doctors.

There are also numerous external actors who can speak on behalf of an organisation, even if nobody internally is involved or knows about it. Examples are supportive customers (fans, brand ambassadors), experts in the field (professors, consultants), or activists with quite different interests, but partly overlapping agendas or goals. Their insights and comments might be as relevant as the news produced by professional journalists, especially if they are spread over social media and if they reach important audiences.

These stakeholders can act as advocates for organisations. Many argue that PR and communication professionals should focus on enabling those groups, e.g. employees, corporate influencers and business unit leaders (Andersson, 2019; Heide et al., 2018; Niederhäuser & Rosenberger, 2018), and that they should align with external parties who can reach out to critical stakeholders. However, this only makes sense if semi-professional advocates enjoy more trust than professional communicators – which was not known until now. This section reports what we have found out.

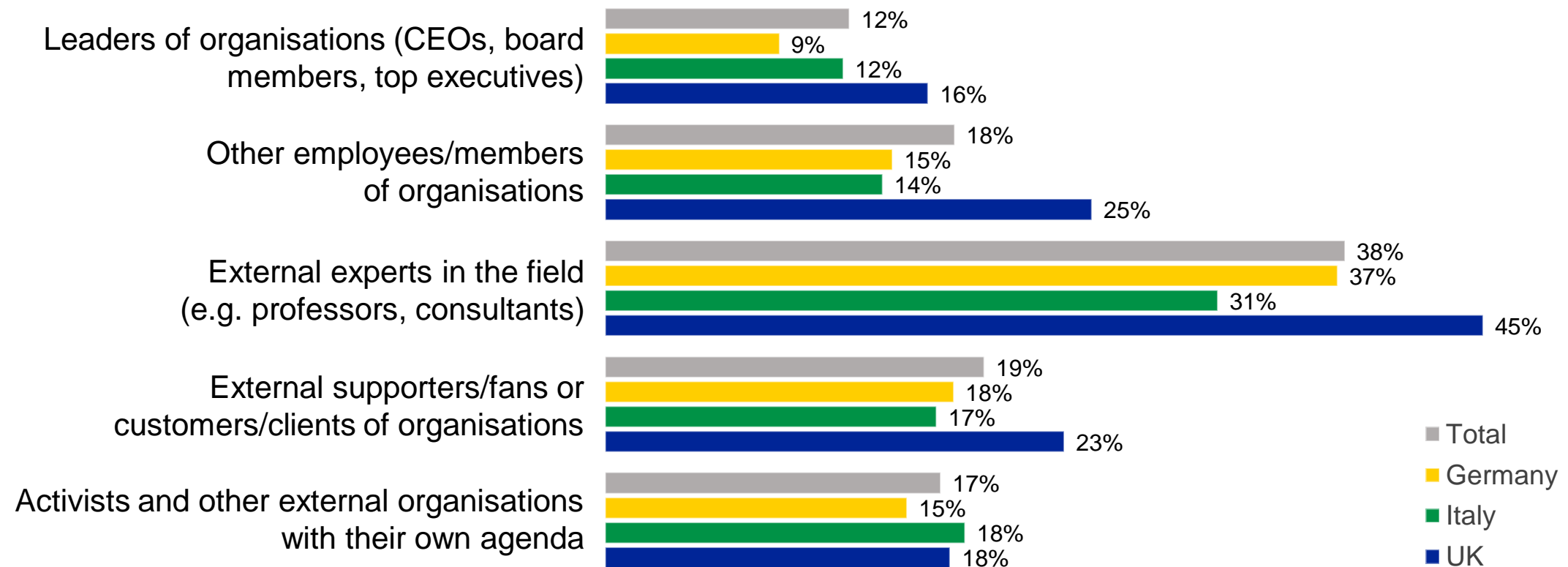


# External experts are the most trusted advocates in the general population



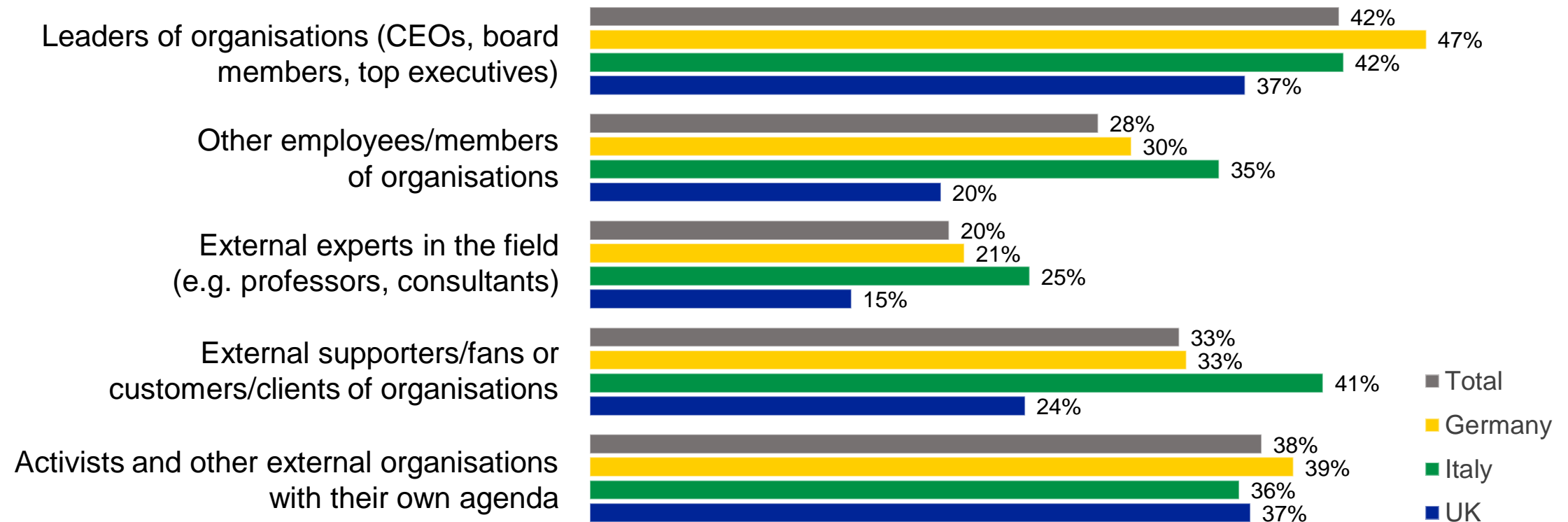
# Public trust in organisational advocates differs across Europe: External experts are most trusted in the UK

(Strong) trust of the general population in:



# Distrust across countries: Germans are more suspicious of top managers, Italians of fans/clients

(Strong) distrust of the general population in:





03

# Perceptions of public relations activities

# Understanding and assessment of PR activities

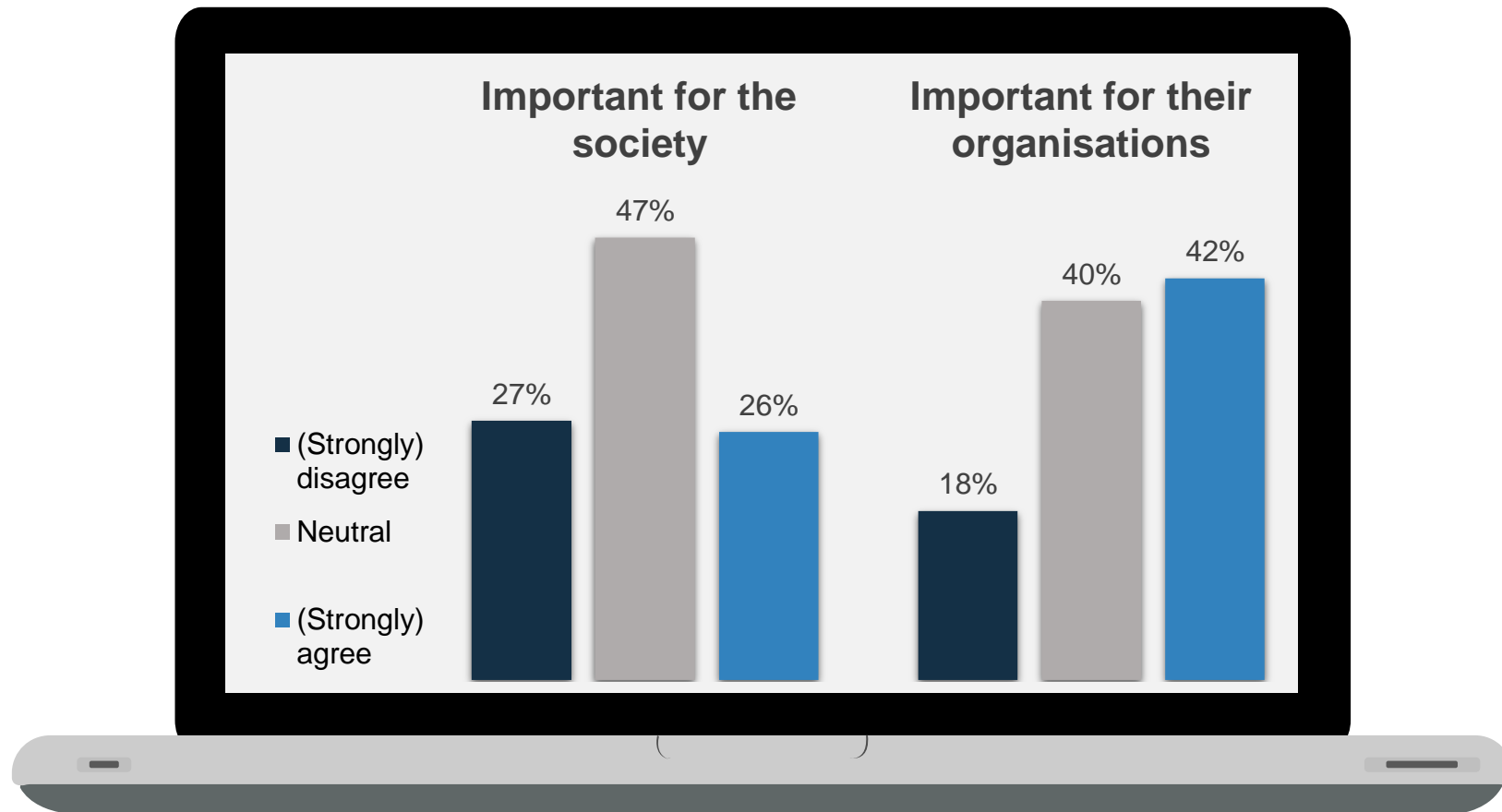
It's clear communication and public relations professionals face high levels of distrust. But how does the general population understand PR activities and does this view have any influence on subsequent levels of trust in them?

There are different perspectives on PR. Strategic communication scholars and proponents of a *managerial approach* to public relations (e. g. Falkheimer & Heide, 2017; Nothhaft et al. 2019; Grunig 1992; Tench et al., 2017; Zeffass, 2008) conceptualise PR as communication activities which are deliberately used to serve organisational goals of any kind, e.g. building legitimacy or reputation. Others argue that PR focuses not primarily on communication, but on *relationship management* between organisations and their stakeholders, aiming at behavioural change (Ledingham & Hung-Baesecke, 2018; Ki et al., 2015). Proponents of *rhetorical and dialogical PR theories* (Heath & Ihlen, 2018; Kent & Taylor, 2002) make the normative stance that public relations is a form of dialogical engagement, whereby organisations and stakeholders act together “for the good of the community” and “a fully functioning society” (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 391). This requires ethical and dialogical communication which brings new arguments into an ongoing discourse.

Results from this study demonstrate that the general population has rather fuzzy perceptions of PR activities. None of the theoretical conceptualisations were supported by a majority; each found supporters and opponents. PR is mainly seen as a managerial approach of organisations. The normative perspective does not resonate at all with only 17% of the population believing that PR activities are based on ethical principles and only one quarter assessing it as important for our society. Nevertheless, we found no evidence that different perceptions influence the level of trust in PR and communication practitioners.

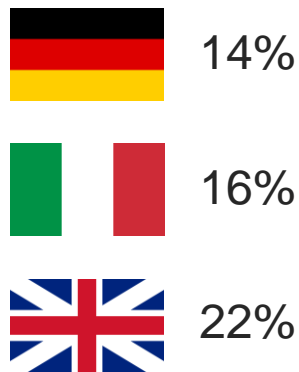


# How the general population perceives the work done by PR practitioners for organisations and society

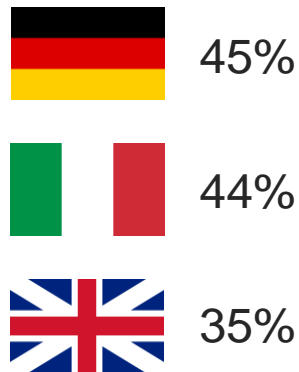


There has been a long debate whether PR professionals serve mainly their own organisation or also the society at large. The public perception is quite clear. Only 20% of the population rate the work of PR professionals as important for their organisations **and** for society.

# Only a small part of the general population thinks that PR activities are based on ethical principles



**5% strongly agree**  
**12% agree**  
overall sample



**14% strongly disagree**  
**27% disagree**  
overall sample



# Fuzzy perceptions about the general goals and essence of PR activities by the general population



## Foster dialogue

One quarter agrees that PR professionals foster dialogue between organisations and those interested in their activities.

26%



## Build relationships

One third agrees that PR professionals build relationships between organisations and their stakeholders.

32%



## Manage communication

More than one third agrees that PR practitioners manage communication activities that help organisations to reach their goals.

36%











# Communication and PR practitioners are primarily seen as organisational servants with few ethical principles



# Communication professionals in the United Kingdom are trusted and recognised to a higher extent



Assessments by the general population:	(Strongly) disagree				(Strongly) agree			
				 Overall				 Overall
I generally trust PR professionals	40.9%	37.0%	27.9%	35.3%	11.2%	12.5%	23.5%	15.6%
Their work is important for our society	30.5%	29.7%	21.5%	27.3%	22.7%	23.8%	32.1%	26.1%
Their work is important for their organisations	18.4%	21.8%	13.0%	17.8%	42.4%	38.8%	46.0%	42.3%
Their work is based on ethical principles	45.0%	44.0%	34.7%	41.3%	13.8%	16.0%	22.1%	17.2%
They foster dialogue between organisations and those interested in their activities	22.6%	29.5%	21.5%	24.6%	26.7%	23.2%	26.7%	25.5%
They build relationships between organisations and their stakeholders	19.8%	26.0%	16.7%	20.8%	34.4%	26.0%	34.7%	31.7%
They manage communication activities that help organisations to reach their goals	17.7%	22.0%	14.7%	18.2%	36.1%	33.1%	39.6%	36.3%

TICS19 © www.euprera.org. N<sup>UK</sup> = 1,029, N<sup>IT</sup> = 1,050, N<sup>GE</sup> = 1,051 adults aged 16-64 (representative sample). Questions: Thinking of communication and public relations professionals, how much would you agree with these statements? Items listed above. Scale 1 (Strongly disagree) – 5 (Strongly agree).

04

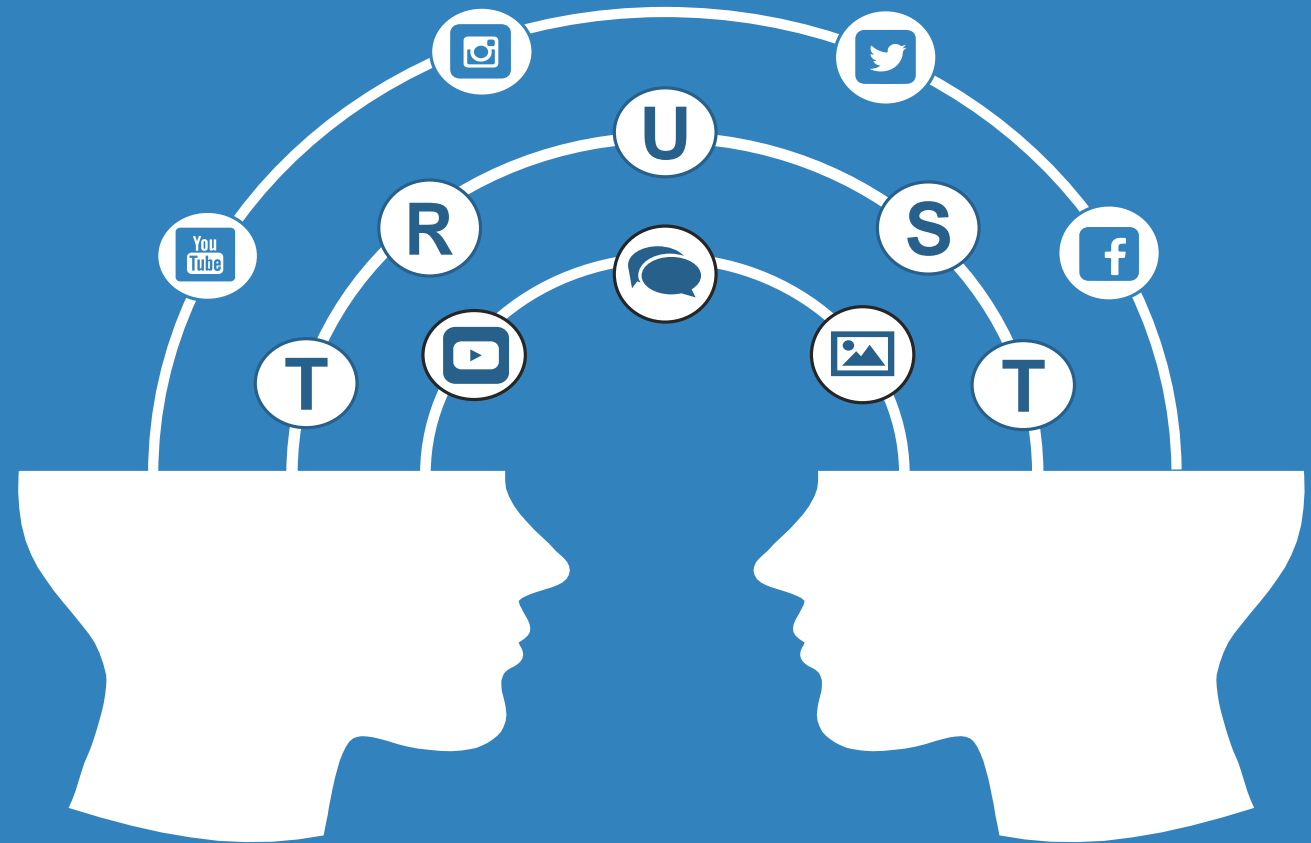
# Misperceptions by public relations professionals

# What PR professionals know about the general population's perception of trust in communicators

Our representative poll of the general population in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom has unveiled a low level of trust in professional communicators. Intermediaries such as external experts, supporters/fans or customers/clients, ordinary employees/members of an organisation, and even activists are more trusted than journalists, public relations or marketing practitioners and top managers, when they speak about or on behalf of organisations.

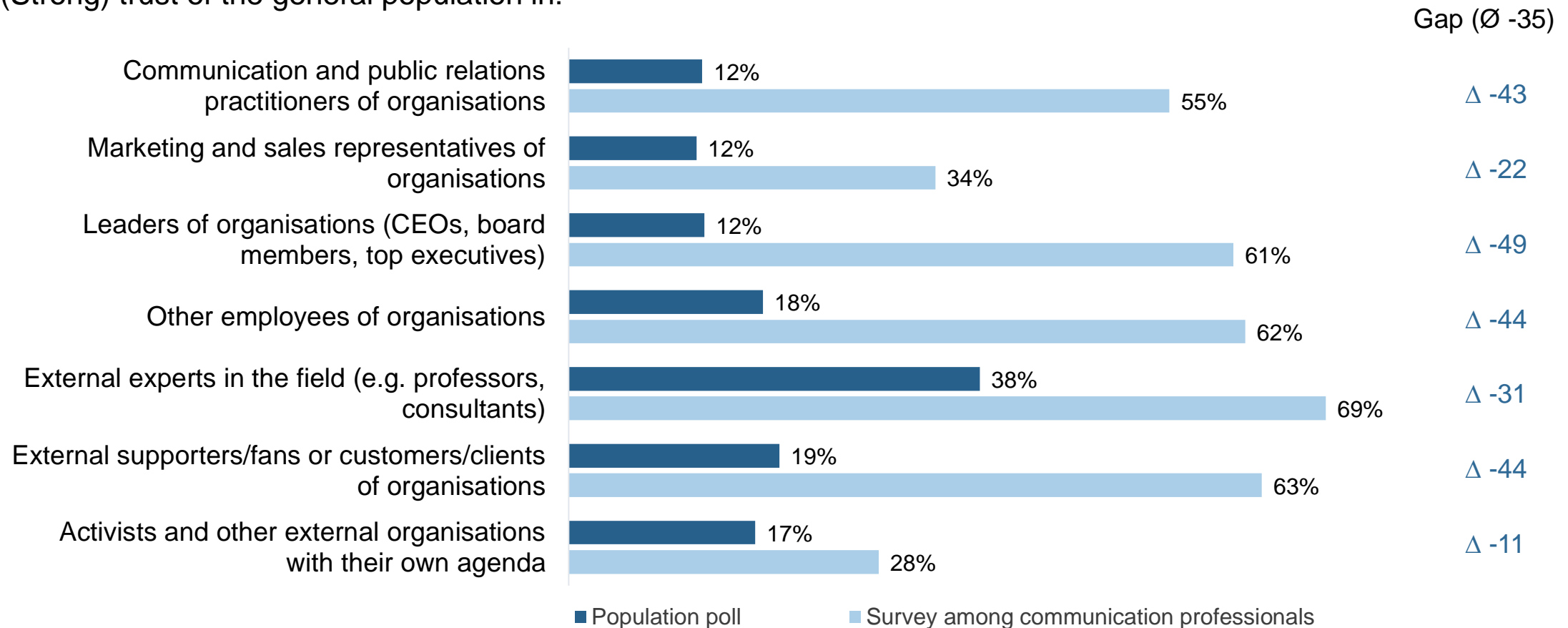
What does this mean for communication and PR professionals? Are they aware of this situation and the growing relevance of organisational advocates beyond the traditional turf of boardrooms and communication or marketing departments? A parallel survey among communication professionals in the three countries investigated how practitioners assess public trust in themselves and in different advocates.

Results of both surveys have been compared. They are reported in this section. It is obvious that communication professionals highly overestimate the trust level of the general population in all parties, whereas the level of distrust is underrated. Specifically, leaders of organisations – often actively profiled through CEO positioning (Zerfass et al., 2016) – are less trusted and more distrusted than PR practitioners believe. The relative relevance and overall ranking of different advocates, however, is the same among practitioners and in the general population (see p. 18).



# Communication practitioners highly overestimate the levels of trust given by the general population

(Strong) trust of the general population in:

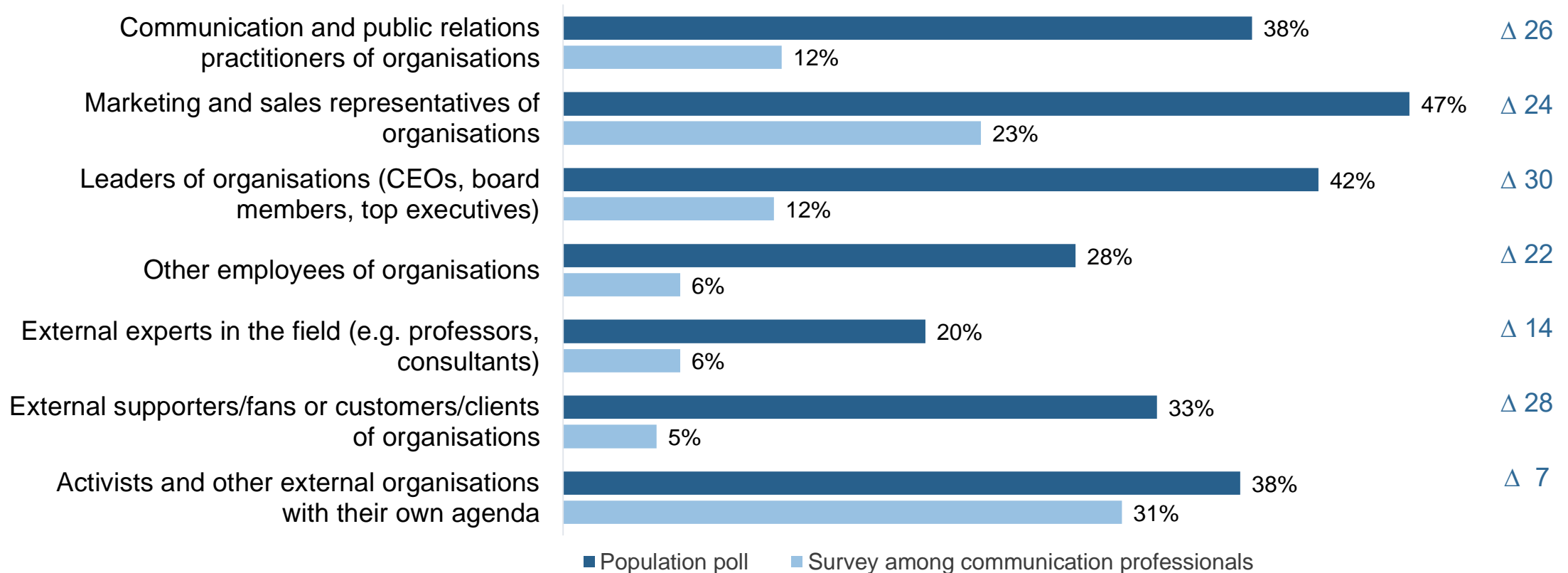










# Public distrust in different members and advocates of organisations is underestimated by PR practitioners

(Strong) distrust of the general population in:

Gap (Ø 22)



# Communication professionals in the UK have the best perception of the general population's trust level

	(Strong) distrust								(Strong) trust							
							Overall								Overall	
	POP	COM	POP	COM	POP	COM	POP	COM	POP	COM	POP	COM	POP	COM	POP	COM
Communication and public relations practitioners	41.8%	15.2%	40.6%	11.1%	31.9%	10.4%	38,2%	12.1%	8.3%	50.3%	12.3%	62.1%	16.1%	52.4%	12.2%	55.0%
Marketing and sales representatives	49.0%	26.9%	49.9%	19.0%	41.6%	23.8%	46,9%	23.2%	8.6%	31.7%	10.7%	37.9%	16.0%	31.1%	11.7%	33.5%
Leaders of organisations (CEOs, board members, top executives)	46.7%	14.5%	42.1%	11.8%	36.6%	9.1%	41,8%	11.7%	8.9%	60.0%	12.1%	64.1%	16.4%	58.5%	12.4%	60.8%
Other employees	30.2%	8.3%	35.1%	9.8%	19.6%	1.8%	28,4%	6.5%	14.6%	64.1%	14.1%	51.6%	24.7%	69.5%	17.8%	61.9%
External experts in the field (e.g. professors, consultants)	20.9%	4.1%	24.6%	11.1%	14.6%	4.3%	20,1%	6.5%	37.2%	73.8%	31.1%	61.4%	44.6%	72.6%	37.6%	69.3%
External supporters/fans or customers/clients	33.3%	6.2%	41.0%	7.2%	24.3%	2.4%	32,9%	5.2%	17.7%	66.2%	16.8%	58.2%	23.3%	65.9%	19.3%	63.4%
Activists and other external organisations with their own agenda	39.3%	31.0%	36.3%	23.5%	36.9%	37.8%	37,5%	31.0%	15.3%	27.6%	18.3%	38.6%	17.5%	19.5%	17.1%	28.4%
Ø Gap	Δ -22.2		Δ -25.1		Δ -16.6		Δ -21.3		Δ 37.6		Δ 36.9		Δ 30.1		Δ 34.9	

TICS19 © www.euprera.org. General population (POP): N<sup>UK</sup> = 1,029, N<sup>IT</sup> = 1,050, N<sup>GE</sup> = 1,051 adults aged 16-64 (representative sample) | Communication/PR professionals (COM): N<sup>UK</sup> = 171, N<sup>IT</sup> = 168, N<sup>GE</sup> = 155 professionals. Question for general population: How much do you trust these communicators? Question for communication professionals: Thinking of your organisation, how much do ordinary people in your country (the general population) trust these communicators? Scale 1 (Strong distrust) – 5 (Strong trust). Percentages: Frequency based on scale points 1-2 and 4-5.

# Key insights



- The *Trust in Communicators 2019* study, based on a representative poll of the general population in three key European countries, revealed that the trust division between journalists and public relations / communication practitioners is closing. Both professions enjoy a relatively low level of trust (between 8% and 17%, depending on the country). But distrust is relatively high with 34% of adults in Italy distrusting journalists and 42% of Germans distrusting PR practitioners. Journalists are trusted most in Germany and communication practitioners in the United Kingdom.
- External experts in the field (e.g. professors, consultants) are clearly the most trusted of all groups that can speak on behalf of an organisation. Regular employees and members of an organisation should be taken into account as well: their level of trust in the general population is quite high, and they are less distrusted than fans/customers or activists. Leaders of organisations and marketing or PR professionals, on the other hand, are less trusted than all other parties in all countries.
- The general population lacks a clear understanding of public relations activities and what communication professionals try to achieve in their daily work. On the other hand, communication practitioners overestimate the level of public trust in their country in the organisational realm, and they underrate the distrust in all kinds of advocates.

*Public relations activities will fail if audiences lack trust in those who talk about or on behalf of organisations. Identifying trusted intermediaries internally and externally is a key challenge for communication and PR practitioners – especially because their own profession, journalists and top managers are all suffering in this respect.*

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