

Americans' Goodwill Toward Business Dips Amid Rising Prices and Deepening AI Doubts

After four years of steady gains, fewer Americans say businesses have a positive impact on people's lives, while eight in 10 believe companies raised prices more than necessary to increase profits.

WASHINGTON, D.C. – October 8, 2026 – Americans continue to see business as a positive force in society, but four years of improving sentiment came to a halt this year as the public weighed higher prices and businesses' growing use of artificial intelligence, according to the [2026 Bentley-Gallup Business in Society Survey](#).

The nationally representative study of 3,270 U.S. adults finds that 61% say businesses have a positive impact on people's lives, down from 65% in 2025 but still above the 55% recorded when the survey launched in 2022. Trust and perceived effectiveness slipped across most institutions; just 27% of Americans now trust businesses to use AI responsibly, down from 31% in 2025.

Four Years of Gains Come to a Halt

Positive views declined most among adults aged 30 to 59, particularly those aged 45 to 59, among whom the percentage rating businesses' impact as extremely positive fell from 30% to 18%. Americans remain far more skeptical about businesses' environmental record: 49% say businesses have a negative impact on the planet, up six points from 2025, while just 22% say the impact is positive.

Business Still Outpaces the Federal Government on Trust

Americans are more likely to trust businesses (41%) than the federal government (26%) to act in society's best interest, though both declined this year. Charitable and advocacy organizations remain the most trusted institutions at 80%, followed by state and local government at 47%. The federal government saw the steepest declines of any institution measured, with trust down five points and effectiveness down eight.

The declines were not evenly distributed. Democrats became less likely to trust businesses (39% to 31%) and to view them as effective (58% to 49%), while Republicans moved in the opposite direction on both measures. Across party lines, Americans still credit institutions with the capacity to help: 88% say businesses have the power to make a positive impact on people's lives, alongside 93% for state and local government and 92% for the federal government.

"The Bentley-Gallup survey results over the last five years show that Americans are becoming more aware of the role that business plays in our lives," said Cynthia Clark, John W. Poduska Professor of Governance at Bentley University. "People recognize that businesses can influence everything from the economy to the environment and even how much they trust AI or the government. Understanding these changing expectations is crucial for CEOs and other executives to lead their own businesses in a way that benefits their bottom lines and our society, too."

Americans See Rising Prices as a Choice, Not a Necessity

Nearly nine in 10 Americans (89%) say the prices of the products and services they buy rose over the past year, including 62% who say prices increased significantly. Eight in 10 believe businesses raised prices a great deal (47%) or somewhat (33%) more than necessary to increase profits. Republicans and conservatives are the only groups in which less than half say businesses raised prices a great deal more than necessary.

Those beliefs carry over into how people judge business overall. Americans who say companies raised prices a great deal more than necessary are more than twice as likely as others to describe businesses' impact on society as negative. Even so, a majority of this group (53%) still view business positively.

Asked what companies should do when costs rise, Americans point first to the bottom line: 74% say businesses should accept lower profits, 49% say they should raise prices and 40% say they should reduce the size or quantity of products. Far fewer support cuts that reach workers or quality — 15% back reducing staff, 5% reducing quality and just 4% reducing employee pay and benefits.

Doubts About AI Deepen

Americans report knowing more about AI than they did two years ago, but familiarity has not translated into confidence. Trust in businesses to use AI responsibly fell from 31% to 27%. Meanwhile, the percentage who believe AI does more harm than good climbed from 31% to 39%; just 9% say it does more good than harm. Concern about jobs rose for the first time since the survey began tracking it, with 79% expecting AI to reduce the number of U.S. jobs over the next decade, up from 73% in 2025.

Young adults drove much of the shift. Among 18- to 29-year-olds, the percentage saying AI does more harm than good rose 11 points to 47%, trust in businesses' use of AI fell from 30% to 20%, and the percentage expressing no trust at all rose from 29% to 41%. Concern grew across five of six AI applications measured, led by an eight-point rise in worry about AI assisting students with homework or studying.

"Americans are learning more about AI, but their confidence in businesses to use it responsibly is declining, particularly among young adults," said Stephanie Marken, senior partner at Gallup. "Business leaders have an opportunity to broaden the conversation beyond what AI can do to what it will mean for people's work and lives. Understanding those concerns is an important part of responsible innovation."

Consumers Draw a Line on AI-Generated Advertising

In a set of questions asked for the first time this year, 79% of Americans say they saw advertisements that appeared to be created with AI in the month before taking the survey. Nearly half (49%) view businesses' use of AI in advertising negatively, compared with 19% who view it positively. Disclosure matters: 75% find it acceptable for AI to help employees brainstorm or draft ads when that use is disclosed, and 53% accept AI-created final text, images or video. But 62% say using AI to create people or voices in advertisements is unacceptable, even when disclosed.

Expectations for Business Remain High

Five years into the study, Americans have not lowered the bar. Nearly all say it is important for businesses to operate ethically (97%), improve the communities they serve (95%) and support environmental sustainability (94%) — yet only 32%, 33% and 25%, respectively, say businesses are performing well in those areas. Executive compensation remains the lowest-rated area of performance: 84% say it is important for businesses to avoid a major pay gap between CEOs and average employees, but only 15% say businesses are doing that well.

Support for Public Stances Cools as Views of Workplace Diversity Improve

Support for businesses taking a public stance on current events fell from 51% to 47%, roughly where it stood in 2022. The drop was driven largely by a nine-point decline among Democrats. Among employees, 56% say their own employer should not communicate a stance to them, down from 60% in 2025.

Views of workplace diversity moved in the opposite direction, with gains across all three partisan groups: 75% now say businesses with diverse workforces make more innovative products and 71% say they are more profitable, each up at least 10 points from 2025.

About the Survey

Results are based on a Gallup Panel web study completed by 3,270 U.S. adults aged 18 and older, conducted May 4–11, 2026. The margin of sampling error at the 95% confidence level is ± 2.4 percentage points for response percentages around 50%, design effect included.

About Bentley University

Bentley University believes good business can impact more than the bottom line — it can change the world. Bentley is a community of future business leaders who will deliver value in the marketplace and lasting positive effects for society. The university's students are highly sought after, its faculty apply innovative research to real-world problems, and its alumni lead organizations around the world. Bentley educates the head and the heart with an innovative, technology-focused education that integrates the best of business and the arts and sciences and prepares the business leaders of tomorrow to lead successful, rewarding careers. Founded in 1917, the university enrolls 4,600 undergraduate and 800 graduate and Ph.D. students and is set on 163 acres in Waltham, Massachusetts, 10 miles west of Boston. For more information, visit bentley.edu.

About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world.