

# Health Pulse: Challenges for Health Communicators in 2026



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## Weber Shandwick uses AI platform, HALO, to uncover the biggest challenges for health communications leaders

MAHA shows as biggest concern for health communicators in 2026, more than pricing pressures or DTC pharma advertising

This past year, the healthcare industry faced unprecedented challenges arising from policy shifts and misinformation from the highest levels of influence. These challenges show no signs of slowing down in 2026, emphasizing the importance of having a strategy in place to prepare for and respond to potential events triggered by outside influence.

To better understand the impact of the evolving political and regulatory landscape on health communications priorities for 2026, Weber Shandwick produced a new research report that combines real-world client observations with insights from AI-simulated personas leveraging its agentic AI platform, HALO.

We also conducted live industry conversations with several corporate affairs leaders across the pharmaceutical and biotech industries, and in parallel, used AI technology to train and poll a synthetic panel replicating 2,500 senior corporate affairs decision-makers in healthcare.

Building on prior research examining healthcare ecosystem trends, the synthetic panelists and interviewed communications executives were asked how their priorities and business strategies would change under three potential 2026 scenarios: A Most Favored Nation-driven pricing announcement, changes to direct-to-consumer advertising regulations and the emerging MAHA movement.

We evaluated how different scenarios influence decision-making and strategic, proactive planning; crisis response and risk mitigation strategies; and how these hypothetical scenarios could impact future communications, advertising and R&D investments.

This AI-driven, human-validated process facilitates fast, scalable results and are indicative of the technologies' potential to help our clients scenario plan and build tested, data-informed campaigns in the year ahead.

### HOW IT WORKS

Weber Shandwick's agentic AI platform, HALO, combined with our Center of Regulatory Excellence (CORE) and partnership with Aaru, reimagines how we develop and implement communications strategies, leveraging AI throughout the process to deliver more targeted, effective and measurable content and campaigns that resonates with audiences and drives business results.

Creating and polling of thousands of individual AI agents, each with a unique background and personality, to create synthetic focus groups is a useful tool due to its speed and cost, particularly when investigating hard-to-survey audiences such as executives.

# WE FOUND FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS THAT WILL IMPACT HOW HEALTH COMMUNICATORS PREPARE FOR 2026:

1

## MAHA is the biggest wildcard for healthcare communicators

**The MAHA movement challenges medicine from both political and cultural fronts. According to the synthetic focus group, misinformation from government officials was the top reputational threat across all scenarios, with 69% of synthetic focus group citing it as a primary concern, and 60% worried for how this might impact future R&D investment.**



**What makes the MAHA scenario so concerning isn't just the risk – it's the lack of an established playbook. Rather than wait and see, the most effective leaders can be proactive in planning, even for scenarios that might be challenging to diagram," said Kelley Yoder, NA health lead. "We saw this throughline across both the AI panel and live leader interviews, offering a glimpse into the agenda of the modern corporate affairs leader in 2026."**

Consequently, the synthetic panel had the least amount of confidence that they could handle a MAHA threat – only 20% showed some or full confidence. For perspective, 65% of the synthetic focus group showed confidence in their ability to handle pricing pressures from a Most Favored Nation (MFN) situation, and 51% felt they were well-positioned to take on a shift in DTC advertising rules.

With MAHA scenario planning, the synthetic panel suggests that leaders are taking a wait-and-see approach, with 44% saying their strategy is to "monitor, but not act."

This perspective is validated by the industry leaders during the live interviews, who said

that traditional messaging does not cut through the misinformation landscape.



**"We work in an industry the public doesn't trust, especially in a post-COVID world," explained one executive. "Saying 'trust the science' over and over again isn't going to shift perceptions."**

The synthetic focus group did, however, have greater confidence in their ability to face changes in the other two scenarios, with 63% having proactive planning strategies in place if DTC regulations change and 44% in the MFN pricing scenario.



## 2

## Priorities – and level of concern – shift by scenario

FOR EVERY POTENTIAL THREAT TO THEIR BUSINESS, LEADERS PRIORITIZED DIFFERENT ISSUES, FREQUENTLY FOCUSING ON COMPLIANCE AND REPUTATION.

- **For pricing pressures due to the MFN executive order**, about 39% of the synthetic focus group wanted to ensure compliance and adjust to new policies. While influencing policy decisions was generally not ranked highly as a priority across scenarios, it had considerable weight in an MFN scenario (20.8%). Interestingly, “minimizing financial impact” was the lowest priority for pricing pressures (10.6%), despite this scenario having the most direct effect on revenues.
- **When thinking about the MAHA agenda**, misinformation on medicine and vaccines is the biggest scenario that could directly affect pharma. In that event, nearly half (49.2%) of the synthetic focus group prioritized protecting their corporate reputation.

THE HUMAN LEADERS AGREED.

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**We want to continue to remove all barriers that would prevent us from delivering on our mission to serve patients,” said one industry executive. “There are elements of the MAHA agenda that do not conflict with our ability to serve patients, and there are others that do. We are being very selective about where and how we engage - it is an important part of our strategy.”**

- **And in the event of a DTC advertising crackdown**, leaders recognize the regulatory challenges presented. More than half (54.4%) of the synthetic focus group cited “ensuring compliance” as their organization’s top priority for this scenario. One leader who we interviewed shared this sentiment, saying, “Regulatory skepticism makes it harder to predict how emerging therapies will be received, impacting investment decisions and even companies’ willingness to pursue innovation in high-risk areas.”

3

## Health comms leaders are highly mindful of policymakers, but remain protective of patients and providers

**Health leaders are deeply invested in the opinions and actions of government officials, with more than 70% of the synthetic panel citing them as the most important group in both pricing and DTC advertising scenarios. However, knowing the impact misinformation has had on public health, patients and the medical system, it makes sense that in the MAHA scenario, 39% of respondents cite patients as the most important stakeholder group while 35% cite HCPs.**

This perspective was echoed in the human interviews.

This finding shows that, regardless of how 2026 unfolds, communications leaders should not get overly focused on policymakers and remain vigilant in keeping patients and HCPs at the center of communications strategies.

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**Healthcare professionals are a critical audience here – they are key in shaping public trust in pharmaceutical science and products,”** said one executive.

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## Rising business risks put R&D spend and talent attraction on the line

In the MFN-driven pricing change scenario, half (50%) of the synthetic focus group said their companies would “reduce R&D investments.” Since a pricing event would directly impact revenue, it would presumably lead to less capital available for investment, justifying the 45% who said they were “extremely concerned” about product pipeline and talent recruitment in that scenario.

In the DTC regulation scenario, 51% of the synthetic focus group said they would be “extremely concerned” about the downstream effects and 45% said it would cause a decrease in R&D investment.

However, the MAHA scenario raised the most anxiety, with 59% of the synthetic focus group saying they were “extremely concerned” about its effects on R&D and talent, even though less than 30% said it would cause a decline in R&D investment.

One of the human executives provided a rationale for this, noting “the combination of shaming health science [workers] and a lack of respect for the professionals who have built their careers doing good, not only threatens the integrity of our innovation pipeline but also makes it significantly harder to recruit and keep talented professionals who want to feel valued.”

# 5

## Organizations are keen to plan for what they can predict, and leaders are trying to stay prepared

In the scenarios involving pricing pressures or crackdowns in DTC advertising, the synthetic focus group said they would be proactive toward planning and execution of strategies (44.2% for pricing pressures; 63.2% for DTC advertising changes). The human executives expressed similar attitudes. "It's about getting ahead of all possible scenarios and thinking about the spectrum of response, even before receiving a letter," one leader pointed out.

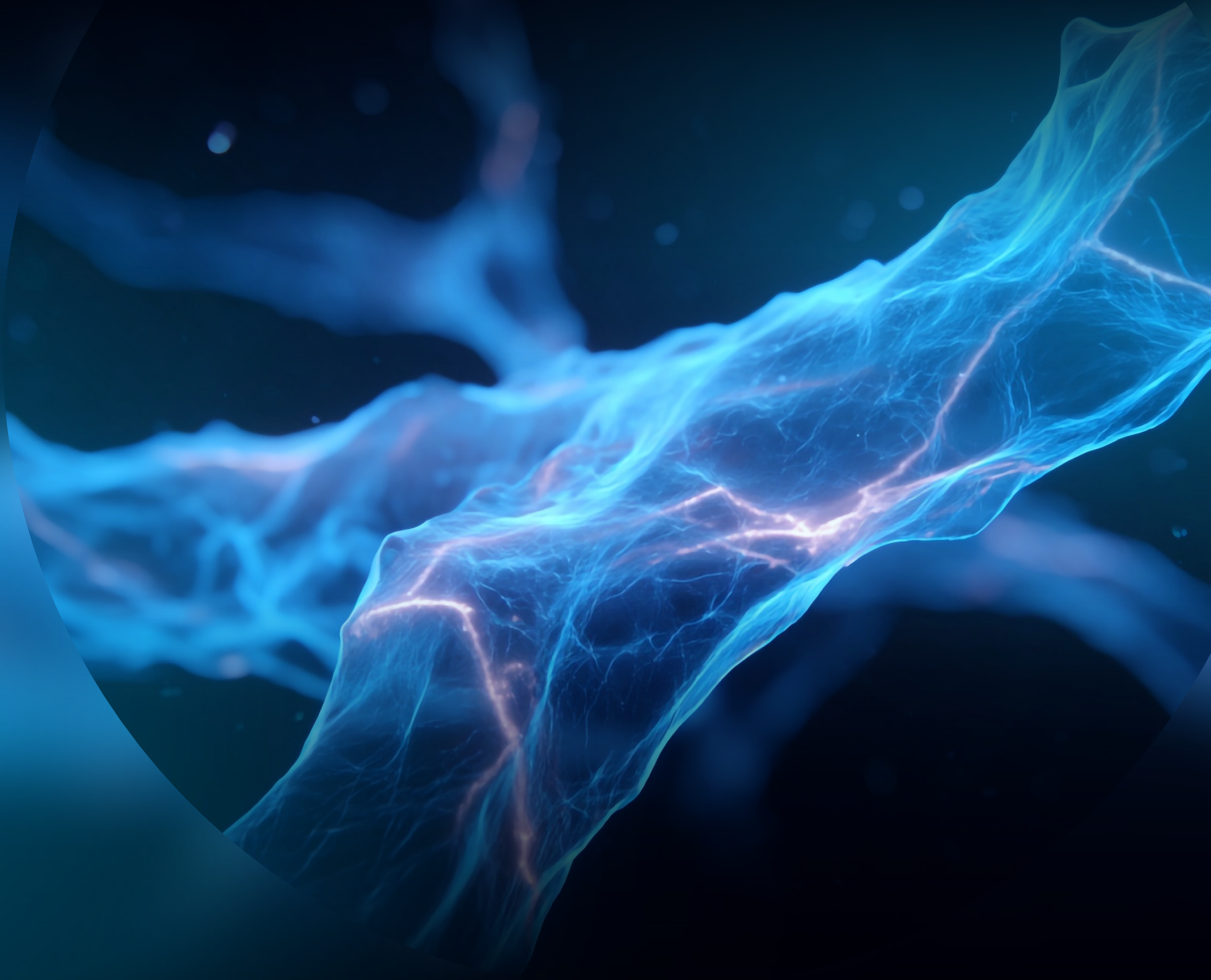
Once again, the MAHA scenario played out differently. In this case, the difficulty in predicting public reaction leads organizations to predominantly adopt a wait-and-see approach in the face of misinformation and policy uncertainty, with 75.6% of the synthetic focus group taking a neutral or reactive approach to the MAHA agenda.

To hedge the risk, leaders are already looking at their current marketing, trying to identify and predict compliance issues that might arise. "We're looking very carefully at how we communicate both in the U.S. and outside the U.S., especially in light of these changing regulatory dynamics," said one executive. "We've created an approach that allows us to be more integrated, moving away from being overly deregulated as a global company."



**We used a combination of human experts and technology to see into the future, but the reality is that no one, including AI, knows how 2026 will play out," said Jesse Wolfersberger, Global Lead, Weber I/O Health. "There is a common theme – prepare for disruption. Be ready to combat disinformation. Be ready to pause live campaigns. Be ready to ball up and throw away your best laid plans."**

**Regardless of what 2026 brings,** the health leaders and the synthetic focus group of health leaders agree that communicators need to be ready – proactive in getting ahead of things they can see coming and quickly reacting to situations that they do not expect.



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