



# A brand leader's guide to the Trust–Relevance Gap

How to reduce exposure and drive relevance.



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## INTRODUCTION:

# The gap that decides everything

Brand leaders have more data to sift through than ever before. They also face a more volatile landscape. A single campaign can rocket a brand into cultural conversation overnight. A single misstep can hollow it out just as fast.

What most measurement systems miss is the relationship between two forces that together determine whether a brand is durable or fragile: Trust and Relevance.

Trust without Relevance means you're respected but not top of mind. Relevance without Trust means you're visible but exposed. The brands that weather crises, command pricing power, and build lasting equity are the ones that hold both – in balance.

This guide explains the Trust–Relevance framework, shows you where different brands sit today, and gives you the strategic playbook for whichever quadrant you're in.

*“Relevance without a foundation of trust is risky. Trust without relevance becomes passive – not protective.”*

*– Wendy Salomon, Head of Reputation at The Harris Poll*

## SECTION 1:

# Why both dimensions matter

## Reputation moves faster than it used to

Five years of stacked crises – economic volatility, global instability, political polarization, AI anxiety – have changed how stakeholders evaluate companies. The bar for institutional credibility has shifted.

According to our research with the Axios 100, 47% of Americans were more anxious affording groceries in 2025 than 2024. In a world where buying necessities is a struggle, corporate credibility has a long way to go to develop confidence with consumers.

82% of Americans now say companies need a proven track record of acting on their values before they'll take them seriously. Paying lip service to “the right thing” no longer counts. Doing it, consistently, does.

As Wendy Salomon, Head of Reputation at The Harris Poll, points out, “We have what is an extraordinarily shallow authenticity trigger right now. If companies all of a sudden engage in something, we look at that with a degree of skepticism. Consistency leads to authenticity.”

At the same time, 54% of Americans feel isolated from others. 79% of Gen Z and Millennials want brands to bring people together in tangible ways. Relevance increasingly requires showing up in the real world – not just in content calendars.

*“We used to care about every feature of the tomato... if it was red and juicy. And now we care about the farmer, where, and how it was grown. Comms and marketing teams are coming to terms with how to tell that story.”*

*– Wendy Salomon, Head of Reputation at The Harris Poll*

|                        | TRUST  | RELEVANCE   |
|------------------------|--|---|
| What it is             | Institutional belief – the sense that a company is honest, ethical, and competent                  | Cultural presence – the sense that a company shapes the conversations happening right now |
| What it does           | Provides crisis resilience, enables pricing power, sustains consideration when things go wrong     | Drives Momentum, turbocharges Trust when it exists, pulls new audiences into the funnel   |
| What it can't do alone | Drive Momentum. If stakeholders trust you but don't think about you, you're coasting – not growing | Sustained visibility without credibility amplifies trust deficits. It doesn't cover them  |

SECTION 2:

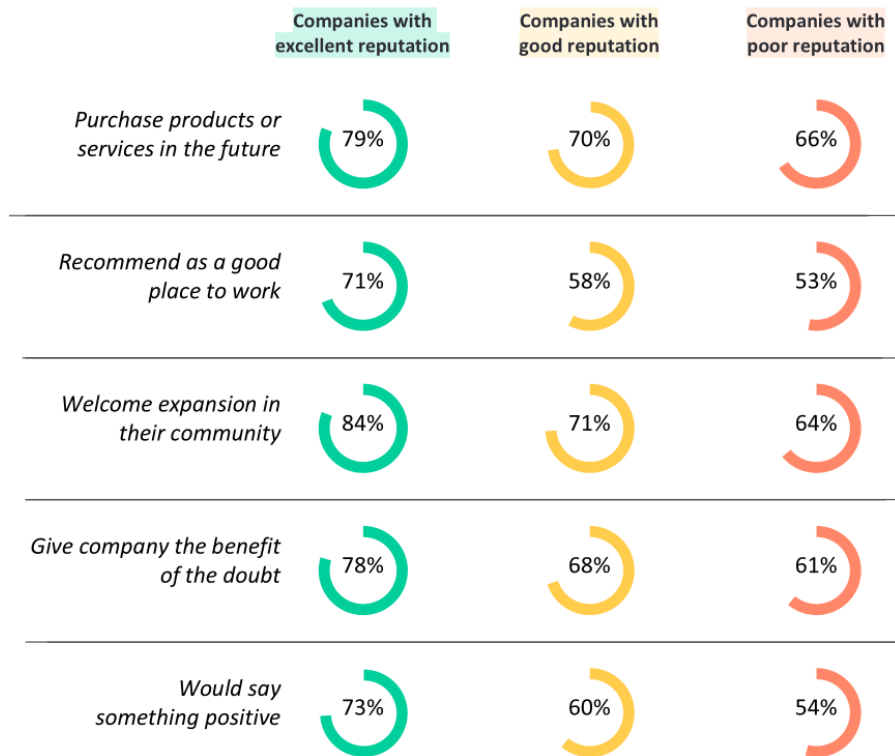
# What strong reputation buys you

## The commercial case for reputation

Data from the [2026 Axios Harris Poll 100](#) shows a direct relationship between reputation strength and stakeholder behavior. The gaps are not marginal.

“You are rolling a rock uphill if you don’t have a good reputation.”

– Wendy Salomon, Head of Reputation at The Harris Poll



Source: 2026 Axios Harris Poll 100. US Adults A18+.

Companies with weaker reputations are working in a markedly different – and uphill – landscape. The spread on benefit of the doubt alone (81% vs 54%) has direct implications for how much brand spend you need to maintain consideration through a rough patch.

As Wendy says: “If your brand requires the benefit of the doubt and you’re in the laggard bucket, low trust, low relevance, you’re not earning it. Those who have high trust and high relevance see consideration and benefit of the doubt scoring 20-plus points more.”

## How we measure reputation

### The framework behind the scores

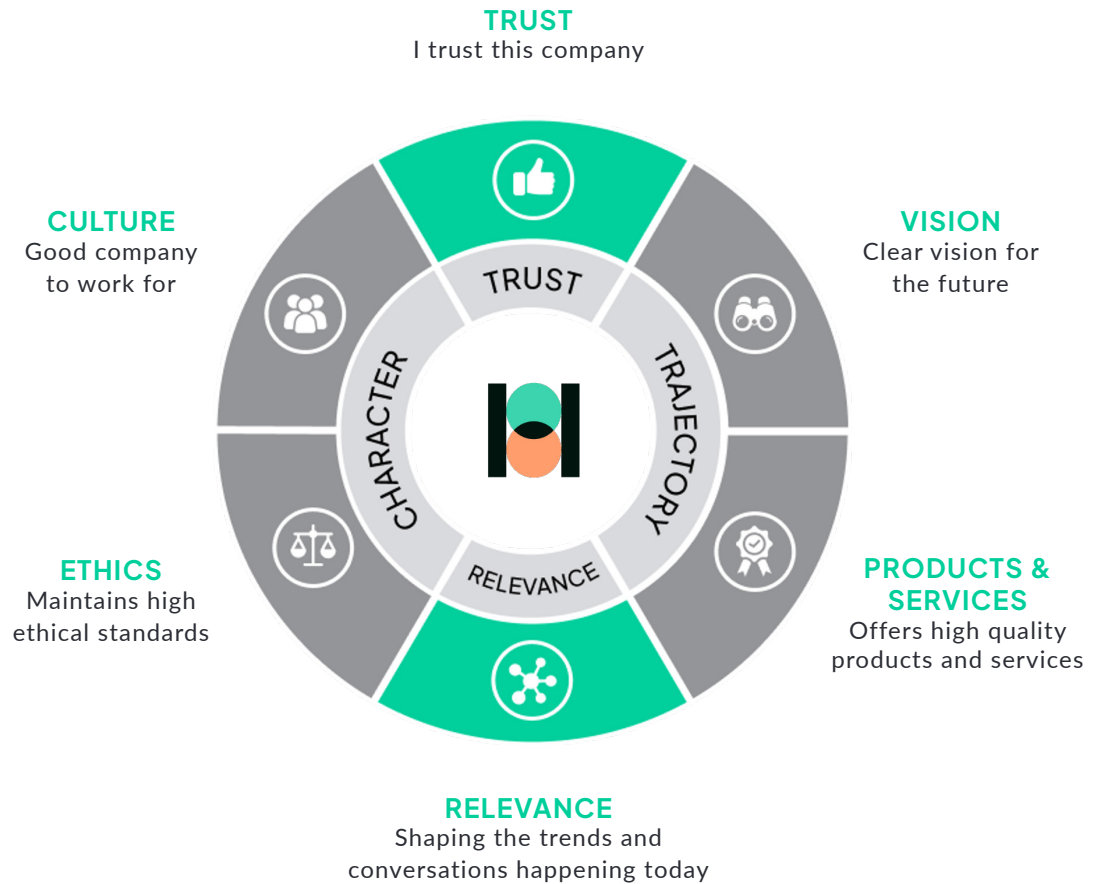
The Harris Poll has been measuring corporate reputation for nearly three decades. The methodology behind QuestRQ – the Reputation Quotient framework – is the same one that underpins the annual Axios Harris Poll 100, the most widely cited reputation ranking in the US.

When we added Relevance to the model, something significant happened: reputation’s ability to predict in-market behavior increased. That single addition – tracking whether a brand shapes today’s conversations, not just whether it’s trusted – made the scores more commercially meaningful.

Trust tells you whether a brand has earned institutional credibility. Relevance tells you whether that credibility is activated. Without both, you’re only seeing part of the picture.

## Six dimensions. One composite score.

QuestRQ measures six dimensions of institutional standing, each asked on a 1–7 scale among respondents familiar with the brand. Together they roll into the QRQ composite, scored 0–100.



*Each dimension is scored on a 1–7 scale among respondents familiar with the brand and rolled into the QRQ composite. Trust and Relevance are the active forces; Character (Ethics, Culture) and Trajectory (Vision, Products & Services) provide the institutional foundation beneath them.*

| TIER      | SCORE RANGE |
|-----------|-------------|
| Critical  | Below 45    |
| Weak      | 45-54       |
| Average   | 55-64       |
| Strong    | 65-74       |
| Resilient | 75+         |

The Resilient threshold is where structural protection reliably appears in the data – pricing power, expansion latitude, crisis recovery. **It's also where no Gen Z respondents placed any brand in Q1 2026.**

## How reputation connects to commercial outcomes

The pathway from reputation to revenue follows a consistent sequence:



Around 70% of how consumers perceive a brand's quality is driven by institutional factors, not the product itself. Quality perception then drives 37% of Consideration. Reputational friction doesn't just affect how people feel about you. It directly constrains purchase intent.

*“You may be a trusted brand, but if you're not relevant – if you haven't carved out a way to be part of your stakeholders' lives and what matters to them – that trust becomes capital that isn't fully activated for growth or for the protective value it can give.”*

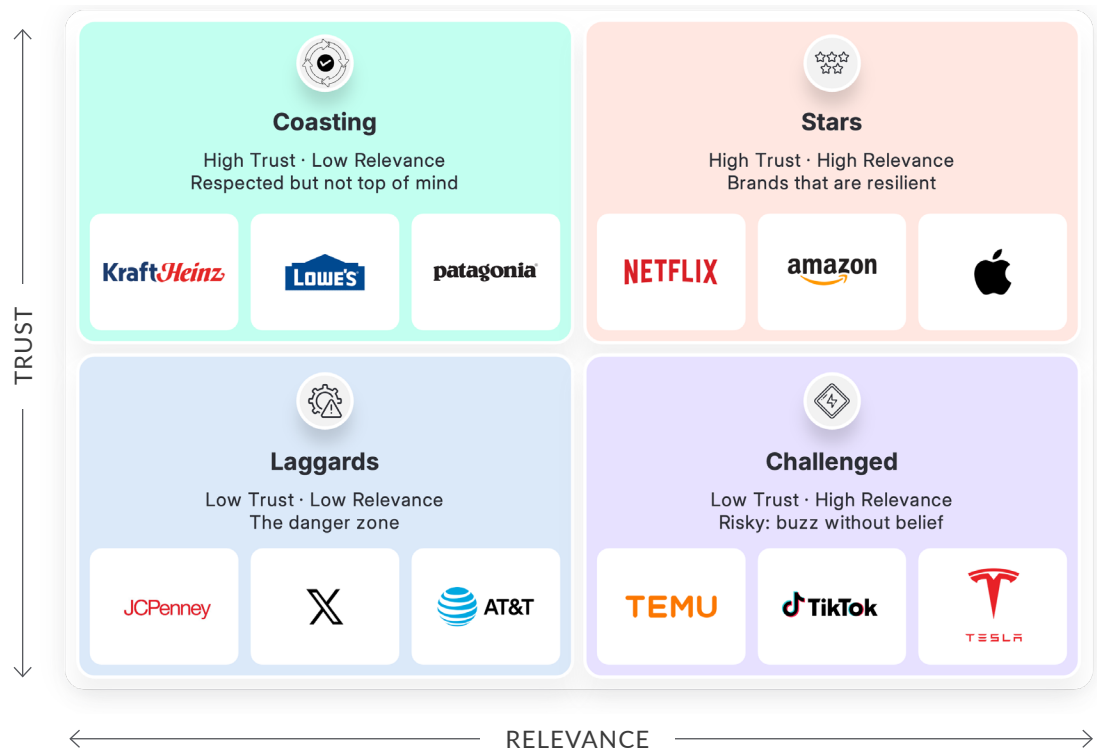
*– Wendy Salomon, Head of Reputation at The Harris Poll*

SECTION 3:

# The Trust–Relevance matrix

## 4 positions. 4 different strategies.

Plotting your brand on the Trust–Relevance matrix is the diagnostic that makes the data actionable. Each quadrant describes a fundamentally different strategic situation – and requires a different response.

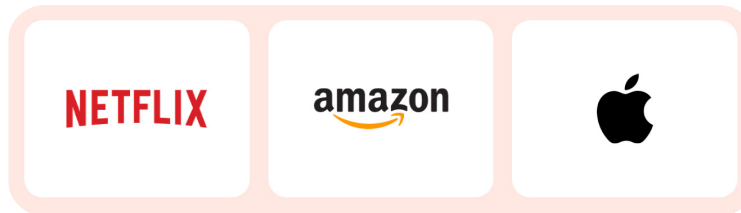


Field means from Q1 2026 QuestRQ tracking across 245+ brands: Trust 63.9, Relevance 58.8.

*“Some companies are trusted but not relevant. Relevance without trust is a risky business.”*  
 – Wendy Salomon, Head of Reputation at The Harris Poll

## Stars – High Trust · High Relevance

Examples: Netflix, Amazon, Apple



Trust and Relevance are in balance. Stakeholders believe in you and think about you. Benefit of the doubt reaches 77%; consideration 84%. This is the resilient position – but it requires active maintenance.

### Priority actions:

- Continue delivering on quality and ethics to earn trust continuously
- Aggressively trend-spot to maintain cultural voice
- Explore emerging areas to drive – not react to – culture
- Keep innovating. Be principled.

## Coasting – High Trust · Low Relevance

Examples: Kraft Heinz, Lowe's, Patagonia



Stakeholders admire you. They just don't think about you when it matters. Institutional belief is solid, but you're the brand they remember fondly and engage elsewhere. Trust gives you a platform – Relevance is the growth lever.

### Priority actions:

- Invest in relevance through strategic collaborations and partnerships
- Activate from existing equity triggers (tentpole moments)
- Identify the subgroup most critical to growth and target relevance-building efforts there
- Be selective – broad relevance plays dilute the effort

## Challenged – High Relevance · Low Trust

Examples: Temu, TikTok, Tesla



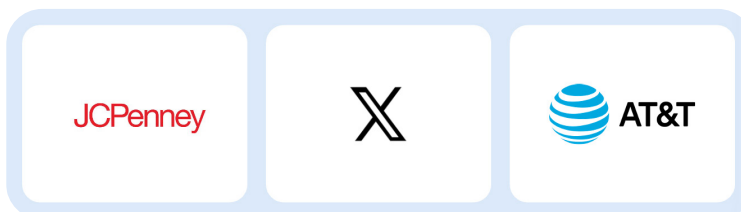
You're on everyone's radar, but they're skeptical. Buzz without belief. Additional relevance makes your trust deficit more visible, not less. Presence is outpacing credibility – a structurally risky position.

### Priority actions:

- Understand trust barriers and identify operational realities
- Drive level-headed thought leadership on core business issues
- Identify core values and incentivize the right behaviors across the organization
- Act on specific trust drivers and measure the movement

## Laggards – Low Trust · Low Relevance

Examples: JCPenney, X, AT&T



The danger zone. Benefit of the doubt is limited (58%) and consideration low (60%). There is no quick fix, but there is a sequence. Trust must come first. Relevance is year two.

### Priority actions:

- Engage C-suite to lead a visible trust restoration effort
- Audit all six reputation pillars
- Run an active trust campaign before investing in relevance
- Focus on operational credibility before cultural presence

## SECTION 4:

# The generation changing the rules

### **Gen Z uses a different yardstick.**

Across all six QuestRQ dimensions, Gen Z's scores are lower than every other generation. No brands cleared the Resilient threshold (75+) among Gen Z respondents in Q1 2026. Around a dozen qualify among most other generations.

The gap is widest on Relevance and that's the critical point. Gen Z doesn't just evaluate relevance differently. They hold it to a distinctly higher standard than any other cohort, with less commonality to other generations than Millennials, Gen X, or Boomers share with each other.

*“Healthcare institutions assume trust transfers across generations. The data shows it doesn't. **Mayo Clinic scores 84.8 among Boomers and 63.3 among Gen Z.**”*

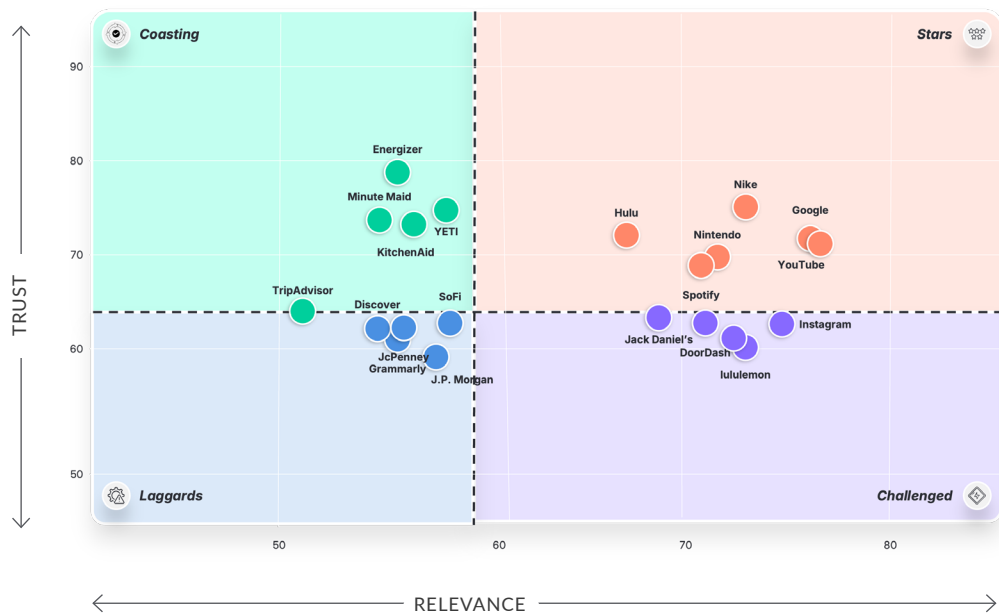
*- Wendy Salomon, Head of Reputation at The Harris Poll*

What cues relevance for Gen Z is not what cues it for other generations. Traditional trust signals – longevity, product quality, familiarity – carry less weight. Among the brands that do score well with Gen Z on the matrix, Nintendo stands out as a consistent performer. KitchenAid and YETI, highly trusted across other generations, don't translate the same way.

The issue lens matters too. When asked what they want companies to engage on, Gen Z rank mental health second only to economic stability – a priority that barely registers for older generations. For brands trying to build relevance with this cohort, product stories alone aren't enough. The question is what your product or company says about the issues that matter to them.

## The brands winning with Gen Z tend to share three traits:

1. **Authenticity:** They act on values consistently over time, not in response to a moment. The authenticity trigger is shallow right now across all generations; with Gen Z it's shallower still. One announcement doesn't count. A track record does.
2. **Community creation:** They facilitate real-world connection, not just content. 79% of younger Americans want brands to bring people together in spontaneous ways. Popups, in-person moments, things that happen and spread – this is what relevance looks like in practice.
3. **Speed:** They respond to culture in real time, not in the next campaign cycle.



SECTION 5:

# Real brands, caught in the data

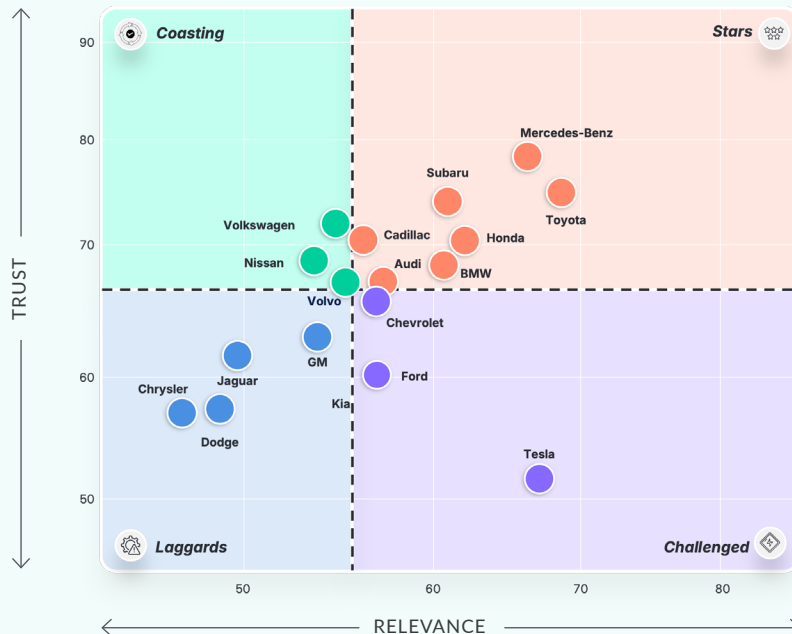
CASE STUDY #1



## Toyota: The car brand in the tech tier

On a Trust-Relevance scatter plot of 55 major brands, Toyota plots alongside Apple, Amazon, and Google – in the Accelerating quadrant. No other legacy automaker is close.

Every other automotive brand sits below the field mean on Momentum. Toyota built tech-tier perception before EV became the central question in the category. That perception is now a structural gap.



## CASE STUDY #2

**BUD LIGHT**

## Bud Light: When the segment tells a different story

In April 2023, Bud Light ran a sponsored post with a transgender influencer. Conservatives organized a boycott. Net Momentum among conservative consumers went from +10 to -32 in 90 days. Among liberal consumers, it barely moved.

A composite-only view would have called this a marketing problem. It would have just been a dip to manage with spend and messaging. The segment cut showed something different: one audience had walked, and the other hadn't replaced them.

That's not a comms diagnosis. It's an audience diagnosis. Conflating the two – which a composite score invites you to do – means deploying the wrong fix. Modelo took the #1 spot. The brand lost \$1.4 billion in sales.

### The recovery had to match the diagnosis

Stagwell agency Anomaly brought Bud Light back to the Super Bowl with “Big Men on Cul-De-Sac”: a 60-second spot featuring Post Malone, Shane Gillis, and Peyton Manning. Not a vague “back to basics” push. This was a deliberate rebuild, using voices the core audience trusted, on creative terms they recognized. It landed in the top 10 of the USA TODAY.

Our 2026 Brand Bowl data captured what happened next. The composite would have shown a modest recovery. The segment cut showed where it actually landed, and with whom.

That's the only number that matters when you're rebuilding an audience, not just a score.

The composite hides the consequence. But the cut reveals the strategy.

Source: QuestBrand, Net Momentum (% headed up minus % headed down), A18+ Gen Pop, 12-week trended, Jan 2022–May 2024.

**CASE STUDY #3**


## Mayo Clinic: Resilient nationally, fracturing by generation

Mayo Clinic ranks #3 nationally on QuestRQ. The A18+ composite looks strong. But cut by generation:

| GENERATION  | QRQ SCORE | TIER      |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|
| Boomers     | 84.8      | Resilient |
| Gen X       | 81.4      | Resilient |
| Millennials | 75.8      | Resilient |
| Gen Z       | 63.3      | Average   |

The first three generations sit comfortably in Resilient territory. Then Gen Z drops 12.5 points to Average, not a gradual generational slide but a cliff edge between Millennials and Gen Z specifically. The composite hides it entirely.

This is not a Mayo Clinic problem alone. It reflects a category assumption that runs through healthcare institutions broadly: that trust earned with one generation transfers to the next. The data shows it doesn't. The values, cultural presence, and communication approaches that built Resilient scores among Boomers and Gen X are not doing the same work with younger cohorts.

The commercial consequence is on a long fuse, but it's lit. The people who will be Mayo Clinic's core patient base in 15 years are rating it Average today. For a healthcare institution, that gap surfaces in patient acquisition eventually. QuestRQ surfaces it first.

*Source: QuestRQ Q1 2026, US National, by generation, familiar base.*

## SECTION 6:



# Five questions every brand leader should answer

1. Where does your brand sit in the Trust–Relevance matrix? And do you have the data to know with confidence?
2. Is your composite score hiding a generational fracture? What does the matrix look like for Gen Z vs. Boomers specifically?
3. If your Relevance is outpacing your Trust, what’s your plan to close the credibility gap before it becomes a crisis?
4. If your Trust is outpacing your Relevance, which audience segment is most critical to growth – and how are you building relevance there?
5. How quickly could you detect a momentum shift in a specific segment? Days, weeks, or at the next quarterly wave?



# About QuestRQ

QuestRQ is the institutional reputation module within HarrisQuest – the always-on brand and reputation intelligence platform from The Harris Poll. It measures six reputation dimensions (Trust, Ethics, Quality, Vision, Relevance, Workplace) continuously across 570+ brands in the US, weighted to census daily, with movement flagged at 95% confidence.

It is built on 28 years of Reputation Quotient research and underpins the annual Axios Harris Poll 100. HarrisQuest is the only syndicated platform that measures brand health and institutional reputation on the same panel, at the same time, in a single instrument.

- **570+ brands** tracked in US QuestRQ
- **28 years** of Reputation Quotient research
- **Daily** data refresh, census-weighted
- **6** reputation dimensions in one composite score

**Find out where your brand sits.** Run a Trust-Relevance diagnostic on your brand with QuestRQ data. We'll show you your position in the matrix, your Exposure Gap score, and the specific dimensions constraining your reputation growth.

*Data notes: QuestRQ Q1 2026, US National, A18+, familiar base. Trust-Relevance matrix field means: Trust 63.9, Relevance 58.8, 245 ranked brands. Axios Harris Poll 100 data: 2025, US Adults A18+.*