

JAN  
FEB  
2026

STRATEGY HQ  
*the cooper group*

# THE BUSINESS OF MISINFORMATION

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES EDITION



3

## **THE TRUST ECONOMY:** Building Organizational Resilience

88

## **THE HYPER-LOCAL IMPERATIVE:** Protecting Brand Identity



# THE TRUST ECONOMY:

## Building Organizational Resilience Against Synthetic Content and Brand Impersonation

by David Cooper

New dynamics are shaking up the status quo for companies, products, and services in every sector of the global economy. Businesses are struggling to find fresh footing to sustain consumer confidence, remain profitable, and stay strong in the stock market.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is playing a leading role. Companies are using it in numerous ways – to boost collaboration, speed, and productivity, and to gather and analyze data, spot patterns and trends, identify prospective customers, make business decisions, and scale their businesses.

AI clearly has essential uses, but not everything it generates reflects reality. AI-generated misinformation is extremely



common and rampant. Leaders confidently steer their firms in the wrong direction based on data that sounds right – but isn't. It creates an illusion of the right answers to form decisions, causing companies to focus on insights that bear no truth.

The results? Flawed strategy, misallocated budgets, reputational damage, legal exposure, and more.

machines. It's not just data, but also news articles, social media posts, images, audio, and videos that are generated and maliciously altered by bad actors with powerful digital tools, particularly AI.

This is today's reality. To combat threats, companies must act immediately to build trust and resilience into their business strategies and operations. This

errors into business decisions, and it happens at machine speed. Once automated decisions zip through finance, operations, supply chains, and

## Welcome to Age of Synthetic Reality, where what looks real, sounds real, and spreads like truth can be mass-produced by machines.



### Make sure you're chasing reality – not illusions

What happens when companies (and consumers!) treat AI-driven data and content as fact, without verifying its accuracy or authenticity, or putting it to the ethics test before making an important decision? It's like chasing a mirage.

**Welcome to Age of Synthetic Reality**, where what looks real, sounds real, and spreads like truth can be mass-produced by

means taking a proactive stance against AI-driven misinformation, internally and externally.

Read on for insights on how to tackle this serious and growing challenge.

### Compelling reasons to act now

Of all the reasons to build trust and resilience into your business strategy and operations, these are the most sobering:

- Unverified AI data hardcodes

customer channels, damage multiplies faster than humans can undo it.

- Out in the marketplace, AI tools are generating believable fakes at scale. Again, misinformation spreads faster than (unprepared) companies can correct it. Silence or delayed action from a company creates the perception that the fakes are true – and brand trust can collapse in hours.
- For bad actors, AI lowers their cost of committing fraud, impersonating brands, and attacking company reputations. This means any business is a target, not just high-profile brands.

To prepare for these real and growing risks, it's time to build **data validation** and **rapid response frameworks** into your strategy and day-to-day operations. If you put

these systems in place, you'll be in a strong position to quickly identify AI-generated misinformation in business planning, and just as quickly shut it down in the marketplace before it spreads or damages trust in your brand.

## **Rapid-response protocols for data gathering, analysis, and decision making**

Businesses that take AI intelligence seriously are establishing intelligence validation protocols to ensure the data they collect fast through AI doesn't turn into fast mistakes.

Designing such a framework for your company gives you a rapid truth-verification reflex that kicks in before your money, reputation, and strategy are put at risk. Specifically, it ensures that AI-generated market, business, and competitive intelligence used in your decision-making process is accurate, verified, and screened for risks before you put it into action.

Here are some of the guardrails companies are creating for their data authentication frameworks.

### **1 ADDED LAYER OF DATA SOURCE VERIFICATION**

Speed and action without confirmation of data is what destroys business strategies and companies. And so, companies are making it a mandate that no one in a decision-making capacity can act on AI data or insights unless that information is confirmed by at least one independent, non-AI source, such as a human analyst or an audited dataset – or corroborated by a reputable and trusted third party.



### **2 INTEGRITY CHECKS FOR DATA PIPELINES**

Answers are sought for these questions *before* AI-generated data is analyzed:

- Is the data current? The answer needs to be yes, or at least the most current data available.
- Is the data scraped, synthetic, or verified? The answer needs to be 'verified.'
- Was the data manipulated or truncated? If yes, the data is not actionable.
- Is the provenance of the data clear or unclear? If it's unclear, it's not actionable.

### **3 HUMAN ANALYST OVERRIDE**

A trained analyst must approve, downgrade, or reject any AI-driven insight or recommendation before it is used in a business decision or action.

### **4 DIFFERENT RULES BASED ON THE RISK LEVEL OF A DECISION THAT'S INFORMED BY AI**

- Low impact risk level: Conduct marketing tests, such as A/B pilot testing.
- Medium impact: Get full verification of pricing, hiring, vendor changes, and other impacts.

- High impact: Get multi-team validation and executive sign-off for M&A activity, layoffs, investments, and other major business decisions.

### **5 CROSS-CHECKS FOR AI-DRIVEN MISINFORMATION**

Companies are scanning AI data and insights against the following 'tells,' using automated detection systems, behavioral analysis, and human verification:

- Known misinformation patterns: AI misinformation tends to follow recurring patterns in how it is written, framed, and spread. Cross-checks catch these patterns.
- Narratives amplified by bots: This information becomes more visible as automated accounts (bots) repeatedly post, share, like, or comment on them to boost their reach and cement false narratives.
- Coordinated fake market signals: Bad actors create and spread misleading tales about supply, demand, or sentiment so that prices move in ways that benefit them, not because of real market conditions.

### **6 AUDIT TRAIL AND POST-DECISION FORENSICS**

# Today's threats include misinformation about products, services, or the company, as well as brand and executive impersonation, cybersecurity breaches, and other issues and false narratives that can damage the brand.

Logs of all AI-informed decisions are kept so that if a decision fails, executives and teams can trace it back to where reality diverged from the data model. This informs both the selection of future data sources and decision-making procedures.

Logs can include:

- The data source used to make the decision
- The data model used to arrive at the AI insight and business decision
- The human approver

## Rapid-response protocols for external threats

Companies are creating rapid response protocols, also frameworks, to quickly detect, correct, and quell threats in the marketplace. Today's threats include misinformation about products, services, or the company, as well as brand and executive impersonation, cybersecurity breaches, and other issues and false narratives that can damage the brand.

These frameworks blend around-the-clock monitoring, alerts, decision-making rules, and communication plans so the company can take immediate action before damage occurs. Following are some of the guidelines that companies are using in rapid-response protocols.

### 1 REAL-TIME MONITORING AND TRIGGER ALERTS

Creating a system of continuous monitoring spans search engines, social media sites, news sites, and brand mentions. Real-time monitoring is programmed with clear alert thresholds. This means the system alerts a business when there are spikes in mentions of the company and its brands, drops in consumer sentiment, fake executive quotes, and fake press releases, videos, images, and other content.

### 2 RAPID-RESPONSE TEAM

An internal misinformation 'strike team' can include executives, marcom heads, and legal, IT, and data or cybersecurity leaders. This team has pre-approved authority to act within 30 minutes of an unfolding incident. These are the tools and actions the strike team uses to knowledgably and effectively respond within and outside the company:

- They use a verification playbook to determine the source of an incident.
- They move through fast verification checklists to determine whether the source is authentic.
- They determine if the content is altered, synthetic, or scraped.
- They identify if the misinformation is spreading organically or via bots.

- With facts in hand, they immediately execute corrective communications, internally and externally.

### 3 IMMEDIATE PUBLIC COUNTER-STATEMENT PROTOCOL

Prepared companies maintain pre-drafted response templates that are ready to be tailored to address:

- Fake announcements, content, videos, images, news releases, stories, social media posts, and other damaging narratives
- Executive and brand impersonations
- Product, service, or safety misinformation

### 4 PUBLIC PLATFORM TAKEDOWN ESCALATION

By maintaining escalation contacts or explicit instructions at Meta, Google, X, LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, and other social media and crowdsourcing platforms, companies can submit takedown requests within minutes of an AI misinformation incident.

### 5 INTERNAL SOURCE OF TRUTH

When an incident occurs, prepared companies immediately push out information to key constituents about what is happening, along with corrective information. This prevents misinformation from spreading internally and externally at the same time. Key constituents include:

- Employees
- Customer-facing teams
- Customers
- Business partners
- Social media audiences and influencers

## 6 WATERMARK AND CONTENT AUTHENTICATION

Companies are protecting their brands with various authentication strategies so that the market can instantly distinguish real vs. fake articles, news releases, executive statements, images, videos, audio, and more. Some of these strategies include:

- Digital watermarking: invisible, tamper-resistant identification data embedded in digital content
- Content signatures: digital fingerprints attached to legitimate content
- Verified brand publishing channels: digitally authenticated, officially recognized communication channels, such as websites, social media accounts, email domains, and content feeds

## 7 RAPID LEGAL INJUNCTION READINESS

Speed preserves a company's leverage in stopping an AI misinformation incident, so companies prepare themselves to deal with bad actors by having pre-approved legal communications and plans at the ready. These can include:

- Cease-and-desist letter templates
- Emergency legal injunctions
- Law enforcement referrals

## 8 POST-INCIDENT FORENSICS, WITH BRAND AND RULES REINFORCEMENT

After an AI misinformation incident is contained, companies with protocols in place take these actions:

- Ascertain how and where the content spread, and if possible, by whom.

- Identify and fix gaps that exposed or made their brands vulnerable.
- Strengthen their data, messaging, and brand identity.
- Update their AI misinformation detection methods, tools, and rules.

## 9 EXECUTIVE SIMULATION DRILLS

When leaders treat AI misinformation as a public relations issue – instead of the business risk that it really is – their companies lose the critical window where most damage is done. Executives need to respond within minutes or hours, not days.

AI misinformation simulation drills are important because if a leader freezes in a simulation, they'll freeze in a real-life scenario, too. Intentional companies treat these drills as they do a cybersecurity breach – so that they're knowledgeable, ready, and on point with rapid and right responses.

### Many business owners are surprised by what we find

At The Cooper Group, we provide companies with business and market intelligence, analytics, and business and marketing strategies. Often, the insights we uncover differ from the beliefs or assumptions business leaders hold about their organizations, people, customers, or markets.

Learning they're wrong about

something so important is difficult for some executives to reconcile, but at least they now have factual data and can make smart decisions based on truth.

Factual insights affirm what business leaders need to know and do. The same holds true in validating AI-generated data and responding to AI misinformation in the marketplace.

### Be prepared by being proactive

Here are truths for the road ahead...

- Speed does not replace reality in business decisions.
- Automation does not replace accountability or ethical practices.
- Artificial intelligence can never run roughshod over accuracy and sound judgment.
- Only data verification and rapid response can arrest misinformation before damage occurs.

Reach out to The Cooper Group for more guidance in navigating today's business climate – and how to start building organizational trust and resilience into your business strategy and operations.





# The Hyper-Local Imperative:

## Protecting Brand Identity While Achieving Cultural Resonance Abroad

exports exploded after the second world war, when U.S. brands, products, and services began trekking across oceans and borders, boosted by expansion in global trade and ultimately becoming some of the United States' most recognized and influential economic and cultural exports.

U.S. brands quickly became icons of innovation and prosperity, and for consumers abroad, buying their products has been seen as participating in a more prosperous American lifestyle. Today, change is afoot.

### Global market perceptions are shifting

For decades, U.S. brands have been relatively untouched by the distrust and disdain held by people in other countries, showing a general separation of their feelings about

by David Cooper

For generations, the world has favorably viewed the United States as a champion of innovation, opportunity, and personal freedom. At the same time, it's no secret that other countries' governments and people have long held varying levels of distrust and disdain for

the USA. Many resent our military interventions; others perceive selective protections of democracy and human rights abroad.

Through it all, American brands have enjoyed ultra-positive reception and indulgence in their products around the world. Global

# Brand America 2025: The Trust Gap

Impact of American Identity on Global Consumers (Non-U.S. Markets)

 Perceived as International/Local

 Perceived as American



## Trust Score



## Purchase Intent



Source: Ipsos Brand America 2025 Report (Survey of 9,000+ adults in 10 countries)

the United States from their buying intents and decisions.

However, perceptions are changing, as revealed in the [Brand America 2025 report](#). The survey was conducted by Ipsos across 9,000+ adults in 10 countries (including the United States). It focuses on the impact of being perceived as an American brand in international markets.

The research findings are consistent:

- If a brand is perceived as American, there is a negative impact on trust and purchase intent among consumers across non-U.S. markets.
- When averaged across brands and countries, these negative perceptions amount to about a 20-point drop in both purchase intention and trust.

"In our current environment, some U.S. brands are facing perceptual

headwinds in global markets. This doesn't mean we need to panic. But we do need to quickly calibrate the likely behavioral impact of the shifting attitudes we are observing. There will be cases where leaders will need to make local adjustments to ensure their brands thrive," says Chris Murphy, president and Global Lead of Ipsos Market and Brand Strategy.

### **It is imperative that U.S. brands think and act locally**

"Looking ahead, multinational companies will have to clear a higher bar to successfully operate beyond their core markets. Tailoring their offerings to local tastes and trends, localizing sourcing where possible, and making strategic portfolio and brand decisions on the ability to win markets will be critical." – McKinsey & Company, State of the Consumer 2025: When Disruption Becomes Permanent

U.S. companies that win in global markets don't export their brands. They re-build their brands locally, meaning they adapt to the spirit and cultural context of the specific markets they enter. Here are the things they do to move the needle:

- They make it their goal to build trust in the market, not just visibility.
- They don't project America-first – in operations, marketing, sales, packaging, or service.
- They grant control to leaders and teams who manage their brand and products in each local market.
- They prove that they're intent on staying by investing in people, their needs, and communities.

These tenets for global growth are about cultural humility, operational flexibility, and local investments that are genuine and visible. Companies with this focus succeed in protecting their brand identity and core value proposition while achieving cultural resonance in non-U.S. markets where they do business.

### **6 ways companies re-build their brands locally**

- 1 **THEY LOCALIZE PRODUCTS AND PACKAGING.** For example, ingredients are reformulated to match local tastes, dietary norms, and regulations. Product sizes, features, usage patterns, and packaging are adapted to how people in the market live. Safety, sustainabi-

# 6 Ways Companies Re-Build Their Local Brands Locally



1

## LOCALIZE PRODUCTS

Reformulate ingredients, adjust sizing, and adapt packaging.

2

## EARN TRUST

Partner with local distributors and invest in the community.

3

## TAILOR MESSAGING

Use local humor and emotional triggers to build cultural bridges.

4

## EMPOWER LEADERS

Hire local executives and grant them full authority over P&L.

5

## LOCALIZE CX

Support local payment and native-language customer service.

6

## STAY NEUTRAL

Avoid national or political symbolism. Maintain a neutral stance.

ty, and quality standards are closely followed, and region-specific SKUs are used to further localize preferences and bestselling products.

**2** THEY EARN TRUST BY BECOMING ONE WITH THE MARKET. Non-U.S. consumers trust institutions they recognize, and that do not exist merely to extract profits. Knowing trust rises with permanence, U.S. companies partner with respected local distributors, retailers, suppliers, and service providers, and they source, manufacture, and assemble goods locally, when possible. They promote offerings using local case studies, testimonials, and third-party endorsements, and show long-term commitment by investing in local jobs and supporting community, education, sustainability, and other programs.

**3** MESSAGING, MEANING, AND VALUES ARE TAILORED – AND GENUINE. Global consistency matters, but cultural ignorance kills brands. Knowing that wording, emotional triggers, and humor vary by culture, U.S. brands create messaging that resonates, rather than trying to appeal based on U.S. sensibilities. Also, value propositions are tailored to what each market prioritizes, such as price vs. prestige, tradition vs. innovation, or efficiency vs. relationship with a brand. Cultural bridges are also built by using local influencers (trusted voices with credibility) to promote brands and products.

**4** LOCAL LEADERS ARE HIRED AND EMPOWERED. U.S. brands that don't decentralize cannot globalize. In other words, it's not

possible to remote-control trust and brand building from the United States. What works is to hire local executives, give them authority over P&L, product pricing, marketing, and partnerships, and avoid U.S. approval bottlenecks for decisions that should be made locally.

**5** MARKETS ARE GIVEN FAMILIAR DIGITAL, PAYMENT, AND SERVICE EXPERIENCES. Smart brands understand that customer experience (CX) is highly culture specific. To succeed in non-U.S. markets, brands really need to support local payment systems and e-commerce norms, use local social media platforms and search engines, and offer local-language customer service that meets local response expectations. Market norms for product delivery, returns, warranties, and support are also honored.

**6** THERE IS SENSITIVITY AROUND GEOPOLITICS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY. As revealed in the Ipsos survey, "Made in the USA" is not always a positive, or at least not for everybody. So, it's important to know if a U.S. origin helps or hurts. A good rule of thumb is to avoid national or political symbolism in branding and marketing abroad, because in many markets, neutrality builds more trust than national pride.

### **Internal risks and training – the parts most companies underestimate**

External trust is impossible for a company to achieve without internal readiness. Specifically, market localization must be backed by serious internal training, as well as realistically aligned incentives. Without proper training...

- Cultural mistakes become systemic.
- Compliance failures become recurring events.
- Local talent disengages due to lack of authority, focus, and direction.
- Global strategy slowly degenerates into disjoined, ineffective execution at local market levels.

Given the enormous investments companies make in doing business outside the United States, it's essential to be aware of the biggest internal risks and what proper training can do to eliminate them.

### **1 CULTURAL SHORTSIGHTEDNESS INSIDE THE COMPANY**

**Internal risks** permeate companies when teams assume U.S. norms and business practices are the default way of operating, marketing,

selling, and servicing customers in other countries and regions. When strategy is filtered through a biased American lens, decisions are made without localized cultural context. These risks (and ultimate failures) are typically seeded at company headquarters.

**Training eliminates risks** in multiple ways, beginning with mandatory cultural intelligence (CQ) training for leadership. If leaders aren't culturally fluent, with an understanding and awareness of how to operate in global or multicultural environments, the organization won't be either. Market-specific immersion programs are extremely important in giving local team members and leaders hands-on experiences to successfully integrate them into a particular culture or geographic market.

### **2 KILLING LOCALIZATION EFFORTS WITH MISALIGNED INCENTIVES**

**Internal risks** often involve incentivizing the wrong things, leading teams to do what bonuses reward. This can demoralize teams if unachievable growth targets are prioritized over local market realities. Incentivizing the wrong things also includes rewarding speed over fit, judging teams on efficiency rather than effectiveness, and reprimanding leaders for adapting (which they should!) instead of standardizing.

**Training teaches** managers how to balance global KPIs with local KPIs to keep things real. It trains finance and operations teams to recognize and understand market maturity curves. And since a company cannot train people to localize if

they punish localization, training and performance metrics are redesigned so that local adaptation is not penalized. Case-based training also helps teams identify and leverage long-term versus short-term trade-offs for the greater good of the company and market.

### **3 WHEN FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES BECOME LIABILITIES**

**Internal risks** can include a sales representative making a culturally inappropriate comment or claim. We all know how one bad interaction with a company can spread globally in minutes. Other internal risks include mishandling customer service issues, fallout when marketing language is not reflected in the behavior of the company's local representatives, and when social media gaffes trigger local backlash.

**Training mitigates** the possibility that untrained staff can destroy entry into a market, or market growth, wasting millions of dollars in the process. Training should include local-market-specific do's, don'ts, taboos, and rules for escalation of company and customer issues. There should

**When strategy is filtered through a biased American lens, decisions are made without localized cultural context.**



U.S. employment practices illegally overseas, or if procurement teams violate local sourcing or anti-corruption standards.

**Training mitigates** such risks by providing country-specific compliance training, legal onboarding of local people in market-facing roles, and annual re-certification with real enforcement consequences. Training also identifies how to manage less-formal areas of risk, such as gifts and questionable facilitation.

absolutely be role-based localized training for sales reps and customer service and marketing teams. Crisis-response simulations should also be staged that employ localized legal and public relations expertise.

## 4 COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS BETWEEN HQ AND LOCAL TEAMS

**Internal risks** rise when local teams feel unheard, when HQ overrides local decisions or judgment, when HQ views local team resistance as incompetence, and when feedback loops are ignored. These scenarios are where smart local insights go to die! Companies also make local efforts vulnerable and ineffective when they manipulate local market data to match the company's global narrative.

**Training eases** communications, including cross-cultural listening training for global leaders. It teaches psychological safety across the hierarchy, bypasses political bottlenecks through formal escalation channels, and helps everyone distinguish important signals from noise in local market feedback. Local truth must be able to travel upward, effectively; otherwise, local strategy turns into fantasy.

## 5 WHEN LEGAL, COMPLIANCE, AND ETHICS ARE EXPOSED DUE TO IGNORANCE

**Internal risks** become full-blown issues if sales teams violate local pricing, data, or labor laws, or if marketing violates advertising or privacy regulations, or if HR applies

## 6 GLOBAL CULTURE IS NOT ALLOWED TO BECOME U.S.-CENTRIC

**Internal risks** proliferate when local talent feels like second-class participants in the company's march across the globe. Rather than the strategic partners they are, local leaders and teams feel like mere execution arms. Consequently, top talent leaves, middle managers disengage, teams become disconnected, and critical collaboration evaporates. These risks cause fragmented execution and poor rollout of products, services, and marketing. Localization fails when local talent is not empowered.

**Training ensures** that leadership receives inclusive training across

cultures, including in enterprise planning, strategy, operations, and talent management. This creates a global operating culture that offers career path parity among U.S. and non-U.S. leaders and teams, and it is enhanced by global mentoring programs. Most important, leaders and middle managers are given market-level autonomy to run the business within mutually understood and agreed-upon guardrails with U.S. headquarters.

## 7 AI AND AUTOMATION ARE CONTROLLED TO PREVENT ERRORS AT SCALE

**Internal risks**, in fact some of today's biggest ones, become reality when artificial intelligence translates data without cultural facts and nuances. As a result, misinformation, which spreads fast through automated content, can violate local norms and laws. Just as risky, data models trained on U.S. behavior misrepresent and therefore cannot predict behavior in non-U.S. markets, rendering it useless in helping to make important business decisions.

**Training educates** leaders and teams on effective digital localization, identifies and eliminates biases, provides market-specific AI validation protocols, and includes the establishment of local review boards to assess high-risk content.

### Localization training is not a one-time event

Training local teams – and company leadership – for success in local markets must be a component of a company's global strategy. It needs to be continuous, market-

specific, role-specific, and tied directly to accountability, incentives, and promotions. If training is not integrated into leadership and team development, local market efforts will collapse under real-world pressure.

### Get more insights from The Cooper Group

U.S. firms must think and act locally in non-U.S. markets because customer expectations, cultural norms, regulations, and competitive landscapes significantly differ across

countries and regions. This requires tailoring products, marketing, and operations to local tastes and rules, and internal training to avoid missteps and effectively compete with U.S. firms that already understand the nuances of global trade.

Contact The Cooper Group for a free consultation on creating a sound strategy to win consumer trust and protect your brand identity while achieving cultural resonance abroad.

**...data models trained on U.S. behavior misrepresent and therefore cannot predict behavior in non-U.S. markets, rendering it useless in helping to make important business decisions.**



**The Cooper Group, Inc.**  
**5 Concourse Parkway**  
**Suite 3000**  
**Atlanta, GA 30328**  
**678-474-9678**

**To subscribe, e-mail us at**  
**StrategyHQ@thecoopergroup.net**

 thecoopergroup

[thecoopergroup.net](http://thecoopergroup.net)