

Leading at the Intersections 2023

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Welcome to **Leading at the Intersections 2023.**

Any new year offers a prime opportunity for goal setting and forecasting. And while we're on board with the personal (and practical) resolutions of stepping away from our devices more, carving out time for friends and family and drinking more water – our team resolutions for 2023 center on leadership.

We're focused on the ways our team at Powell Tate, the public affairs unit of The Weber Shandwick Collective, can continue to inspire, inform and ignite leadership from clients across sectors to drive business and organizational performance – and to make a positive impact on the world.

That's especially so as we reflect on our role in the new Business & Society Futures offering, which adds to the advisory capabilities within The Weber Shandwick Collective, with a new roster of external advisors to help clients meet a new standard of leadership.

At Powell Tate, curiosity animates our work and is our starting point for understanding the fast-changing world around us and determining how we partner with clients to navigate complexity, mitigate risk and deliver work that creates value.

This year will again bring many twists and turns across the worlds of media, politics, technology, healthcare and more. This report succinctly explores some of the biggest issues of the moment – and what to be watching for in 2023.

Thanks for taking the time to read this report. As always, we welcome any questions or ideas it may spark – and look forward to hearing from you.



Paul Massey

President, Powell Tate

Global Lead, Social Impact & Sustainability, Weber Shandwick

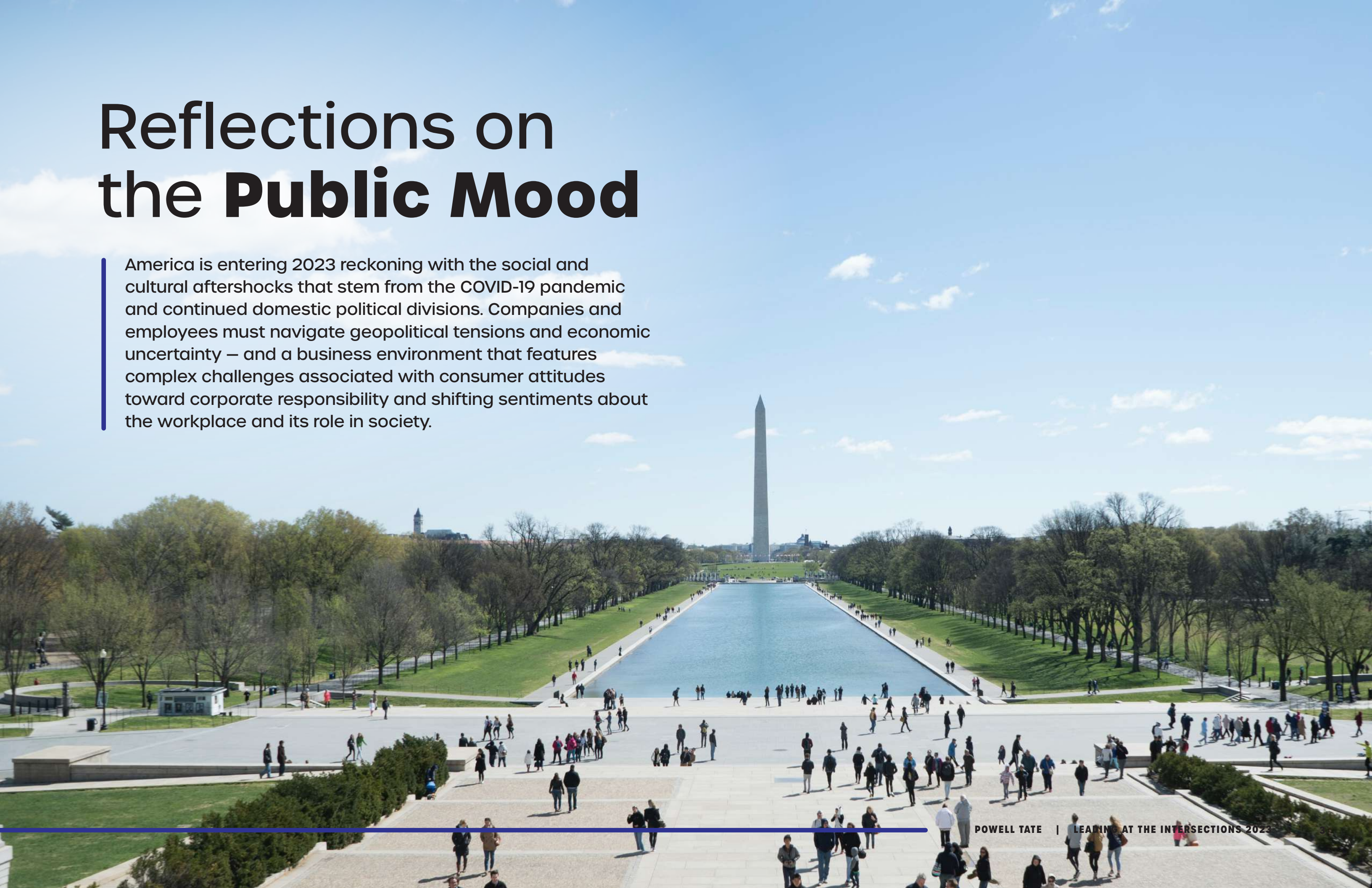


Our report is organized into the following sections:

- Reflections on the public mood
- From 2022 to 2023: What's next on the global agenda
- From political polarization to... political polarization?
- From pop culture to in-culture
- From woke capitalism to sustainable innovation
- From disparity to health equity
- From misinformation to narrative intelligence

Reflections on the **Public Mood**

America is entering 2023 reckoning with the social and cultural aftershocks that stem from the COVID-19 pandemic and continued domestic political divisions. Companies and employees must navigate geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainty – and a business environment that features complex challenges associated with consumer attitudes toward corporate responsibility and shifting sentiments about the workplace and its role in society.



Findings from our most recent National Pulse Poll,¹

conducted by our colleagues at KRC Research after the 2022 U.S. midterm elections, illustrate these realities and reveal three key intersecting themes:



The nation is steadfastly divided, which permeates the way Americans live, work and engage. Corporate leaders cite polarization as a major internal risk.



Employees are largely back in their workplaces, but question the value of being there. CEOs regard workforce development, reducing employee turnover and talent retention as some of the most important ways to protect businesses from recession.



People believe in the power of business to make a positive difference, but are growing skeptical of their own employers' impact. Corporate leaders feel more equipped to lead on business issues than societal ones.

In short, the mood at the start of 2023 can best be described as unpredictable, suggesting we will see continued shifts in areas that include the public's outlook of the state of the nation and employer-employee relationships. The latest National Pulse Poll results underscore the importance of cultivating workforce loyalty as a critical challenge for employers, especially with a softening economy and as Millennials and other younger workers redefine the intersection of workplace and social issues.

[Read more from the Reputation Alert](#) ▶



Pam Jenkins
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¹ National survey among 1,006 U.S. adults between November 14 and 16, 2022. Sample randomly drawn from large national opt-in panel. Survey data weighted on key demographic variables to reflect the adult population based on U.S. Census data. Full- and part-time employees (-549 in total) just over half the total national sample; non-employed include homemakers, students, unemployed and retired individuals.

From 2022 to 2023 – What's Next on the Global Agenda

President Biden will advance U.S. foreign policy in 2023 with a focus on continued U.S. military support for Ukraine; global climate diplomacy; countering China, Russia and Iran; supporting global democracy; and promoting cooperation, through multinational forums and summits, on nuclear proliferation, pandemic prevention and other global issues.

Here are **key issues** to watch in 2023:



China

There is bipartisan support for the U.S. engaging with China as both a military and economic competitor. This will continue in a divided Congress. House Republicans will create a task force to explore the entire scope of U.S.-China relations – from trade and tech-related exports to chemicals sourced from China and used in fentanyl, to controls on TikTok.

For more details, [read here](#).



Europe

The Biden administration is pursuing an industrial strategy designed to ensure U.S. leadership in technology, clean energy and innovation, with incentives for “Made in America” investments. This is creating tension with European allies. Both sides are working to prevent a trade war.



Ukraine

The midterm election is unlikely to alter U.S. policy on Ukraine. But Republicans say they will not give President Biden a “blank check” on funds. Europe will watch shifts in U.S. support because it could not offset the flow of weapons and cash if the U.S. pulls back.



Trade

Some Republicans want the administration to begin negotiating new bilateral trade agreements. The administration is talking with 13 Asia-Pacific partners in areas such as worker rights, the environment and digital trade, but progress in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) may be slow unless the U.S. opens its market to more of their goods.

What we watched in 2022

[A Six Country Survey: Public and Employee Expectations of Business Amid War in Ukraine](#) ▶

[Global Perspectives on the Food Security Crisis](#) ▶

[A Changing Digital Landscape in Europe](#) ▶



Jim Meszaros
Executive Vice President,
International Public Affairs



From **Political Polarization** to ... **Political Polarization?**

A divided nation is beset by economic and social aftershocks stemming from the pandemic and extreme political polarization. While confronting inflation and a looming recession, Americans are embroiled in a national debate over deeply personal issues like abortion, gun violence, racial justice and LGBTQ+ rights.

Here are three things to watch in 2023.

- 01 Democrats will turn to a new generation of leaders while the future of the GOP is litigated in the 2024 presidential election season.** Though midterm results bolstered President Biden and Senator Schumer in their incumbencies, the Democratic old guard must reconcile with a younger generation of leaders newly empowered in the House. As conspiracy theorists are sidelined and more conventional GOP figures like Governor DeSantis ascend nationally, early maneuvering for the 2024 GOP nomination will clarify the extent to which President Trump maintains a grip on the party.
- 02 In a divided Washington, regulatory agencies will be more aggressive in the Executive Branch while investigations, many performative, will steal the show in Congress. Corporate America may find itself on center stage in both theaters.** Legislation will grind to a halt in a divided Congress, leaving President Biden to focus on his regulatory authority, his ability to confirm judges and his pastime of foreign policy. Holding a narrow majority in the House, the GOP will consume itself with politically inspired investigations that rev the party's base. "Corporate wokeism" will be in the crosshairs.
- 03 The Supreme Court will, yet again, decide landmark cases that could remake the social fabric of the country.** Following watershed decisions expanding gun rights and curtailing abortion access and environmental protections, the court will rule on more cases with seismic societal implications. If the conservative supermajority decides as predicted, affirmative action, LGBTQ+ and voting rights will be rolled back. Since federal courts, including the Supreme Court, have repeatedly struck down or paused the administration's regulations and executive orders – including those related to vaccines, emissions, evictions and student debt forgiveness – expect more aggressive regulatory action to produce more court rejections.



John Files
Executive Vice President, Public Affairs



Meghann Curtis
Senior Vice President, Public Affairs,
Social Impact & Sustainability

What we watched in 2022

[Modernizing America's Infrastructure and How Companies Can Begin to Prepare](#) ▶

[How \(and why\) to Take A Stand on Gun Violence](#) ▶

[118th Congress Issue Briefs](#) ▶



From Pop Culture to In-Culture

Business, policy and culture have become inextricably linked, which is why brands need to be in-culture. To be “in-culture,” companies should ask not only what value their goods and services provide their customer, but what value their brand can add to society. That added value is the brand’s “move.” Make that move consistently – because consistency is authenticity.

Consistency is key to building an influential “in-culture” brand:

Why be “in culture”?

Political Washington ignores real-world culture at its peril. The World Cup is a bigger geopolitical stage than COP27. The loudest complaints about the system being rigged aren't heard on the campaign trail. They're from millennial Taylor Swift fans shut out by Ticketmaster. The lines blur further as businesspeople like Elon Musk become celebrities and celebrities like Memet Oz become politicians. The phenomenon isn't new; the massive public following afforded by social media is – linking policy, brands and culture more tightly than ever.



Start with an authentic move.

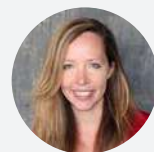
Brands looking to affect policy and culture should first look at themselves. Ask: What do we do every day? What value do we add? Then ask, where can our values add value to the world? Nothing will get you “canceled” by culture faster than an inauthentic gesture – but there's a lot to be gained by big positive moves (e.g., Coca-Cola* unveiling its first-ever bottle made from 100% plant-based material to reduce their carbon footprint by 25% in 2030) that drive culture, policy and your brand forward.



Culture is behavior, over time.

Culture is values that come to life through norms and rituals. If you run every day, you are a runner. If you write every day, you are a writer. The same is true for brands. A one-time donation to an environmental cause doesn't make you an environmental brand, but 40 years of hands-on-pro-environment-sweat-equity does. (Thanks, Patagonia!) Being in-culture is not simply hijacking ephemeral trends. It is about making big moves and sticking to them.



Chris Ferguson
Chief Creative Officer
 



Kristine Fitton
Executive Vice President, Strategy & Planning
 

What we watched in 2022

[The Freedom to Speak Freely](#) ▶

[The Currency of Culture](#) ▶

[The Understanding Imperative](#) ▶

* Weber Shandwick client

From **Woke Capitalism** to **Sustainable Innovation**

As environmental, social and governance (ESG) goes mainstream, there is more scrutiny on the validity of sustainability claims and pressure on businesses to prove performance and impact. Constructive pushback will strengthen ESG as a critical component of the corporate operating system and investment thesis. Politicization will distract from the substance of the debate and delay the advancement of the scalable solutions we need.



Increasingly, the priority issues on the corporate agenda emerge from a **changing climate, fractures in the social contract and new realities for the future of work.**



As trust in government, the media and civic institutions declines, people look to business – and in particular, their employers – to be a constructive force for positive change. ESG practices and policies have become a shorthand for how companies meet these new expectations for purpose-driven leadership.



ESG is an imperative despite headwinds.

The private sector has embraced ESG to help address risks across the value chain and protect a sustainable license to operate. But in both the political and business worlds, opposition is surfacing among those who say corporations are moving too far from their fiduciary responsibilities by serving as champions for social justice and climate action – practicing what they term ‘woke capitalism’ instead of prudent business strategy in the face of unprecedented economic, political and geopolitical headwinds.



The politicization of ESG is a distraction.

The attack on ESG serves as a distraction from the necessary conversation about how to address real problems that impact all of us and have tangible implications for organizations and society.



Opportunity to frame a better ESG debate.

It’s time to move to a more constructive dialogue about how to advance sustainable innovation and business model transformation to anticipate, mitigate and transcend persistent challenges and create long-term shared value for shareholders, stakeholders and society.



Kate Olsen
Executive Vice President,
Social Impact & Sustainability



What we watched in 2022

[Three Imperatives for Gender Equality in a Time of Conflict](#) ▶

[Climate Spotlight 2022](#) ▶

[Sustainability Sensemaking](#) ▶



From Disparity to Health Equity

The pandemic magnified health disparities and the need to address them. Across sectors of healthcare – government, pharmaceutical companies, payors – momentum is building toward policies and investments that address the social causes of those disparities and improve access to care and well-being. Still, much more needs to be done.

The pandemic has led to a **reawakening across government and the healthcare industry** around health inequities and has created an urgency about addressing them.

Increased momentum in the public sector for policies to address health inequities. Since 2020, state legislatures have passed hundreds of laws to reduce health disparities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced an initiative on Racism and Health, making new investments to achieve health equity. And the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Healthy People 2030 established national objectives to improve well-being by addressing social determinants of health.

The private sector is also responding. The American Medical Association has recognized racism as a public health threat.

And pharmaceutical companies are prioritizing programs that directly address healthcare inequities – expanding access for people of color in clinical trials, developing partnerships and programs to ensure better access and exploring the linkage between pricing and access.

Insurance companies and other payors are evaluating the impact of social causes on health outcomes. Grant-making and pilot programs that directly focus on issues such as homelessness, transportation and food access, safe and supportive schools and healthy environments are being increasingly supported by these organizations.

There is rare alignment in the public and private sectors about the urgency of tackling the nation's healthcare disparities, but real progress will come only if there is rigorous and sustained action.



Trish Taylor
Executive Vice President, Healthcare
[m](#) [in](#)



Nicole Arens
Executive Vice President, Healthcare
[m](#) [in](#)

What we watched in 2022

[World Health Day 2022: Creating A Healthier Tomorrow Through Shared Action](#) ▶

[How Brands Can Support Mental Health – Both In and Out of the Workplace](#) ▶

[Taking Stock of Global Health Goals and the Road Ahead](#) ▶



From Misinformation to Narrative Intelligence

COVID-19, QAnon, Russian bots – as communicators and citizens we’ve all experienced the dangers of misinformation. The advent of new technologies like generative AI, an increasing polarization within society and ongoing attempts by geopolitical actors to sow dissent ensure that the threat level will only increase. So too, must our sophistication in tackling it. That’s why in 2023, brands must move beyond misinformation as a crisis communications issue and think more broadly about **narrative intelligence**.

Narrative intelligence

uses the same tools that help us map and react to misinformation networks but applies them to proactive strategies rooted in human insights. Brands leveraging narrative intelligence are already using it for:



What we watched in 2022

[A.I. Identity](#) ▶

[Making Sense of News](#) ▶

[Media Threats Go Mainstream](#) ▶



Narrative mapping and understanding:

Accumulating a depth of knowledge about the media and cultural dynamics of socially sensitive issues to anticipate potential crisis points before engaging on a topic.



Counter-narrative development:

Developing positive communications and company behaviors that directly address the needs, hopes and fears of target audiences so that they are less likely to believe misinformation about the brand or industry now or in the future.

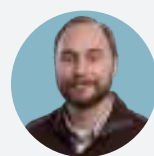


Message testing for “blowback”:

Deploying real-time testing of counter narratives to ensure that the strategies, tactics and language of company communications are read, heard and believed by target audiences – and don’t drive unintended blowback or reinforce the misinformation.

Misinformation and adversarial narratives are now pervasive in the media landscape.

Narrative intelligence is an evolved approach to help brands build more resilient strategies and weather the storm.



Mike Connery

Executive Vice President,
Integrated Media Strategy



James Walker

Executive Vice President,
Integrated Media Strategy



About Us

Powell Tate, the public affairs unit of The Weber Shandwick Collective, is built to deliver the next-generation solutions clients need to win in a complex, prove-it-works world. Our approach is informed by data and animated by a human element that creates compelling stories for our clients' audiences. As part of a broader network, we're led by world-class strategic and creative thinkers and activators who deploy leading and emerging technologies to inform strategy, develop critical insights, heighten impact and move the needle on reputation, public policy and social issues.

Our differentiator is how we see and approach today's best-in-class communications. Delivering powerfully integrated, culturally resonant solutions, we believe the best and most effective campaigns are led by **a core set of operating principles:**

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[Send us an email:](#) Paul Massey 

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Human-Led, Data-Driven

Strategic communications programs today must marshal a vast amount of available data and combine it with the intelligence of experienced communicators to shape stories that move target stakeholders.

Channel-Savvy

Communicators need to deliver their stories where the audiences are. While we have an earned-first perspective, we know consumers often do not distinguish between earned, owned, shared or paid content. We create content and tell stories that are emotionally resonant, immediately relevant and newsworthy across all channels at key moments – the hallmark of best-in-class communications today.

Always-On

Today's news cycle never stops. The best companies strategically plan for and create news opportunities while nimbly and tactically responding to the non-stop news cycle.

Measurable

The explosion of data accessibility allows communicators to demonstrate measurable return on investment. Best-in-class communications campaigns begin with a clear, measurable goal and use data and analytics to adjust in order to achieve results.

Grounded In Purpose

Customers, employees and other stakeholders expect companies to do more than provide quality products and services – they expect companies to demonstrate their values and impact on the world. At the heart of any best-in-class communications program is an authentic understanding of a company's purpose and a recognition that the purpose extends beyond the company's bottom line.

