

Reputation

America's Most--and Least--Reputable Industries

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Here's how the American public feels about 19 industries.



In Pictures: America's Most, and Least, Popular Industries--The Rankings

How good companies are for the economy seems to be a key to their public popularity this year. What happened on Wall Street mattered more and more to Main Street over the last 12 months. Companies that the public perceived as managing their business in non-transparent ways, losing profits and endangering the economy, lost face. But the financial industry did surprisingly well. And pharmaceuticals, long widely disliked, did better this year, according to the latest survey results released by the New York City-based Reputation Institute.

The Reputation Institute is a private research and consulting firm that interviewed online 7,269 consumers across the U.S. in January and February 2009. Its study focused on the 153 largest American corporations as part of the Institute's 2009 Global Pulse Survey of companies worldwide.

The Institute takes each company's "pulse score" by determining how it measures up in the four broad areas of esteem, admiration, feeling and trust. It looks at what it calls "seven dimensions"--products and services, innovation, workplace, citizenship, governance, leadership and performance.

The most influential dimension is products and services, but leadership and performance gained influence over the past year. People have become more eager to know what plans companies have for the future, and how they expect to be profitable.

Americans ranked [consumer products](#) (77.56), [transport and logistics](#) (73.78), [industrial products](#) (72.76) and [computers](#) (72.58) at the top of the scale, the survey shows. People have the strongest affection for companies that produce goods present in their everyday lives, that value their relationships with the public, that don't appear to be dangerously unregulated and that have business models that are easy to understand."People now demand that companies communicate what they do," says Anthony Johndrow, managing director for the U.S. of the Reputation Institute.

The financial industry isn't famous for transparency, yet the economic meltdown didn't cause the reputation of financials to sink much lower than they already were. That's partly because the study left out companies that were acquired or eliminated, like Merrill Lynch. If those businesses had been included, the industry would have looked much worse. People still don't see any improvement in financial executives, their behavior or the rules of the game, Johndrow says.

"I'm surprised the numbers aren't worse," says Jefferson Harralson, managing director at the brokerage Keefe, Bruyette & Woods, "since bankers have been held largely responsible for the recession we're in."

Some industries' reputations have gotten better. Pharmaceutical companies advanced by four points, to 66.39. People seem to like businesses that succeed, employ people, make money and strengthen the economy.

The worst-rated industries were services, insurance, utilities, banks, telecommunications, diversified financials and energy.

Energy providers remained dead last on the list, at 56.08. Their popularity probably wasn't helped by the volatility in fuel prices over the last year. Also, many people seem to view [oil companies](#), as they always have, as rapaciousness machines.

Telecommunications also ranked below 60. Those companies may have improved their reputations by providing more diversified services for less money, but they still have a lot better to do in their relations with customers, Johndrow says. Among financials, the diversified sector performed the worst, scoring 58.33. The number of institutions surveyed this year went from 12 to eight, and the industry's score dropped by 2.5. Insurance scored 61.31, and banking 60.67. The latter was the only financial sector to rise slightly, by two points. That rise, however, is because companies like Washington Mutual and Wachovia were no longer measured in 2009.

The utilities industry (60.71) remains among the least beloved. This year, like last year, people expressed a strong dislike for regulated industries or monopolies that make them feel they have no choice in who they do business with.