



How to Improve Trust in Local Journalism

September 2022

Key findings

1

Trust in local news sources is good, but not excellent and it's extremely fragile. 50% of people who say they trust a local news source also say they have questioned whether they should. 1 in 5 say local TV or local radio are sources with "fake news".

2

A question about the trustworthiness of a single journalist puts the integrity of the entire organization in jeopardy. 60% of respondents share this "one rotten apple" sentiment.

3

Action, not promotion, is the key to cultivating trust with the audience. There are 28 things local news sources and journalists should work on to earn and build trust.

4

Success will not come from the targeting of a specific demographic. The findings are very consistent across all demos. It is not a generational challenge. Nor is it a challenge primarily rooted in political orientation.

5

Social media is a significant challenge. It is easily the least trusted local news platform. It is also the second most used local platform daily. Journalists who post personal opinions on social media are hurting their trust relationship with the audience.

Methodology



Online interviews were conducted with a national sample of 2,000 adults 18–64 years old.



Respondents were contacted randomly and qualified for the sample if they use a LOCAL source weekly for LOCAL news and information: TV newscast, radio newscast/programs, social media, website, and/or mobile app.



Interviews were conducted in April/May 2022.
Average survey length: 15 minutes

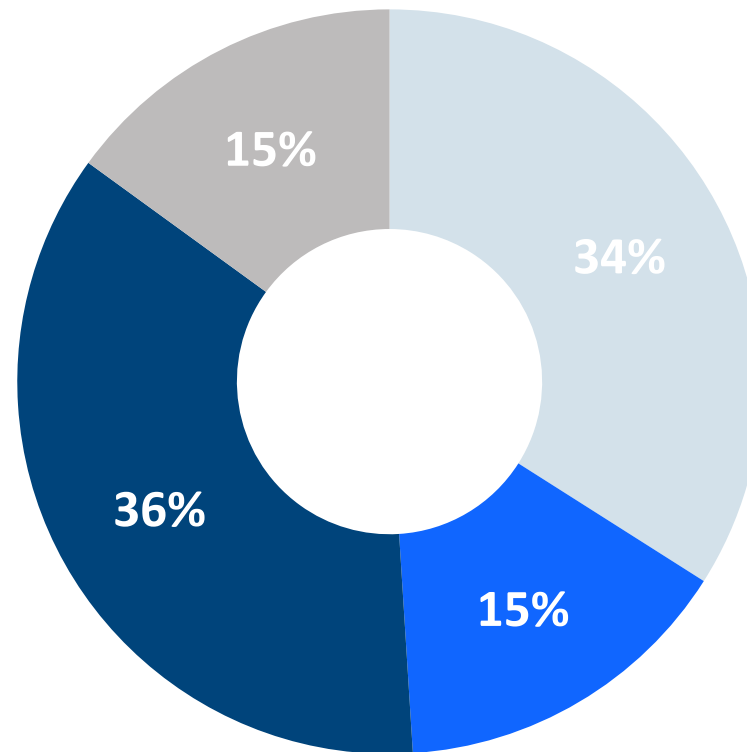
The local news consumer

GEN Z (18-24)

- 15% of the 18-64 audience in the sample.
- Light consumers of local news on any platform. Social media is this groups most-used (42% daily+) source for local news.
- Share the same opinions about what's important to trust as other generations; not nearly as passionate about these

MILLENNIAL (25-40)

- 36% of the sample. The generation with a majority stake in the 25-54 demographic.
- Moderate consumers of local news on all platforms. Most likely to use social media (60% daily+) and television (50% daily+).



■ Gen X ■ Baby Boomer ■ Millennial ■ Gen Z

GEN X (41-57)

- 34% of the sample.
- Local television (61% daily+) is by far the most dominant platform used by this generation. But Gen X are consuming local news on all platforms regularly.

BABY BOOMER (58-64)

- 15% of the sample. No longer a part of the 25-54 demographic.
- Strong users (61% daily+) of local television news. Light use of all other platforms.
- Tends to find platforms not used regularly less trustworthy.

Sample



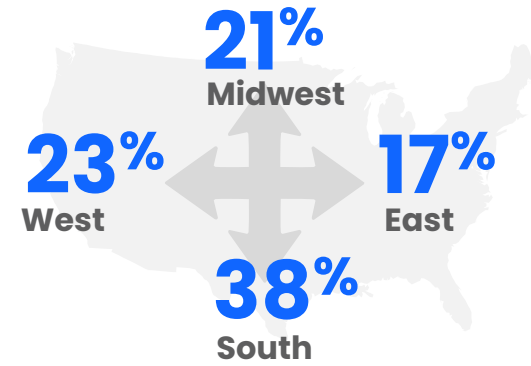
50%
Female



49%
Male



1%
Non-binary



44%
Democratic



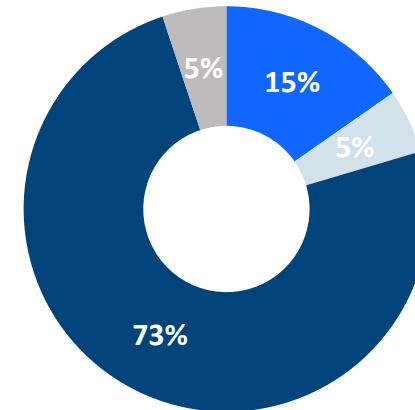
25%
Republican



23%
Independent



9%
Other / none



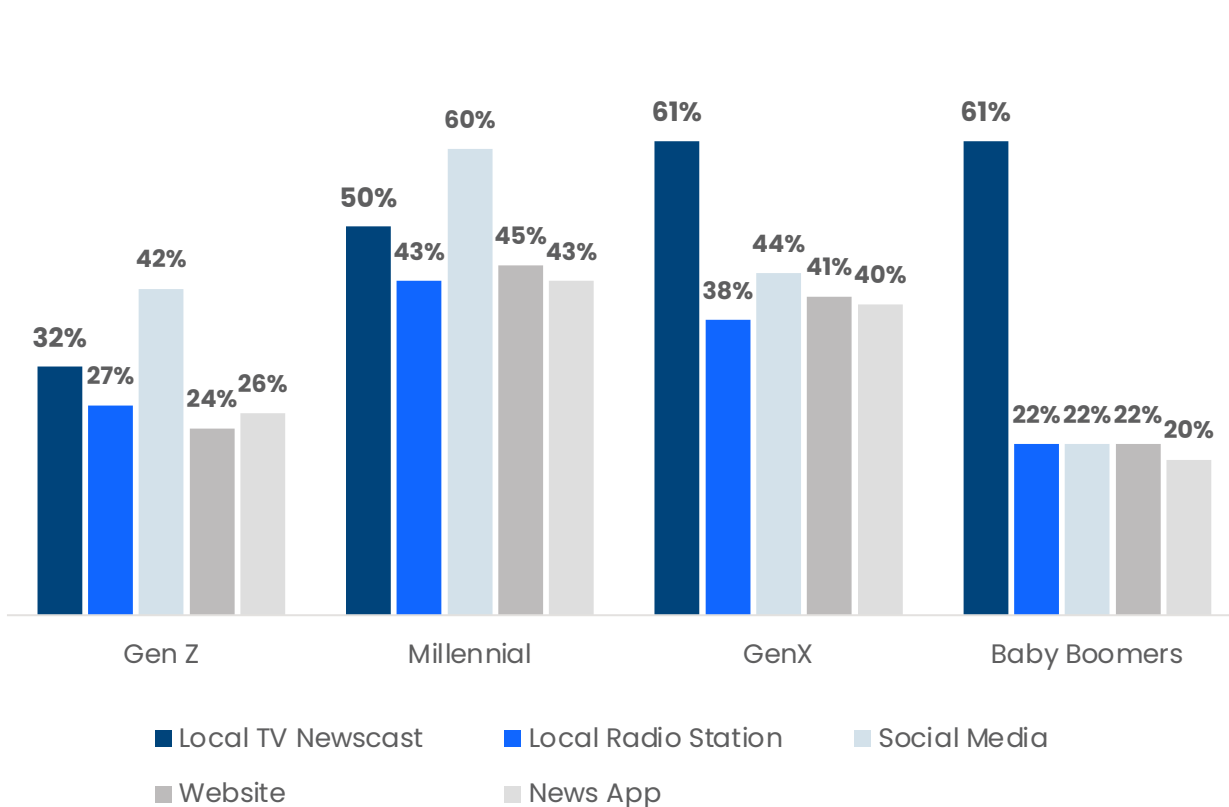
- African American
- Asian
- White
- Other / DK / NA

18% identified as being of Hispanic or Latino origin.

A CALL TO ACTION

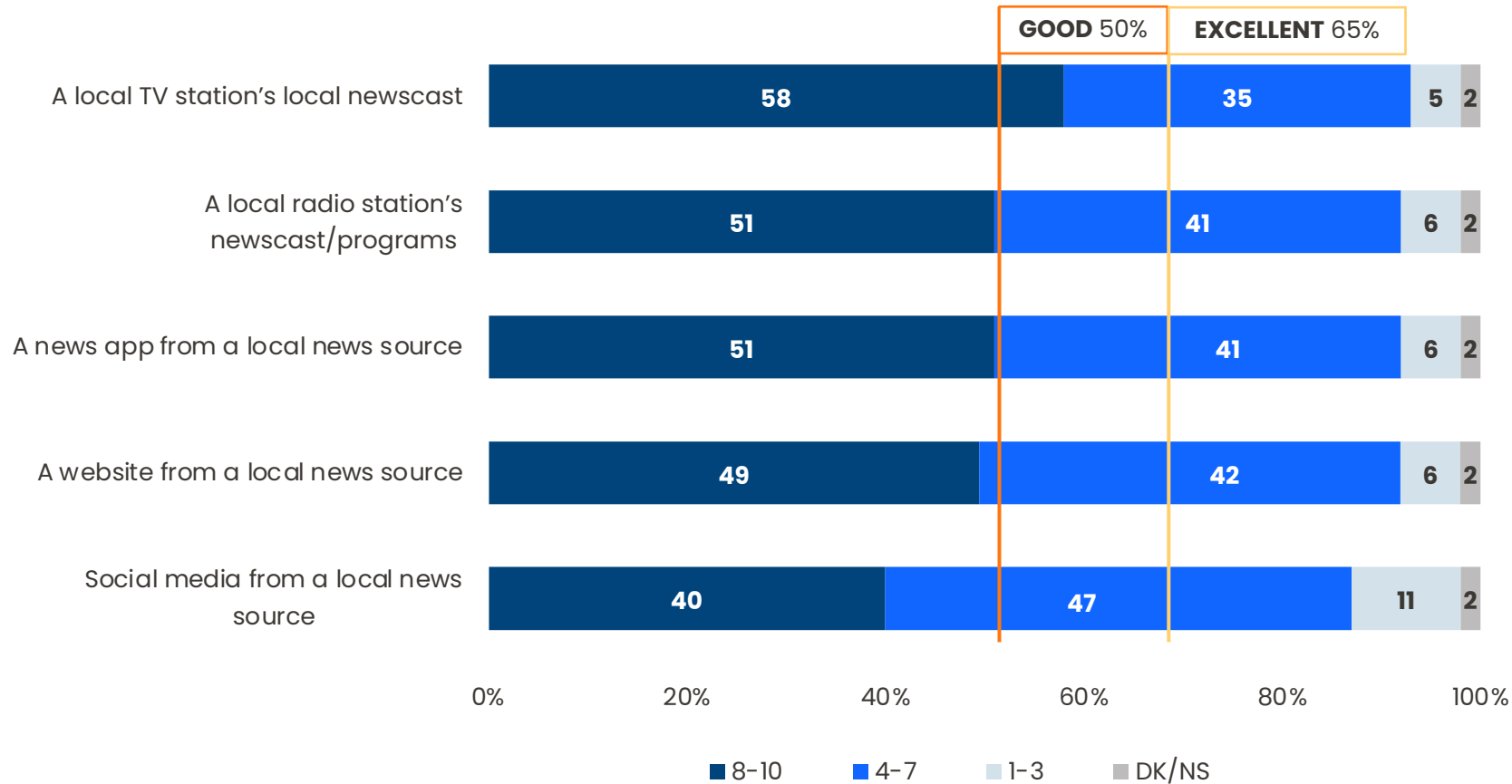
Local news consumption is healthy

DAILY+ USE OF LOCAL NEWS SOURCE



78% of the sample uses a local source daily (driven primarily by television and social media), putting the news consumer in a good position to evaluate local sources and local journalists.

Trust in local news is good...not excellent



50% (GOOD)

The average 8-10 score for all five platforms.

There are differences based on political affiliation:

Democrats: 60%
 Republicans: 48%
 Independents: 39%

Trust in local news is good...but fragile

% of respondents who say they've ever wondered if they can trust what they're getting from...



43%

WHY?

- They start to get "sensational".
- Political stories.
- They give opinions.
- Overly dramatic headlines.
- Don't show all sides to an important story.



48%

WHY?

- When they quote the big media firms.
- When reports don't use primary sources.
- They are giving completely different information than other local news.
- Political reporting.
- If they say something outrageous.



49%

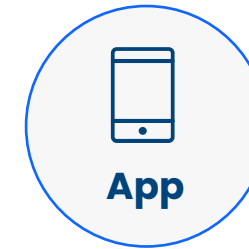
WHY?

- Exaggerate the news.
- Unverified information.
- Weather related news.
- Covering national news.
- Far fetched news stories.
- Story only has one side.
- Political stories.



50%

AVERAGE



56%

WHY?

- Stories seem outrageous or unbelievable.



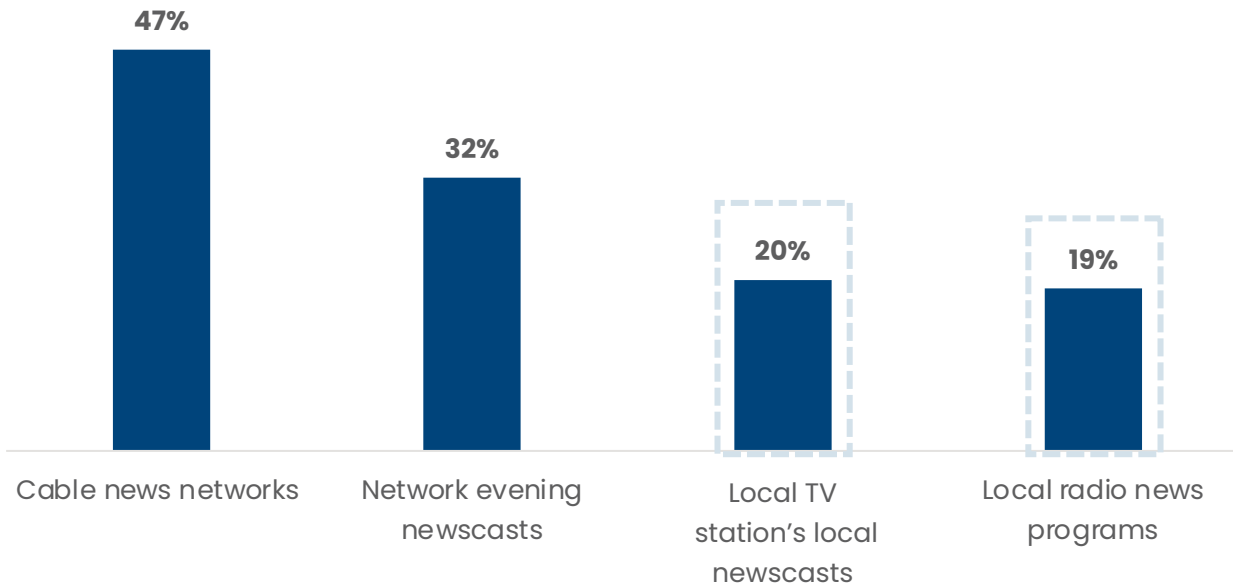
66%

WHY?

- When the stories seem outrageous or unbelievable.
- When that news feed is sponsored or backed by advertisers.
- When it comes to politics or world news.
- Leaning to one side.
- If the news didn't sound correct.
- If the story sounds sketchy.

1 in 5 say local news sources have “fake news”

SOURCES THAT HAVE “FAKE NEWS”



86% Recall hearing the term “Fake News”

What does “Fake News” mean?

“News you can not trust.”

“News stories that are not true.”

“Things reported in a slanted way.”

“News that pushes a false narrative.”

Every journalist counts... for better or worse

60%

Say if just **one** journalist from a local news source is not trusted, they would be **less likely to use the source** overall.

“Journalists are a reflection of the source they belong to.”

Why would you be less likely to use the source overall because of the specific journalist?

“If one is reporting badly, you can’t trust the others aren’t doing the same bad job.”

“One rotten apple spoils the bunch.”

“If they let the one journalist continue, then they must be okay with lies or opinions.”

“Might be just an example of a deeper problem with the source.”

“If they let one journalist spread lies, they would probably let all of them.”

WHAT BUILDS “TRUST” ?

Trust is built and broken in many ways



Respondents were asked about their level of agreement on a 10-point scale that the action could impact trust in local news.

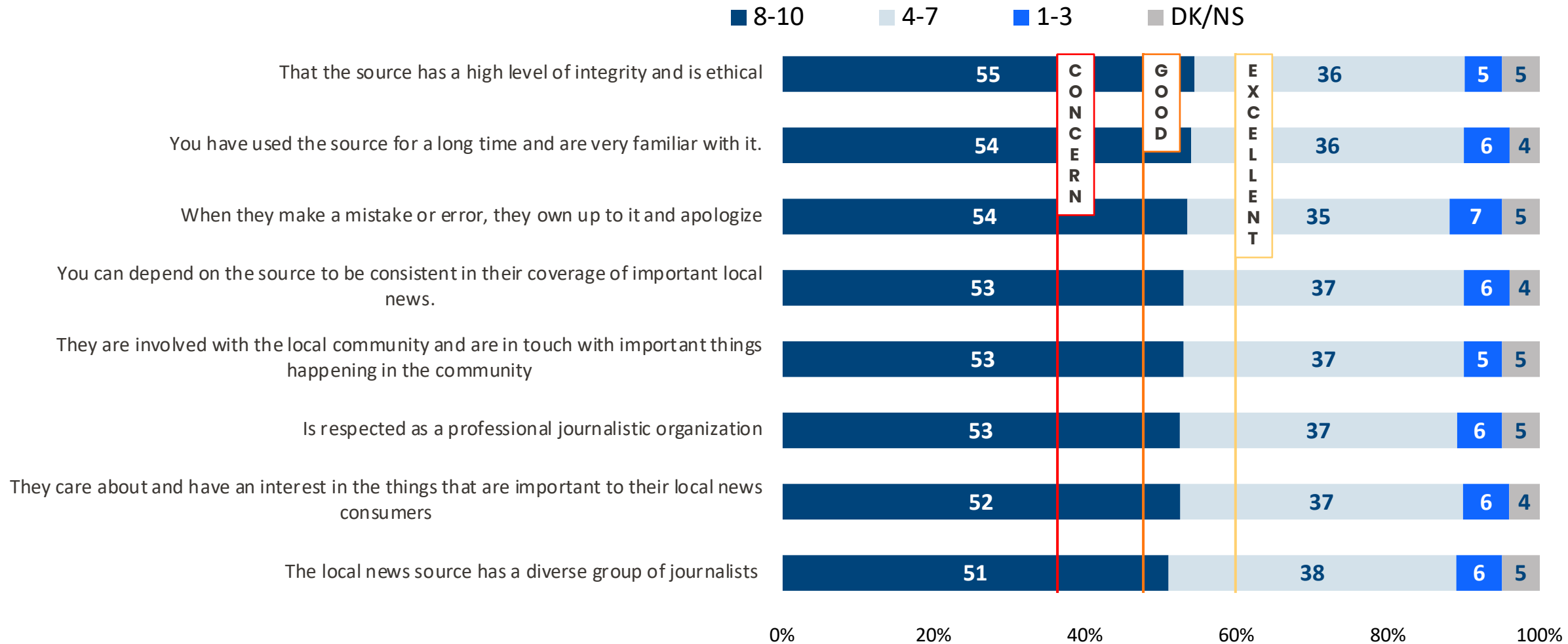
Excellent actions have 65%+ strong agreement (8-10).

Good actions have 50-64% strong agreement (8-10).

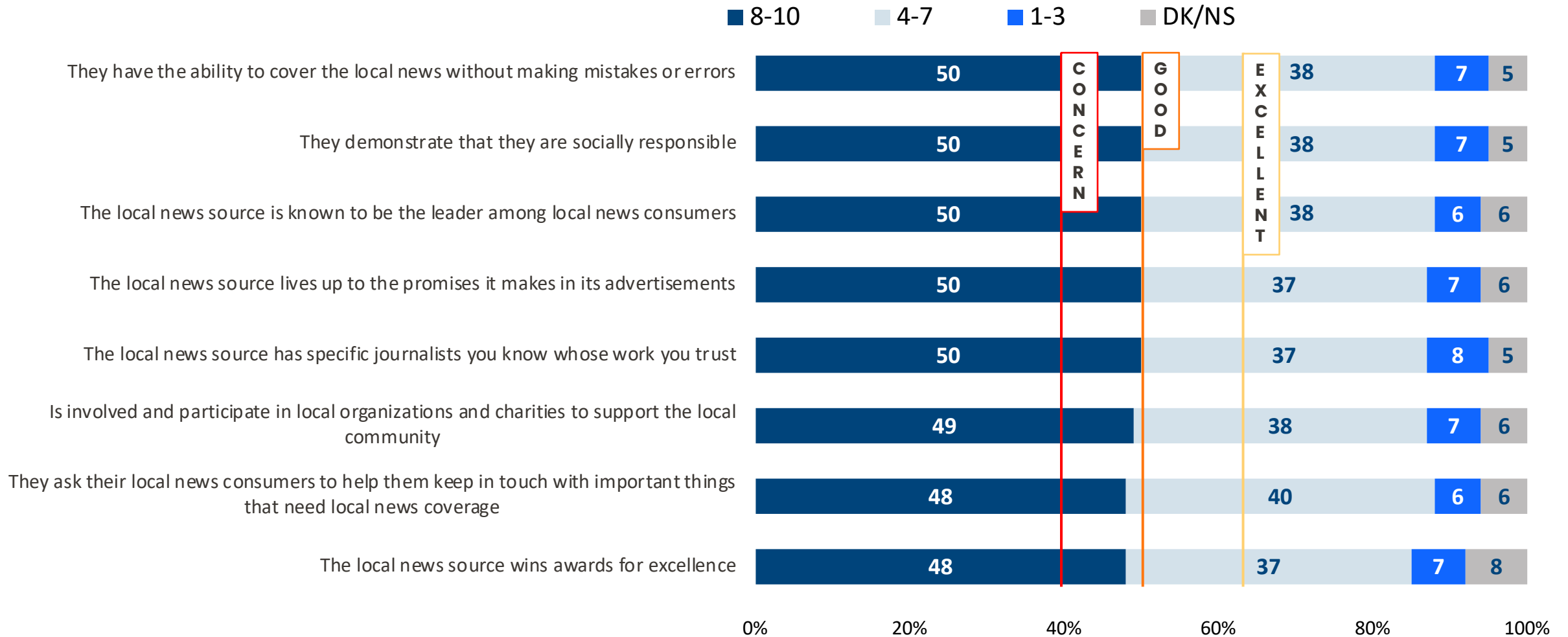
Concerning actions have 40% or less strong agreement (8-10) and/or a net score ($[8-10] - [1-3]$) below 40%.

Demographic segmentation shows some differences in the intensity but not the rank of the responses and with no meaningful exceptions.

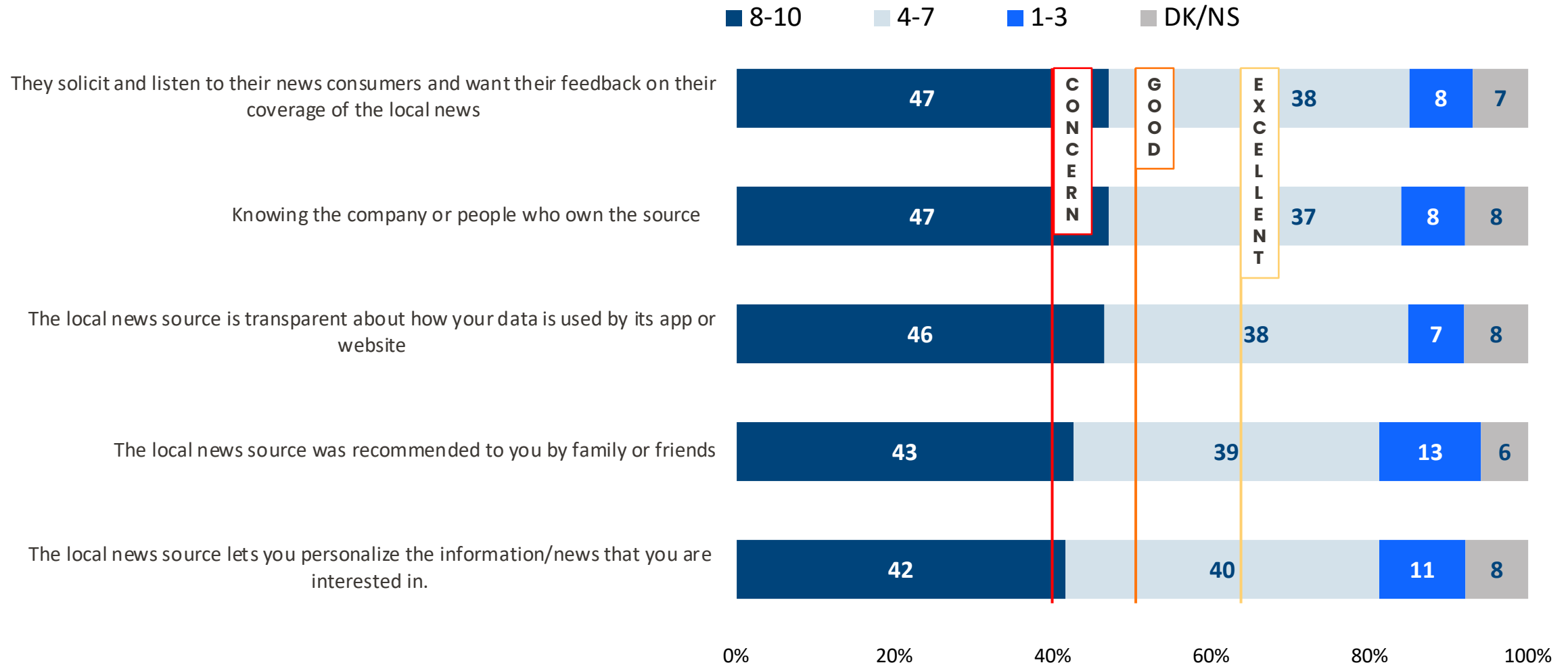
Trust actions for local news *sources*



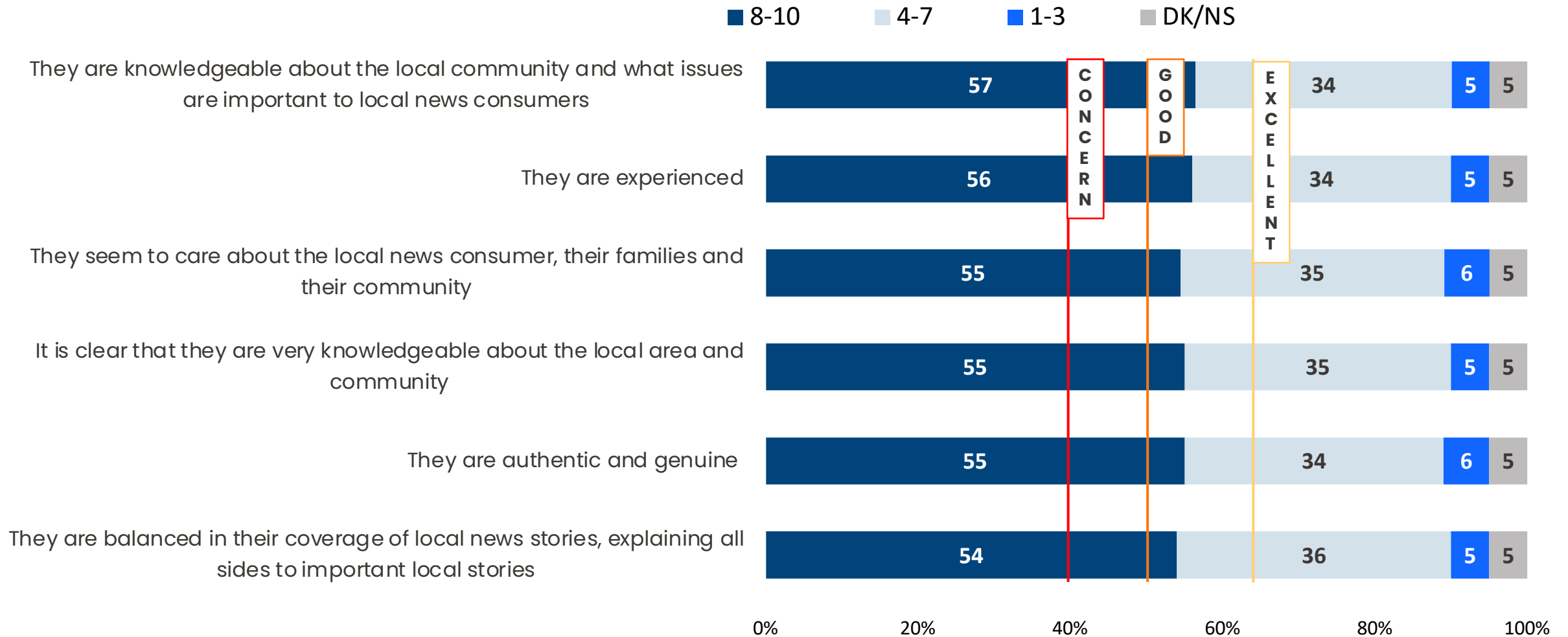
Trust actions for local news *sources*



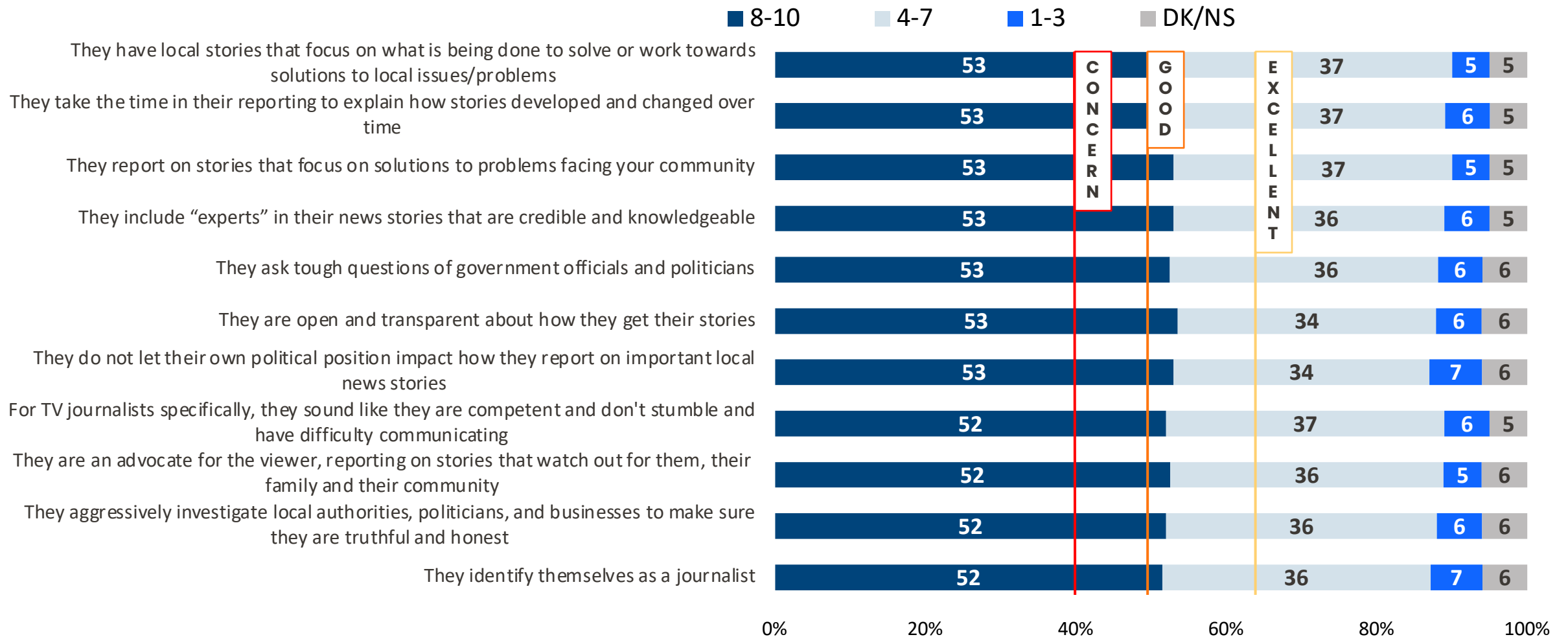
Trust actions for local news *sources*



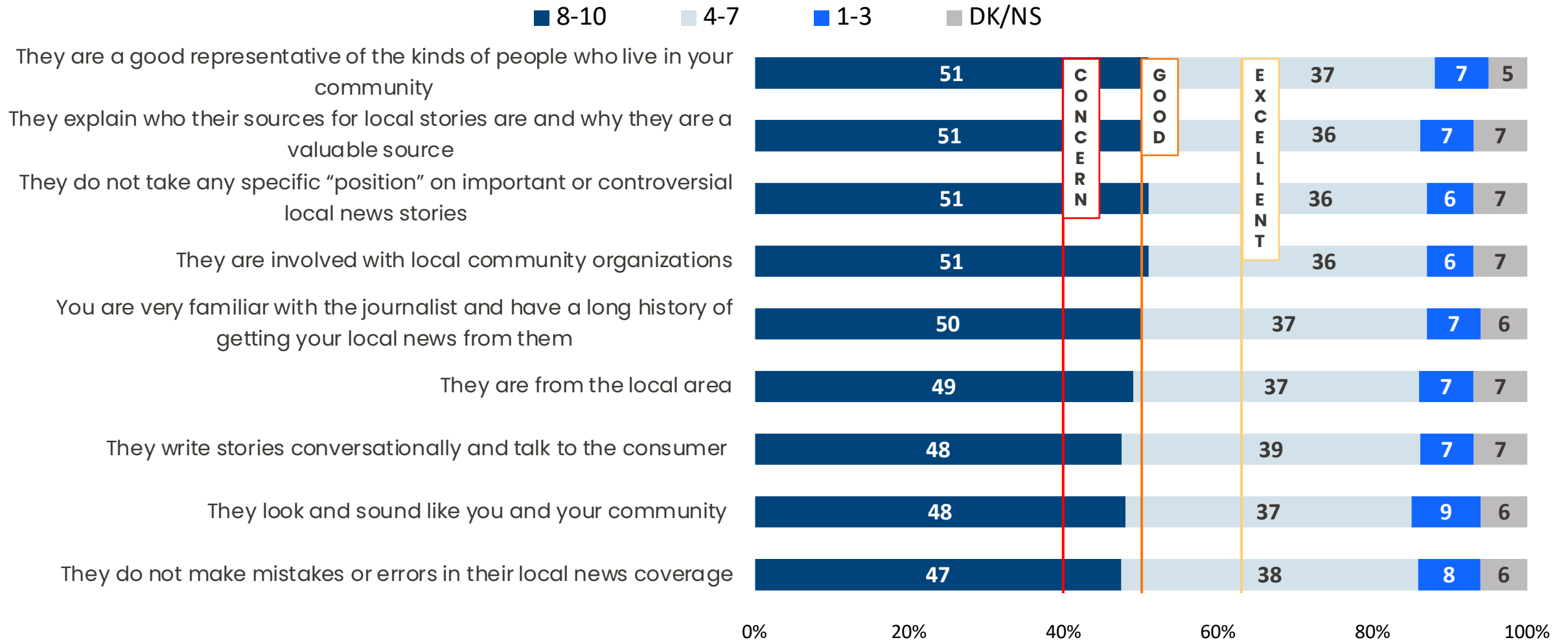
Trust actions for local news *journalists*



Trust actions for local news *journalists*

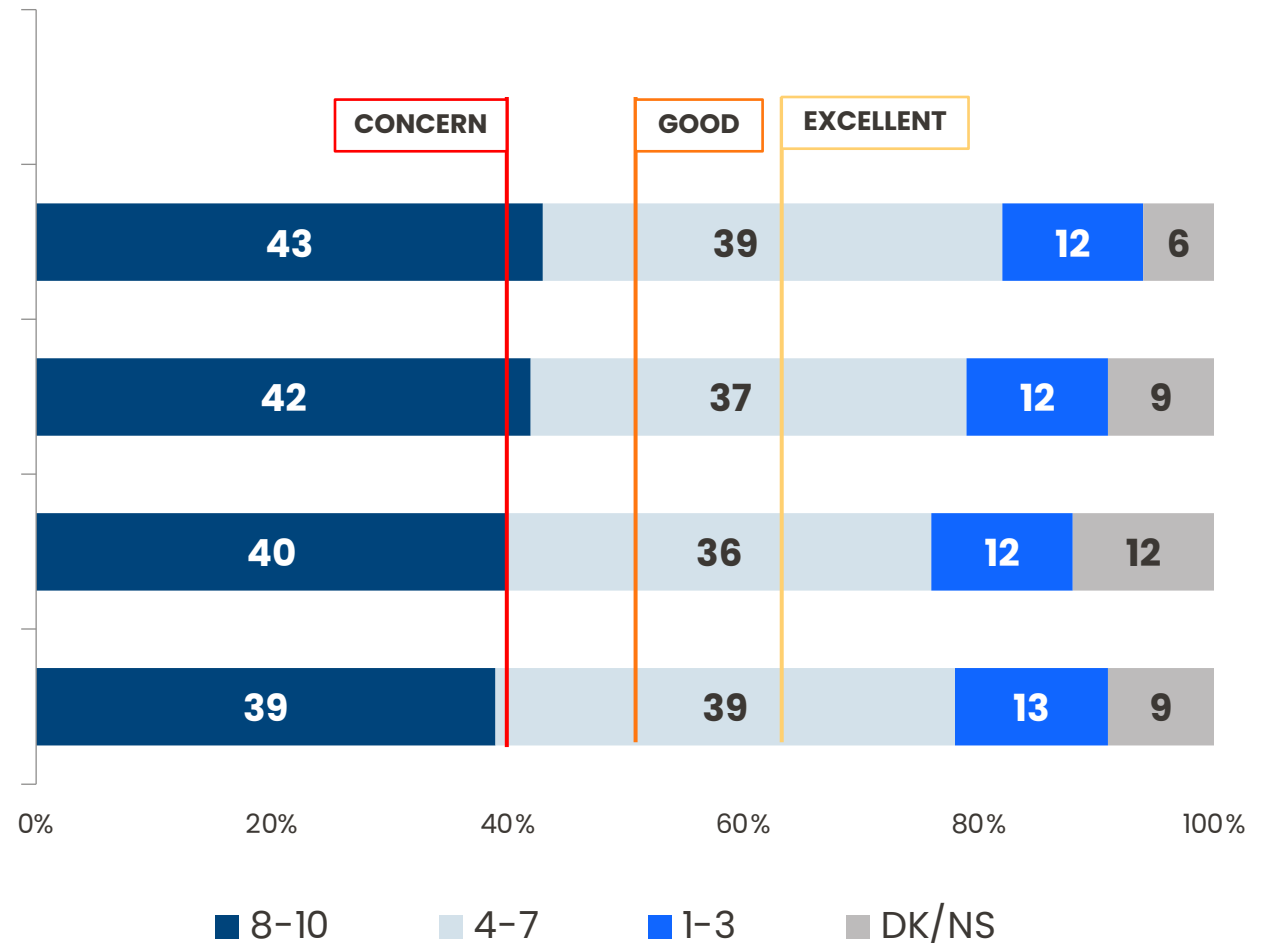


Trust actions for local news *journalists*



Risky actions with negative consequences

- They give their personal commentary on news stories
- They share their personal opinions, even about stories they're not covering, on social media
- They post personal information about themselves on social media
- They identify themselves as a storyteller



Gen Z and Baby Boomers had very similar responses to these issues, indicating agreement across all ages.

TAKING ACTION

Key takeaways

1

The state of trust

Local news sources and journalists will need to work aggressively to reinforce a good, but often fragile relationship with the audience. Local sources are in a better position than network and cable entities. But the current state of trust in local sources cannot be taken for granted.

2

Action items

Local news sources and journalists can target 28 things to work on to can help earn and build trust. This all comes before any promotional efforts are undertaken. With very few exceptions the sentiments are consistent across all demographic and ideological group.

3

Paths to pursue

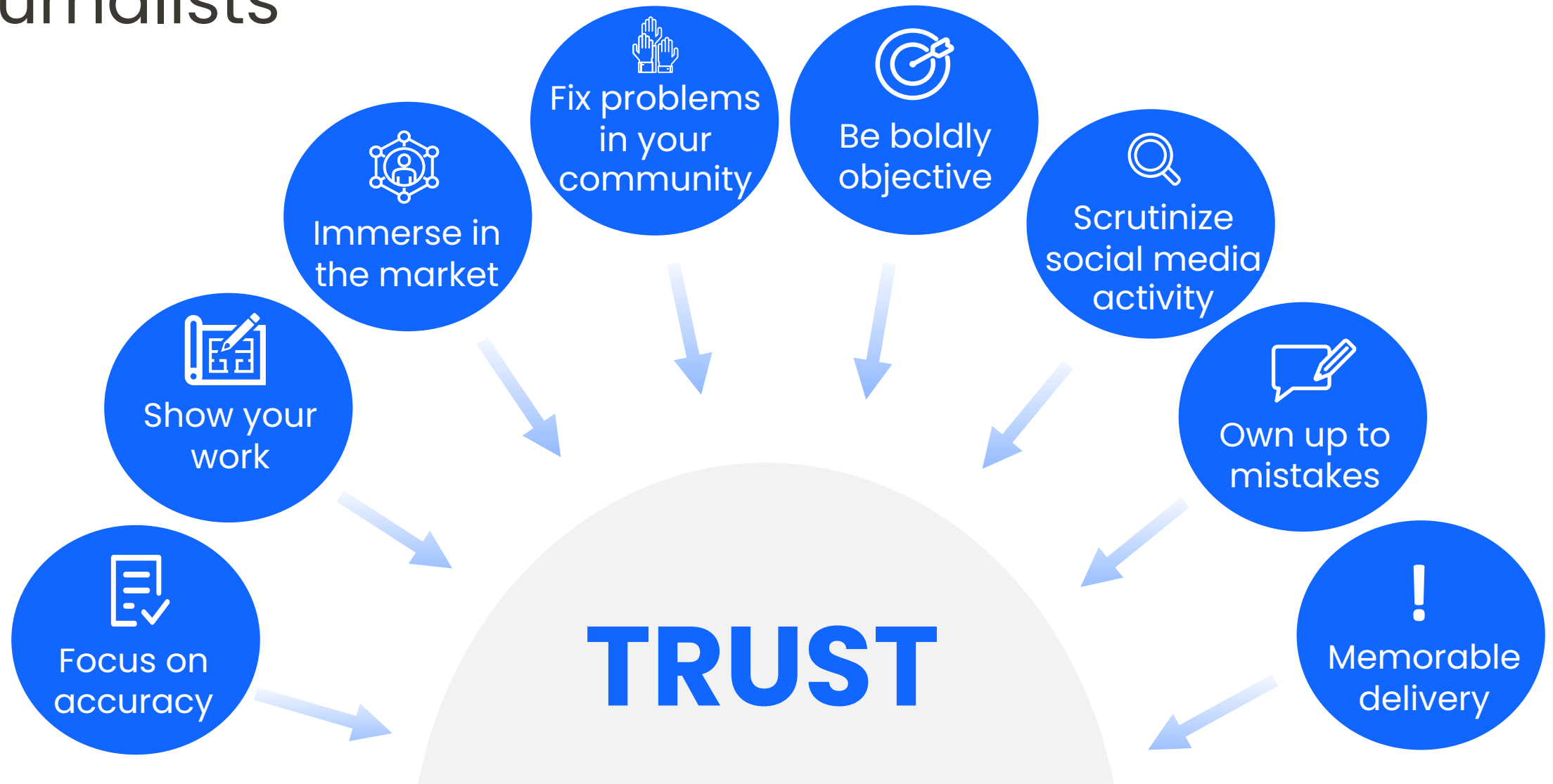
The action items represent a two-fold approach to cultivating trust. First are actions to demonstrate objectivity and accuracy. Second are actions designed to showcase the local news source and position journalists as real people who are truly connected to and invested in the communities they serve.

4

Social media struggles

While social media is a heavily used source for local news and information, it comes with a great deal of risk. Individual journalists risk harming themselves and their news organization with questionable posts containing personal opinions.

Action items for local news sources and journalists





Focus on
accuracy

Training, especially for new, inexperienced, journalists is essential.

Review internal systems in your newsroom to ensure a process for double checking the facts.

Be explicit about the credentials of the expert sources in the story.



Show your
work

Explain your work process as often and in as much detail as possible.

- Use process language/demonstrative storytelling to communicate how the facts were gathered.
- Let the audience see/hear you ask the tough questions.
- Think through your “tough questions” (Why are they “tough”?). Watch for an accusatory tone.



Show your
work

Communicate what's known and not known when a story is developing.

- Be clear about what you're doing to get more complete information.
- Communicate the reasons for changing facts in a story; be clear about the source(s) of the details.

Be transparent about your efforts to get in touch with someone. "Unavailable for comment" is rarely enough.



Show your
work

Be transparent about your decision-making, when the story you're covering or the way you're covering it is controversial.



Immerse in
the market

Journalists' onboarding needs deep training on local issues, culture, etc.

Ensure staff and leadership on-air and behind the scenes reflect the community you serve.

Understand what makes your local market unique.

- Learn how to pronounce the names of important people, places, local institutions, etc.
- Understand the key issues driving politics, the economy, and social issues.
- Network regularly; build relationships with local officials and community leaders.



Immerse in
the market

Assign journalists to “own” elements of your community.

Demonstrate experience & expertise with stories and/or a specific subject area.

- If you don't have a beat, consider giving yourself one to dig into.
- Keep following up on all your stories; push to advance them. Backsell previous stories.

Enlist local experts on important topics to be a part of your team.



Immerse in
the market

Use known and experienced journalists (many times the anchors) to cover important stories. Explain why they are best suited (i.e., experience).

Don't let new reporters just appear. Introduce them to your community frequently and in innovative ways.

Consider staying longer; time spent in a market has a direct impact on your value.



Fix problems in
your
community

Identify the most newsworthy and impactful problems in your community.

- Probe the causes and accountability through tough questions and deep reporting.
- Dig into and highlight the search for solutions.
 - Hold the powerful accountable to making improvements.
 - Spotlight those who are champions of change.



Fix problems in
your
community

Identify the most newsworthy and impactful successes in your community.

- Probe the causes with deep reporting.
- Get involved (sources and journalists)

Journalists and news organizations should get involved in activities (community organizations and/or nonprofits) that improve your community while remaining independent.



Be boldly
objective

Consider “balanced” coverage in different ways:

- Sharing differing opinions about a controversial topic.
- Probing the differing accounts of something that’s happened.
- Looking not only at problems, but also solutions or potential solutions.

Use overt language in transitions between the various sides to a story.



Be boldly
objective

Re-evaluate the need for systems to improve the vetting of content on all platforms coming from content services.

- Network affiliate services
- Content from owned and operated sister stations/organizations
- Wire service and other content providers



Scrutinize
social media
activity

Don't allow content on your business or private social media account to question your ability to objectively cover the news.

Do not post or interact with a social media post in any way that would communicate your personal opinion on a controversial topic.

Evaluate every individual post for biases; consider the image and the text independently. Each post and each component of the post must stand up to scrutiny on their own.



Scrutinize
social media
activity

Journalists should consider treating their personal social media accounts just as they do their work account.

Local news sources should reevaluate their overall social media strategy.



Own up to
mistakes

When a source or the public informs you about a mistake, thank them and promise to immediately inform your supervisor.

Corrections and apologies should be made swiftly and across all platforms.

Conduct a mistake post-mortem to determine next steps for addressing systems, training, and/or employee performance management.

Reevaluate internal systems designed to ensure content is accurate on all platforms.



Memorable
delivery

Local news sources should prioritize training, coaching, and feedback of the journalists' on-air presentation skills.

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