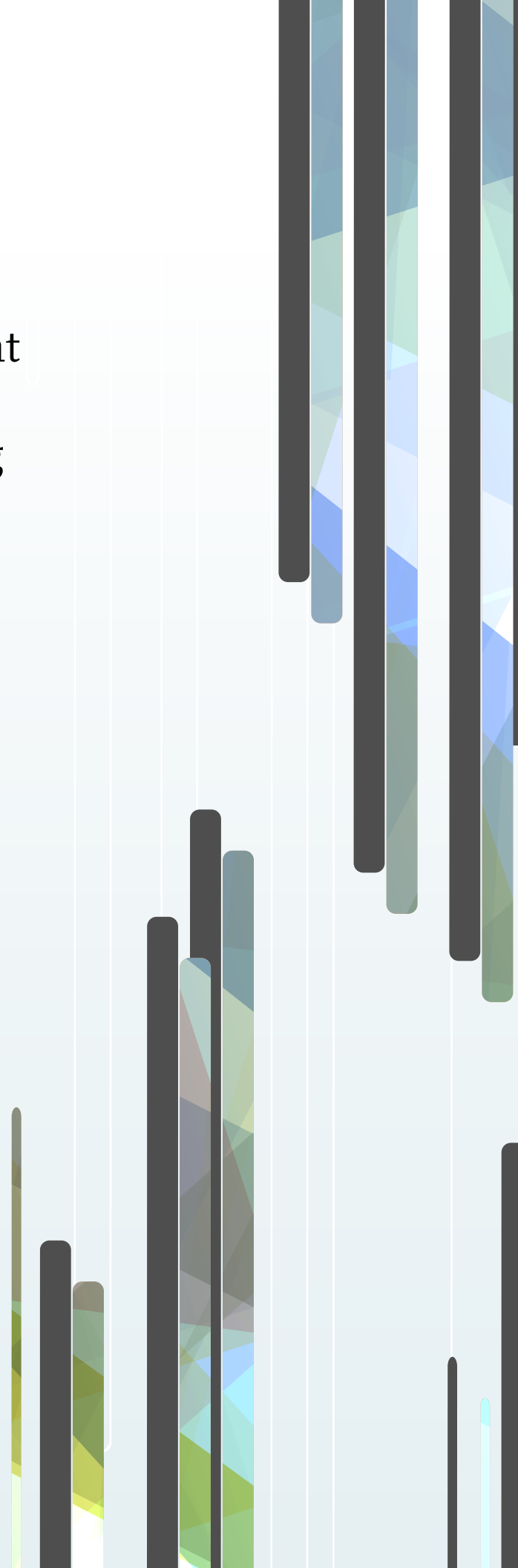


15 New CEOs, One Turbulent Year: The Top 50 Consumer Products Companies Bet Big on Rapid Change

2025 saw the highest CEO turnover in years for the consumer products industry: Among the industry's 50 largest companies, 15 new CEOs either started or were announced during the year. With new CEOs now leading about one-third of the top consumer products companies — well above the broader market trends in both the United States and Europe — 2026 and beyond promises to be a period of significant change for the sector.

So, what's driving this period of leadership change in consumer products? In this article, we take a close look at the data on 2025 CEO transitions at the world's 50 largest consumer products companies, examining the key factors behind the increase and what it means for leaders and boards going forward.

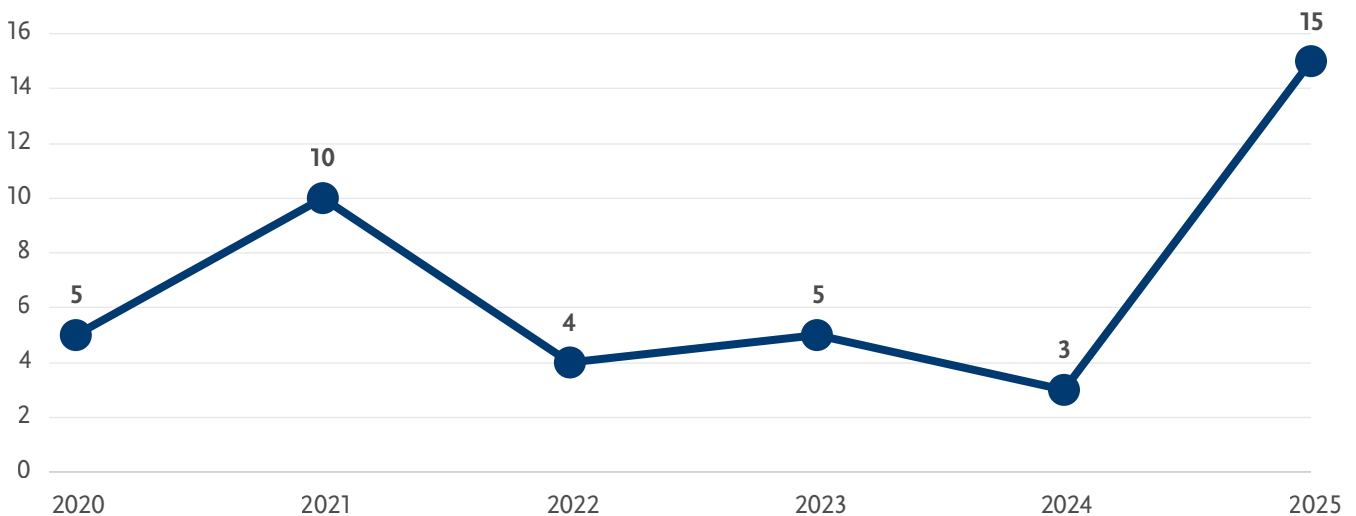


1. Consumer products boards feel pressure for radical action — now.

The fluid leadership situation reflects, in many ways, today's macroeconomic landscape, marked by greater market volatility, activist pressures, complex trade dynamics and economic uncertainty. In consumer products, declining sales volumes and cost inflation are combining with shifting consumer behaviors and rapid technological change. Amid shrinking margins and restless investors, it's not surprising that anxious boards see change at the top as a way to supercharge a transformation.

The pressure for transformation seems to be more acute in consumer products than in the economy overall; only 12% of the S&P 500 and 10% of the 590 companies in Europe's 13 major indices had CEO transitions in 2025, compared with 30% among the top 50 consumer products companies.¹

THE NUMBER OF CEO TRANSITIONS AMONG THE TOP 50 CONSUMER PRODUCTS COMPANIES JUMPED IN 2025



Another indicator of the pressure for change: Consumer products CEOs are leaving their jobs sooner than CEOs in other sectors. Average tenure at the time of departure among the 15 consumer products CEOs who left in 2025 was seven years, lower than the S&P 500 (8.4 years) and Europe (7.4 years). The industry's relatively shorter tenures is a sign that boards — even those of higher-performing companies — are more willing to act immediately when they see warning signs and are looking for leaders able to transform their businesses in a challenging environment.

Average tenure at the time of departure among the 15 consumer products CEOs who left in 2025 was seven years, lower than the S&P 500 (8.4 years) and Europe (7.4 years).

¹ Our research looks at the 50 largest consumer products companies in the world by market capitalization. The list includes 24 companies in the Americas, 20 in Europe and six in Asia Pacific.

2. Boards increasingly look to the outside for experienced leaders — and for a fast reset.

Five of the 15 new CEOs were external hires, continuing a trend from previous years. Each of the five previously served as CEO of a consumer-facing company — including one who was rehired by the company he formerly led — and each has a deep pedigree within consumer products.

MORE CONSUMER PRODUCTS COMPANIES ARE HIRING CEOs FROM OUTSIDE THE COMPANY

	% of CEOs hired externally					
	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Consumer Products top 50	33%	33%	20%	0%	10%	20%
S&P 500	27%	24%	24%	17%	21%	23%
Europe	57%	40%	42%	50%	51%	50%

Note: The data for Europe includes the 590 largest companies in stock market indexes for 13 different countries.

This is the second straight year in which one-third of transitions were outsiders, another clear sign that more boards are looking for proven leaders who can come in with a track record of high performance and successful turnarounds. The 2025 rate was also higher than the S&P 500, where 27% of new CEOs were outsiders, but well behind Europe, where 57% of new CEOs were external appointments.

When a transformation has stalled or cultural inertia is holding the company back, boards often view a CEO from outside as a change agent, bringing fresh perspectives and a plan to reset expectations, introduce new norms, elevate accountability and change entrenched behaviors. Experienced CEOs, meanwhile, come with a proven playbook, and may seem like a safer bet, given the scrutiny on companies today.

Will this trend continue? For the foreseeable future, the pressure on consumer products companies is unlikely to abate, so boards will continue to look for agile leaders who can drive innovation, high performance and change. But the pool of viable candidates with past CEO experience — and, in particular, a background leading a large consumer products company — is quite small. [Spencer Stuart research has found](#) that hiring an experienced CEO is by no means a guarantee of success.

Our analysis has found that the best candidate is situation-dependent. A CEO with prior experience may be the best option for turning around a poor-performing company or one rocked by scandal when their skills match the situation, [while a talented first-time CEO is more likely to deliver higher performance over time](#). Particularly in a sector where change is a constant, the playbook for success today is unlikely to be the one that works for the future. Boards should be ensuring the development of potential internal candidates with the capabilities needed for the future and building an understanding of the external talent market in and outside of the sector.

3. Succession planning matters more than ever.

The rise in externally hired CEOs suggests that some boards lack confidence in their internal candidate pool. Today, consumer products CEOs largely have marketing or sales backgrounds: Nine of the 15 new CEOs, including all of the externally hired CEOs, came up through marketing or sales. Of the 10 internally promoted CEOs, six were divisional P&L leaders, three were CFOs and one was COO.

In the context of challenges like sluggish growth, margin pressure, AI acceleration, brand reinvention, portfolio simplification and supply chain resilience, will the path to CEO need to change? In our experience, selecting the right CEO in today's environment isn't solely about operational excellence or steady hands. It's about resilience, reinvention and range. Rather than being overly guided by past-oriented criteria — such as sector expertise, a prior CEO role or a track record of financial results — companies will be best served when boards establish forward-looking criteria that reflect leaders' adaptability, long-term strategic vision, and their ability to problem-solve and engage the organization in sustaining transformation. Organizations can deliberately cultivate these leaders by giving them diverse, nonlinear roles and assignments that build resilience and adaptability, placing high-potential executives in unfamiliar contexts where experience alone won't suffice.

Boards today are more willing to act when they see warning signs of poor performance, but they can avoid being caught flatfooted by regularly evaluating CEO performance and maintaining a robust CEO succession plan. Most importantly, boards must be willing to move quickly when performance concerns arise, whether to replace the CEO or to intervene and recommit to the plan.

When the time for transition comes, boards should have both viable internal candidate options and insight into external talent market. This requires boards to define multiple future succession scenarios and the related characteristics and capabilities needed in the next CEO. When they build a relationship of transparency and trust, directors and CEOs can work most effectively together to turn high-stakes moments of transition into lasting impact for the business.



The consumer products industry's sharp increase in turnover signals boards' urgent demand for transformational leadership amid volatility. Prioritizing rapid action over gradual development, boards are seeking leaders with proven playbooks for success — even if they may be from outside the company.

Only 12% of the S&P 500 and 10% of the 590 companies in Europe's 13 major indices had CEO transitions in 2025, compared with 30% among the top 50 consumer products companies.



Authors

Gianluca Bianchi (Milan)
Frank Birkel (Munich)
Jim Citrin (Stamford)
Massimo Di Dia (New York)
Adeline Ducray (Paris)
Cassandra Frangos (Boston)
Jonathan Harper (London)
Rohit Kale (Mumbai)
Joe Kopsick (Miami)
Chris Lakens (Amsterdam)
Eric Leventhal (Stamford)
Silvia Molinaro (Milan)
Ricardo Rocco (Miami)
Heidi Sandreuter (New York)
Jwee San Tan (Singapore)
Greg Welch (Miami)

For more information about Spencer Stuart's Consumer Products Practice, please [visit our website](#).

About Spencer Stuart

Privately held since 1956, Spencer Stuart is a leading global advisory firm specializing in people, team and organizational performance — spanning more than 60 offices, over 30 countries and more than 50 practice specialties. Boards and executive leaders consistently turn to Spencer Stuart for senior-level executive search, board recruitment, board effectiveness, succession planning, executive assessment and development, culture change and performance acceleration for senior leadership teams. For more information on Spencer Stuart, please visit www.spencerstuart.com.

