

## The Language of Trust

In his thought-provoking book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam shows how Americans have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors and social structures over the past 25 years. He also flags another societal development – the decline in trust people have in each other. As Putnam sees it, once-familiar phrases such as, “Don’t trust anyone over thirty,” were more than just catchy slogans. They were accurate indicators of changing attitudes held by some young people.

Today, the issue of trust has taken center stage. In particular, the spotlight is on some of our best-known and most important institutions.

Following this year’s unprecedented meeting of American cardinals in Rome to discuss sexually abusive priests and related cover-ups, the largest and most influential non-governmental institution in America, the Catholic Church, is experiencing a crisis of confidence.

And church leaders are not the only ones with a credibility problem. In light of Enron, Tyco, Global Crossing, Adelphia and WorldCom, distrust in corporate America is on the rise. A January 2002 *Business Week*/Harris poll found that the percentage of Americans who have “hardly any” confidence in business leaders nearly doubled to 24 percent from 13 percent in 1999.

As our parents taught us, trust is earned, and once lost, is hard – though not impossible – to regain. Restoring trust in corporate America will not be easy. In large measure, success will depend on how business addresses a variety of issues: how earnings are reported, how executives are compensated, how corporate boards are chosen – to name a few.

When it comes to trust, actions speak louder than words. Someone who lies, cheats or steals is a liar, cheater or thief, respectively. And no words – however effectively delivered – can change that fact. But words matter. And honest people with poor communications skills sometimes undermine their credibility. Perception is reality. In this article, we’ll examine the link between language and trust. Communicating trust is a skill – one that can be learned.

## The Scientific Side of Trust

The overriding goal of any communication is to establish trust. If your audience doesn’t see you as trustworthy or credible, you won’t get your message across or be able to address their concerns. Trust, credibility or believability is overwhelmingly determined in a specific part of the brain – the non-rational or emotional part.

The human brain is incredibly complex, but one way to look at it is as a two-part structure:

### Emotional Brain

- Brain stem and limbic system
- Non-reasoning part

### Rational Brain

- Cerebral cortex
- Seat of conscious thought, memory, language, creativity, decision-making

When most people communicate, they aim their message at the rational part of their audience’s brain. In other words, they rely on logic and common sense to move someone to action – e.g., learn something, believe something, do something, buy something. And while our goal must be to reach this rational part of the brain, our message first must pass through the emotional part of the brain.

In the spoken medium, if you want to get your message across, you must reach and connect with the emotional part of the brain. You have to convince this part of the listener’s brain that you are trustworthy.

As Bert Decker says in his book, *You've Got to be Believed to be Heard*, "The emotional judgment that is formed in your preconscious mind about the speaker determines whether you will tune in to his or her message – or tune out. If you don't believe in someone on an emotional level, little if any of what they have to say will get through. It will be screened out by your distrust. . . Even if the facts and content are great by themselves, they are forever locked out because the person delivering them lacks believability."

To test this theory, ask yourself how you reacted to the following individuals if you saw and heard any of them on TV recently: Kenneth Lay, Andrew Fastow, Jeffrey Skilling, Sherron Watkins (all of Enron); Bernard Ebbers, Scott Sullivan (both of WorldCom); Martha Stewart.

## The Components of Trust

Research conducted by Susan Santos provides some valuable insight into trust.

### What Makes a Source Credible?



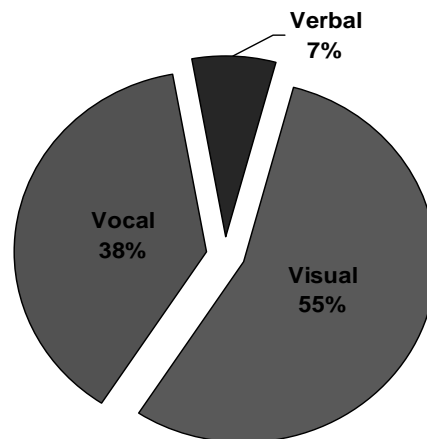
- Empathy/caring account for half of a person's credibility, and is assessed in the first 30 seconds. That's why, for example, it's critical for a company spokesperson to express sorrow or concern when there's been an injury or loss of life in an accident. When delivering a business presentation, a speaker demonstrates empathy/caring by addressing the informational needs and wants of the audience.
- The other three components account for 15-20 percent each. Competence/expertise: What is your knowledge level? Honesty/openness: Do you appear remote or guarded? Do you take questions? Commitment/dedication: Do you care about or believe in what you're discussing?
- Technical training tends to drive out empathy/caring. (Hence, all the jokes about engineers and computer nerds.)
- Women are automatically perceived as having a high degree of empathy/caring, but need to work on projecting competence/expertise.
- Men are automatically perceived as having a high degree of competence/expertise, but male communication patterns generally don't exhibit empathy/caring.

UCLA Professor Albert Mehrabian also has examined trust. According to Mehrabian, a spoken message has three components: verbal (the words you use to express your ideas), vocal (how you sound) and visual (what people see).

### Components of a Speaker's Believability

A spoken message is made up of three components:

- Verbal (the words you use to express your ideas)
- Vocal (how you sound)
- Visual (what people see)



- Visual and vocal components account for 93 percent of believability, the verbal component a mere 7 percent. (The verbal component refers to the words you use to express your ideas, not to the ideas themselves. Poor ideas, delivered in a visually and vocally appealing manner, do not necessarily generate believability.)
- When trust is low and concerns are high, non-verbal cues will override verbal cues (what people see says more than what you say).

### Communication Pitfalls That Undermine Trust

In recent years, much has been learned about communication that undermines trust, credibility and believability. According to the most current research, here are the pitfalls to avoid:

#### Failure to Listen

Most of us spend 70-80 percent of our waking lives communicating, and nearly half of that time (45 percent) is spent listening. But we are poor listeners; we listen at an efficiency rate of only 25-50 percent. One reason for this is that the average person speaks at a rate between 150-200 words per minute (WPM), but we can hear at a rate of at least 600 WPM. That leaves a lot of time for our minds to wander. Another reason is that when someone is talking, most of us are thinking about how we're going to respond.

Listening is hard work. When you listen actively, your pulse goes up and you breathe faster. To listen effectively, and to show your audience that you are listening:

- Take notes.
- Repeat or paraphrase what the speaker has said.
- Ask the speaker to clarify or elaborate on what was said.
- Don't interrupt.
- Look at the speaker.

## **Jargon/Lack of Clarity**

If you've ever watched the TV show *ER* or *NYPD Blue*, you've probably been frustrated when you couldn't understand some of the language being used. Most of us incorporate the specialized vocabulary of our profession into our communication. This can be very difficult for an audience that isn't familiar with the terms you're using. Moreover, audiences are generally suspicious of people who lapse into jargon. For example, doctors who fail to explain things in layman's terms rarely inspire confidence.

- Define all technical terms and acronyms.
- Use language that can be understood by a 12-year-old, or is four grade levels below the average education level of the audience.

Particularly troublesome forms of business jargon are the popular, but often meaningless, misleading or inaccurate, statements, expressions and euphemisms of “corporatespeak” typically found in news releases, ads, speeches and other corporate communications: The ad that states Company XYZ is “the leader” or “the premier firm” in its field. The news release that says Mr. Big “has left the company to pursue personal interests.” The internal memo that says Mr. Bigger will now be in charge of “special projects.”

- Communications that carry real weight in the marketplace and with other audiences must be substantive, and must illuminate not obfuscate.
- Tell the truth. Back it up with supporting facts. Don't hype the truth.

## **Personal Attacks**

Americans have made it clear that they are tired of personal attacks in political campaigns. *Argumentum ad hominem* – using race, gender (and sometimes the character) of a person is never a legitimate argument, and it destroys the credibility of the person using it. Organizations, not just people, can also be the targets of personal attacks.

- Address the issue, but don't attack the person or the organization. (For example, your view of an environmental organization may be that it's a radical group made up of hippies, lawbreakers and publicity-seekers, but when you talk about the organization, you need to describe it as one whose tactics and proposed solutions are well intentioned but misguided.)

## **Humor/Sarcasm**

We've all seen speakers try to use humor in difficult or uncomfortable situations. Frequently it's done to break the ice or as a defense mechanism when dealing with skeptical or hostile audiences.

- Use humor in difficult situations only if it is directed at you.
- Never use humor when dealing with sensitive issues such as health or safety.
- If you use sarcasm, you may cause its target to lose face, and you risk having the audience see you as mean-spirited, and empathizing with your opponent.

## **Technical Details & Debates**

At times, people are confronted by others who disagree about the facts of a situation – whether global warming exists, whether a particular drug or medical protocol is safe, whether an historical event actually happened. Lengthy discussions or arguments rarely enhance credibility, and frequently erode it.

- Avoid too much detail.
- Don't be drawn into protracted, technical debates.
- Focus your remarks on factors that bolster credibility: empathy, competence, honesty, dedication.

## **Shifting Blame**

Some people say America has become a society where people refuse to accept responsibility for their actions. Who's responsible for cigarette-related illnesses? Tobacco companies. Who's responsible for obesity? Fast-food companies. Who's responsible for societal violence? Hollywood. Who's responsible for hot-coffee burns? McDonalds.

- Don't shift blame or responsibility.
- Remember that there's a difference between blame and responsibility. You can accept responsibility without accepting blame. (Although it was a victim and blameless, Johnson & Johnson accepted responsibility for the Tylenol poisonings. In contrast, Bridgestone/Firestone and Ford initially refused to accept responsibility for the deaths associated with the Ford Explorer.)
- Take responsibility for your share of the problem.
- Acknowledge mistakes. (This writer received a letter from management at his health club that began as follows: "Recently we announced an incentive for those members who nominate 10 new members into the club between June 1, 2002, and May 31, 2003. After careful review, we have concluded that the program was flawed and we had made a mistake.")

## **Temper**

- Keep your composure – no matter what!

## **Broken Promises**

- Do what you promise.
- Don't make promises or commitments without strict deadlines. Then meet those deadlines.

## **Organizational Identity**

The public tends to see large corporations and other organizations as uncaring, faceless entities.

- Put a human face on your organization.
- Issuing a press release is preferable to saying nothing, but having a real person talking on camera is the best way to make your communication personal.
- Avoid words such as "the corporation" or "the company." Instead, use your company's name along with "our company" and "we."

## **Non-Verbal Messages**

Non-verbal cues – tone, volume, gestures, posture, eye contact – often tell us whether to trust someone. Remember the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon presidential debate? Those who watched it on television believed that Kennedy won, but radio listeners felt Nixon won. Actually, Nixon had more experience and more foreign affairs knowledge than did Kennedy. And on radio, Nixon sounded fine, but on television he looked sweaty, shifty-eyed, unshaven, uncomfortable. Kennedy looked handsome, tanned, friendly, composed.

- In part, your audience will judge your credibility on your degree of interest in the outcome. (A neutral party with nothing to gain is more credible; a person who knowingly acts against his own interest is the most credible.)
- Truthful people speak with expression and animation. Halting or slow speech communicates exactly the opposite.
- When appropriate, smile. We tend to trust a smiling face implicitly. (George Rotter, a psychology professor at Montclair University, cut out yearbook photos of college students and then asked people to rate the individuals for trustworthiness. In almost every instance, people chose the students with smiling faces as the most honest.)

- Face your audience directly with a forward and open posture. Avoid crossed arms and the “fig leaf” stance.
- Make sustained eye contact: deliver one complete thought to one pair of eyes for 5-10 seconds. Repeat this process.
- Avoid delivering presentations in a darkened room, and where the focus is on your visuals. In every presentation, you are the message, and being seen means you are willing to be judged for trustworthiness.
- Encourage and take questions from the audience. When doing so, come from behind the lectern and approach the audience.
- Never leave a public meeting early.

## Other Trust Generators

Effective communication is regularly cited as one of the most important contributors to success in business. What are some other communication strategies you can use to promote trust?

- **First and foremost, communicate.** Many companies clam up when the news is bad, but this is a time for more, not less, communication.
- **Communicate in person.** Some experts cite the decrease in face-to-face communication (and the increase of less personal forms of communication, such as E-mail) as a contributing factor in the erosion of trust. When possible, meet face-to-face with employees, customers, vendors, analysts and other key constituencies. Video or Internet conferencing, is an effective alternative.
- **Encourage/facilitate two-way communication.** The best kind of communication is two-way. But it takes on added importance when people are not sure what or whom to believe. Ramp up or begin formal and informal mechanisms to get feedback and input – surveys, Q&A sessions, suggestion programs, town hall meetings, etc.
- **Increase your employees’ financial acumen.** Most employees have little or no knowledge of finance and accounting. Yet recent events have propelled these topics to the forefront. Take advantage of this development by offering a workshop or seminar that shows employees how to read an annual report, including a balance sheet and income statement. Or offer employees a primer by providing them with a pamphlet or booklet on the topic. What better way to generate confidence in your own numbers than by providing employees with the means to analyze those numbers.
- **Utilize credibility transference.** You can enhance credibility by coordinating your activities or forming alliances with other credible sources. (Sears did this when it added name brands such as KitchenAid and Whirlpool to its product line. K-Mart did this when it selected Martha Stewart as its spokesperson.) For example, issue joint communications with other sources. Quote supporting statements made by other credible sources, including:
  - Local citizens who are perceived to be neutral, respected, and well informed about an issue.
  - Professors (especially senior professors from respected local universities).
  - Physicians and other health professionals.
  - Law enforcement officials.
  - Not-for-profit organizations.
- **Get out into the community.** Don’t just donate money to worthy organizations in your community. Find opportunities for some of your employees to get in front of groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club, etc. Remember that hourly and middle- and lower-management employees often are perceived to have more credibility than does senior management.
- **Recognize advertising’s limitations.** Paid advertising is generally useful for large markets consisting of multi-thousands of purchasing influences, but it has less credibility than other communication tools, such as editorial coverage.

