

A DIFFERENT ANGLE ON: TRUST OR WHY NO ONE BELIEVES YOU ANY MORE.

TRUST ME, PLEASE...

If you want to communicate, you have to inspire trust. But when everyone says they can be trusted, who do you believe? As the clamour of self-proclaimed credibility increases, we are becoming more sceptical. They can't all be right. We mistrust the media, the politicians, the big companies, and even the doctors.

So what chance have we got in B2B – where it's more important than ever to explain, to educate and to convince? How can we avoid the traps of mistrust, and create communications that are perceived as authentic, useful and actionable by our target audiences? How do we convince people who are determined not to believe what we say?



TRUST IN THE AGE OF HYPERCONNECTION

We have never had such easy access to information as we do today. Never have so many people been able to create and distribute their version of the truth. The result is wild rumour and speculation, with the naïve reader vulnerable as never before. Whether it's conspiracy theory or debates around enviro-scepticism or creationism, facts are becoming fiction, and fiction is replacing the facts. We are assailed on both sides by contradictory arguments – leaving us little option but to believe no one...

Why today's children are learning to distrust

For the first time, children are being taught in schools to question their sources: to develop the skill of critical judgment. Just a generation ago, the only access that children had to information was through sources approved by schools and parents. It was trusted because the distribution of information required expensive infrastructure, whether that meant a printing press or a TV network. Now everyone is a publisher, and everyone can go straight to YouTube with their version of reality. It's not just about learning facts, but learning whether to believe them.

IN SEARCH OF CREDIBILITY

Our growing tendency to mistrust our sources is part of a vicious circle. The speaker struggles to convince his or her listener, and is therefore encouraged to do one of two things: shout or lie. This in turn stretches the gap between the real and the reported, as people are compelled to exaggerate and embellish. Hyperbole has become the only way to keep up – or so it seems.

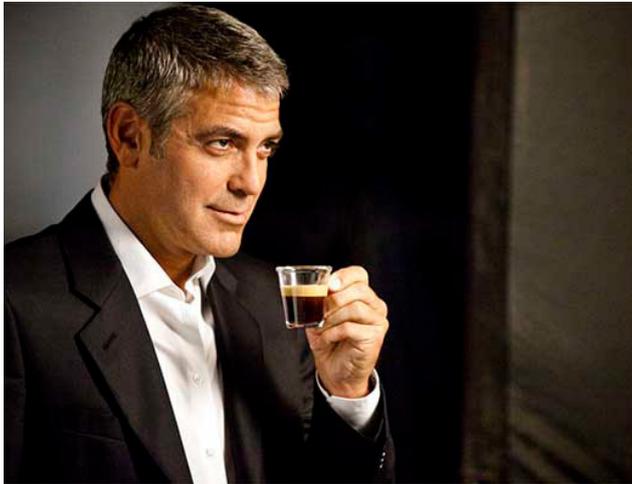
So in a world where everyone seems to be either sugar-coating the facts to make them acceptable, or hiding them altogether, how do we find the truth? One of our intuitive reactions has been to turn to those that we already know and trust – ie our immediate social circle. The creeping sense of doubt is giving rise to a tribe mentality, because only our faith in our trusted inner circle can prevent a general mistrust of everyone and everything they say. This is one of the reasons for the rise of social media as a primary information source.

While Google may often be demonized for the way it influences opinions simply by prioritizing one website over another, it is increasingly aware of the trust we place in the people we know, and search results are linked to data about our social circles. Facebook plays the same game, by promoting not just the advertiser's product, but the friends who have used it, thereby enabling the brand to enjoy a reflection of the trust you place in that friend. But can this work in B2B?

CREDIBILITY IN B2B COMMUNICATION

While the general lack of credibility has created mistrust in the minds of consumers, the ad men have known about it for years (and indeed probably helped to start it). But their solution was not to try and convince people – but to seduce them instead. They don't sell the product, they sell the dream. It may be unattainable, but because the dream exists in our own minds we are only deceiving ourselves. We won't become as cool as George Clooney by drinking Nespresso, and Lancôme fragrances won't give us the allure of Julia Roberts. But we want it so badly that we allow the notion to tempt us.

But B2B is so different. Dreams don't make a company buy new machinery – and this is why B2B communicators are so keen on cracking the credibility code. They live in a world where they have to put forward a clear differentiation, supported by practical information and rock-solid arguments. If you are going to talk about innovation, technical superiority, quality or reliability you need one thing first: credibility.



CONSISTENCY AND AUTHENTICITY FIRST

It's sometimes useful to look outside the world of B2B to better understand how to solve our challenges within it. Why does the Pope Francis have such an adoring and infatuated following? Why does Donald Trump have so many US voters behind him? Why does a brand like Ben & Jerry's still inspire such loyalty from consumers? Three wildly different examples teach us the same simple points: they are all authentic and consistent – and therefore credible.



Trump's extraordinary statements do not alienate his followers because they are in line with everything else about the man. From his outrageous behavior and opposition to the mainstream to his eccentric hairstyle, he is consistent and authentic. Pope Francis, at the other end of the spectrum, washes refugees' feet, drives a second-hand Renault 4L and talks quietly and humbly about the importance of basic

Christian values. Ben&Jerry's, for its part, has consistently worn its hippie heritage on its sleeve, with its irreverent, homegrown Vermont personality, its commitment to social responsibility and uncompromising product quality. All different, but all consistent and authentic.



Wolfgang Griepentrog, an expert in this field, talks of the central three prerequisites of trust in a person (or a brand): sincerity, transparency and authenticity. These conditions are enhanced by the presence of other attitudes (or weakened by the lack of them): fairness and respect, reliability, control, professionalism, responsibility, restraint and courage. If these qualities are present, the result is credibility.



7 WAYS TO BUILD CREDIBILITY IN B2B

How can we apply this in practice to the context of industrial marketing? We believe there are 7 points to consider which will help build sincere, trusting relationships with internal or external audiences:

■ Content

What are we really saying? Is it worth saying? For that matter, is it worth listening to? Be careful not to lose their attention by saying too much. Sometimes, stepping back to consider the essentials of the message will increase the clarity and authenticity of what you're saying.

■ Facts

We can't help wanting to embellish the truth. But unsupported claims and empty promises do nothing but dilute the information. Only the facts remain – be brave!

■ Emotion

A rational message might be understood, but will it be believed? Tell the story, apply a personal touch, explain how it feels. This is not unnecessary embellishment, it is presenting the facts in a way that are readily absorbed.

■ Ethics

Your readers are perceptive – and they will spot platitudes and falsehoods a mile off. Don't try to be everything to everybody, and don't allow yourself to be led into saying what you think the world wants to hear. Stick to your beliefs and values, and you will gain respect for it – even from those who disagree.

■ Consistency

We send a lot of messages – and whether they are verbal or visual, they need to converge to create a consistent sense of our identity, our value and our skills. In the concerto of daily life, every note counts and every false note counts twice. The more we are consistent, the more we have a chance to be trusted. Thorough branding is a powerful tool to align messages internally and externally.

■ Respect

You don't have to shout, and you don't always have to rail against the competition. A sense of measure and humility goes a long way, especially when combined with respect for opinions other than your own.

■ Authenticity

Be yourself. Never hide. There is nothing more powerful to create trust and credibility than letting no doubt about who you really are. Origin, history, intentions, grit ... brands are looked upon like humans. And the better you are known, the more likely you will be forgiven smaller hiccups.

CONCLUSION

We live in an age of doubt by default: unless you are known and trusted, you are unlikely to be believed, and nowhere is this more important than in the information-heavy, high-risk world of B2B. However, trust can be built – but only on solid foundations of consistency and authenticity. More than ever, B2B marketers are investing in careful branding. Having a consistent, honest, considered brand reputation is the starting point for the credibility that will lead to preference, and in turn to commercial success.

Why it's important to take a different angle

We hope you enjoyed our different angle on this important subject. We published it because the internet appears to be full of copycat content, echoing the same mainstream opinions, and we felt it was time for something different. We're an industrial marketing agency that likes to stand out in our world of B2B marketing, so we felt we shouldn't be afraid of stating our views. If you would like to read more, please subscribe or get in touch. We'd love to know what *you* think.

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