

Establishing Automatic Trust

Trust is critical in persuasion. Unfortunately, we live in a day and age when people are more skeptical and mistrustful than ever before. Twenty years ago, the mindset was: “I trust you; give me a reason *not* to.” Now the mindset is: “I don’t trust you; give me a reason why I *should*.” You could say trust is at an all-time low and still falling. Gone are the days when there was a baseline of trust, no matter where you were coming from. A Gallup poll found that the majority of people feel you can’t be too careful when dealing with others. Another study found that only 4 percent of respondents felt complete trust in any of the persuaders they had conducted business with in the last twenty-four months.

What does this mean for you as a persuader? It means you cannot assume that people trust you. This assumption is one of the most common persuasion mistakes. Many persuaders think that because they are friendly or good at helping people feel comfortable, they will automatically be trusted. Studies show that nothing could be further from the truth. One study conducted by the Persuasion Institute monitored persuasive situations and then asked both the prospects and persuaders how much trust was established between the two. Only 12 percent of the prospects trusted their persuaders, while 88 percent of the persuaders felt they had established trust with their audience. It is safer to assume that your audience lumps you in with the rest of the world that they don’t trust. Don’t take for granted that trust exists. You must work to earn and develop a trust that is instant, genuine, and lasting. The bottom line is great persuaders establish instant trust.

It’s no use carrying an umbrella if your shoes are leaking.

—IRISH PROVERB

You can have the greatest product in the world, but if there is no trust, there is no persuasion. Trust can be an ambiguous concept, but certain things are quite clear: 1) You can’t get others to trust you unless you first trust yourself; and 2) your message will not be convincing to others unless it’s convincing to you.

Whenever someone tries to influence us, in our minds we ask ourselves, “Can I trust this person? Do I believe him? Is she really concerned about me?” We are less likely to be influenced if we sense that the person trying to persuade us is driven solely by self-interest. Trust is the glue that holds the entire persuasion process together. Trust is created when you put your audience’s interests and wants before your own. Many times trust comes when your audience feels you are predictable. For some people, trust is a leap of faith; they simply want and need to believe in the persuader’s intentions. Research shows that, deep down, people want to trust others.

If you can’t assume that your audience automatically trusts you, then your next focus should be on how to acquire this sense of trust as early on in the persuasion process as possible. To do this, it’s helpful to understand how trust works. Most people can’t explain why they trust certain people more or less than others. Usually there is not a lot of rational thought behind it; more often, it is an instinct or feeling about the particular person. Your audience will feel you out, trying to discern whether or not they can trust you and how much. Remember it is a sliding scale. This means that you want to be perceived as trustworthy right away, before your audience members even know you (because, fair or not, they’re already making judgment calls about you at this point). Then, you can demonstrate that this trustworthiness is genuine through your correspondence and interactions. Gaining and keeping trust for both the short term and the long term is vital to your success as a persuader.

There are some instances in which the importance of trust is magnified even more. Being aware of these situations can help you devote more effective attention and energy to establishing and developing trust. Consider the following situations:

- It is the first time you have met someone.
- There is misunderstanding or misconception about your industry.
- Your audience has never heard of your product.
- Your company is unknown to your audience.
- Your audience considers the purchase price to be expensive.

- You or your company makes the first contact.
- The company you represent has a poor history.
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Trust is also magnified or diminished based on your occupation or profession. For example, medical professionals enjoy higher trust levels than lawyers do. An individual's general trust of a certain industry or profession is dictated not only by experience, but also largely by rumor and reputation (especially if they have had no direct experience with that industry). The Persuasion Institute conducted various polls in which the general trust levels of different professions were surveyed. In a five-year time period, we saw that the trust level generally fell across the board by 5.6 percent. Trust levels in some fields stayed the same, while a few actually experienced small gains.

Here are the Persuasion Institute's most recent findings on profession-based trust levels. Remember it does not matter if these numbers are fair, we deal with reality. The scores are based on a 100-point scale.

Occupation	Trust Level
Firefighters	65%
Nurses	58%
Schoolteachers	57%
Engineers	56%
Accountants	55%
Pharmacists	54%
Professors	53%
Dentists	52%
Veterinarians	51%
Police	50%
Clergy	49%
Small business owners	48%
Medical doctors	47%
Chiropractors	46%

Judges	43%
Daycare providers	42%
Military officers	41%
Funeral directors	38%
Bankers	37%
Nursing home operators	36%
Real estate investors	35%
Business executives	34%
Computer salesman	33%
Real estate agents	32%
Home repair	31%
Building contractors	30%
Jewelers	29%
Auto mechanics	28%
Labor union leaders	27%
State governors	26%
Lawyers	25%
Journalists	24%
Large corporations	23%
Television news	22%
Gun salesmen	21%
Insurance salesmen	20%
Advertisers	19%
Stockbrokers	18%
Network marketers	17%
Members of Congress	15%
Car salesmen	7%
Telemarketers	6%

All things being equal, people will do business with, and refer business to, those people they know, like, and trust.

—Bob Burg

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