

Your Credibility

“One can stand as the greatest orator the world has known, possess the quickest mind, employ the cleverest psychology and have mastered all the technical devices of argument, but if one is not credible one might just as well preach to the pelicans.”

– Gerry Spence, trial lawyer

Daniel O’Keefe defines credibility as “judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator.” Edward Murrow also said, “To be persuasive, we must be believable. To be believable, we must be credible. To be credible, we must be truthful.” Credibility is in the eye of the beholder and it is a quality that is constantly changing. In fact, your credibility can shift from high to low in the same presentation with the same audience. Credibility can also alter with respect to time, presentation or somebody else’s opinion.

Three stages of credibility present themselves during any persuasive encounter:

1. Initial (Pre) – This stage of persuasion happens before you even open your mouth. How you are introduced, your reputation, the books you have written, your degrees, etc.—all of these things create initial credibility.
2. During – This stage of the persuasive process includes everything you say during your speech. This type of credibility is similar to a thermometer—it will rise and fall throughout your presentation.
3. End (Post) – This stage of persuasion is your credibility at the end of your speech. Did you win your audience over or not? Are they even more convinced than they were before you began?

To boost your credibility, find out who your audience knows and respects. See if you can get that person’s endorsement, either in person or in writing. Master Persuaders know that it’s OK to borrow the credibility of others. When you gain this type of support, your audience will consider you to be even more credible. If you are a known expert in your

field, be sure to communicate that you have studied it, researched it and met with its other experts. Also, be prepared to drop the names of people your audience will recognize.

Another way to boost your credibility is to present yourself in a calm, organized and authoritative manner. Being overly emotional or flustered throws your credibility out the window. Consider the most highly successful attorneys or CEOs. No matter how rushed or pressured they are, you don't ever see them running into the room, slamming their stuff down on the table and throwing themselves into their chairs. No! They are absolutely composed at all times. That's because they must always convey an air of authority and control. Jury studies show that lawyers who appear well organized are thought of as being more thorough and better prepared than their disorganized counterparts, which of course increases their credibility.

An important issue to consider is how involved your audience is, emotionally or otherwise, in the topic you're going to present to them. If they are highly involved, you will have a harder time gaining credibility—unless, of course, you're telling them what they want to hear! An audience with low involvement in a particular issue is more likely to defer to other sources (including you) because such deferment requires less mental strain or emotional investment than trying to figure it out for themselves.

It's generally harder to gain credibility nowadays than it ever has been in the past. Most consumers are fairly sophisticated and have grown cynical from all the exaggerated and unsubstantiated hype that is being thrown at them. People who feel that they have been burned in the past have developed thick skins to almost every persuasive message they are exposed to. In fact, according to the Pretesting Company, advertising's overall impact in the United States has gone down from 61 percent in 1986 to 38 percent today. Here are ten ways in which you can increase your credibility in spite of all the skepticism:

1. Be sure your appearance is polished and professional. How do you look, dress and appear to your audience? Do you appear self-assured and in control of the situation? Do you maintain good eye contact?

2. Use highly credible sources, facts, statistics and stories to back up your claims. Cite evidence, identify sources and give source qualifications. Write and publish relevant articles or publish a book.
3. Research your audience. Be sure you explain the issue in terms that are relevant to them. Demonstrate that you have their best interest in mind.
4. Explain your background, expertise and qualifications so your audience knows why you have the credibility to speak to them on this particular subject matter. Display or promote your qualifications as a means of conferring your status and expertise.
5. Adopt a language and style that is suitable to the listener, the topic and the setting. Watch vocal fillers like um, er and ah. They detract from the message and your credibility. Use assertive language.
6. Emphasize your similarities in a way that makes them relevant to your audience. Listeners find it easier to identify with sources they perceive as similar to themselves. Use similar industries, colleges, home states, professional sports teams—anything that will strike a chord of familiarity (a technique that breeds instant rapport) in your prospects.
7. Have another highly credible individual (in the eyes of your audience) introduce you. Testimonials substantiate your expertise. Find third-party testimonials that endorse your position.
8. Be prepared, be organized and know your position. Make that great first impression. Make sure your presentation is rehearsed and polished. Educate, inspire and entertain with passion, compassion and purpose.
9. Make sure any printed material or literature you will be handing out has been carefully proofread and presented in a neat and professional manner. Nothing detracts from your credibility more than sloppy supplemental material. Make sure all your material is appropriate and understandable.
10. Be prompt. People who are always showing up late are considered less competent, less composed and less sociable than people who arrive on time.

