



Sales & Marketing



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by Christine Alemany

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Illustration: Nata Schepy

It is no big secret that our world has a trust problem. Amid a global pandemic, economic crisis, and political instability set against a backdrop of deep cultural malaise, people no longer know where (or whom) to turn to for dependable information amid widespread disinformation and propaganda.

Similarly, government leaders, briefly seen as the most trusted institutions at the beginning of the pandemic per the 2021 Edelman

Trust Barometer, squandered that goodwill when they could not halt the virus or restore economic stability. And per the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in U.S. CEOs is at 47%, and credibility has basically hit rock bottom in Japan (18%) and France (22%) as consumers wake up to the indignities and absurdities of unfettered capitalism.

Yes, trust is in short supply, yet it remains a vital currency in sustainable customer relationships. A 2021 survey of 1,000 consumers concluded that more than 80% consider trust a deciding factor in their buying decisions, despite the fact that only 34% trust the brands they use. Consumers, of course, are not a monolith. And as it so happens, age is a key differentiator in understanding the intricacies of the public's confidence in and perception of the news media, in particular.

Per a Gallup/Knight Foundation survey, older Americans tend to rely on *maybe* one or two sources for all their information, and they prioritize brand reputation and political slant when evaluating an outlet's credibility. Conversely, younger adults (18- to 34-year-olds) are more likely to gather information from numerous sources and place more of a premium on how open that outlet is with its facts, research, and processes.

Younger consumers also view national news outlets with more skepticism, with just 29% saying they trust them compared to 41% of adults over 55. A credible media landscape is always critical, but with the line between marketing and media blurring each day, news organizations' morale fiber can sometimes be linked to that of a brand.

To summarize, older adults are more brand-conscious, while younger adults are more process-conscious. As marketing experts, we can apply

these findings to our brand messaging to develop credibility with our intended audiences as they age and evolve. Here is how.

1. Do not overspin.

Though Edelman found that trust in CEOs hit an all-time low in 2021, the same study revealed that businesses are still considered more trustworthy than governments, NGOs, and the news media. With such power comes great responsibility. CEOs and other business leaders must address today's most pressing challenges and focus on societal engagement with great fervor. According to the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, 53% of respondents believe that business leaders have a duty to fill the information void left by the news media.

This is not the time for corporate platitudes. People are smarter than you think. If you attempt to fool them, they will find out — and the hit to your credibility will outweigh any short-term gains that you made.

Think back to summer 2020, when PR teams across industries jumped to distribute public denouncements of systemic racism. People were quick to call out the performative allyship of companies such as Glossier, whose public anti-racism pledge was at odds with former employees' recounts of on-the-job discrimination and toxicity. So make sure you back up any announcements with actual steps. For example, Ben & Jerry's is not one for empty promises, and its statement on racial injustice held a lot more weight because company leaders have a track record of on-the-ground activism.

Keeping your message free of excessive spin goes a long way with the public and protects you from potential PR gaffes down the line.

2. Avoid half-truths.

Pfizer has been in the news a lot this past year — mostly for good reasons. CEO Albert Bourla and his team cleared myriad hurdles to develop an innovative, effective Covid-19 vaccine in record time. But back in 2006, Pfizer was in the news for less-than-glowing reasons after launching a \$258 million ad campaign for a cholesterol drug with Robert Jarvik, inventor of the first permanent artificial heart, as the face of it.

The tagline — “*Just because I’m a doctor doesn’t mean I don’t worry about my cholesterol*” — was catchy, but there was one problem: Jarvik was not licensed to practice medicine and, in fact, had *never* practiced medicine. The ads drew swift criticism that resulted in a congressional investigation and millions in monetary losses for Pfizer.

In the court of public opinion, omission is akin to lying. If a claim requires omission, then do not use it; and if you do make a mistake, own up to it. In fact, you may find consumers more forgiving if you show any semblance of contrition. Being vulnerable about where you have fallen short in the past suggests honesty, which sits at the foundation of consumer trust, brand affinity, and long-term engagement.

3. Read the room and adjust.

When was the last time you checked the pulse of your customer base? You should be continually evaluating the effectiveness of your marketing efforts by asking yourself these key questions:

- What is our customer sentiment? Negative? Positive?
- What are our favorability ratings? Are they rising? Dropping?
- Is our audience engaging with our content?
- And did we follow through on our promises?

By regularly checking whether consumers are picking up what you are putting down, you will find that you can more easily meet and even exceed their ever-evolving preferences. For example, [Bryanna Evans](#), the social media manager at home fragrance brand SECC, told Buffer that her team's social media-powered strategy focuses on in-feed customer engagement. Not only does the social team respond whenever someone leaves a comment, but it also nurtures consumer interest by regularly posting quizzes, contests, and giveaways. As a result, SECC has built an army of loyalists and grown its monthly revenue from \$20,000-\$30,000 to more than \$100,000.

The fight for consumer trust is ongoing — and it will not be going away anytime soon. But savvy marketers can use authentic brand messaging to engender stronger customer relationships that stand the test of time. Implement these three steps to begin building a reputation as a reliable information source that people depend on.

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