



The power of authenticity: Building trust in business

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When people consider working with a business today, they look for several things. They want to be sure the company is capable, that it's affordable, that it's experienced, but more than anything else, they want it to be authentic.

Authenticity is important for prospective customers to develop trust in a company. They need to trust that your company is who you claim to be, that the products or services you offer will address their needs as well as promised, and that your people will not deceive them or treat them poorly.

You may believe all those things are true and assume everyone else is aware of that, but the reality is people don't automatically award trust to companies. It's something you have to earn, and it's earned in many different ways. (And if you're saying you're business-to-business marketers or don't sell directly to customers, never forget you're not selling to companies — you're selling to people at those companies, and people behave as consumers even when making business purchases.)

Trust is more important than ever before. Why? Consider how much hype and misleading information we're all subjected to every day. Think of how wary you are in your own dealings with companies. You may think well of a vendor, but you probably don't trust them implicitly until they've had the opportunity to prove themselves. Well, people look at your company the same way.

So how can you capture the kind of authenticity that tells the world you, your team, and whatever it is you offer are the real deal? Not surprisingly, it starts with clear and honest communication. Instead of hype, overpromising, or making exaggerated claims, present your business and what it offers in simple, straightforward language.

If your website and other materials talk about your values and how eagerly you embrace them, make sure your team really lives up to them. It's critical that your employees understand and embody your company's values, because their interactions with customers either enhance or degrade your brand's authenticity.

When something goes wrong or there's bad news to share, acknowledge it promptly and candidly. Take responsibility instead of shifting the blame to someone else. People understand that nobody and no company is perfect, and most are only too willing to extend grace to you, but only if you're willing to admit your faults and work towards solutions. And by the way, they don't care how it happened, they just care that you have implemented preventive measures for the future.

Your messages and stories should be authentic, too. When you're talking about your company and its journey, it's okay to share challenges along with successes. If you're not afraid to own up to things that didn't go well, customers will trust what you have to say about the good times. A great way to build authenticity is to share stories about your employees, because their work is usually the most visible symbol of your company. Don't be afraid to share personal details because it's normal for us to seek connections. For example, mentioning that someone is a runner will make other runners think more highly of them — and by extension, your company.

Never make the mistake of assuming you're smarter than your customers. Companies are often so eager to create an image of expertise that they unwittingly talk down to customers or are guilty of using detailed engineering jargon. Even if you know a customer knows less than you about something, treat them as a peer.

The best way to create and enhance your company's authenticity is to ask the two groups with the strongest opinions about it: your customers and your employees. Actively seek and listen to their feedback. Provide multiple opportunities and avenues for them to share their thoughts and impressions with you. When you do, speak to them in their language so they know they've been heard and understood.

We've helped clients better understand how the world really sees them by interviewing both customers and employees. We ask about their impressions of the company and their relationship with it. We seek to learn what matters most to them. We summarize their words anonymously in reports, with recommendations for simple steps to address opportunities for improvement.

If you make the effort to seek input, don't make the mistake of brushing aside what they tell you. Address their issues promptly and respectfully. Prove you value their input through your actions and are committed to resolving any problems they cite. Deepen your authenticity and their trust by being candid about what you've learned from them. "It was tough to hear, but we appreciated feedback as to how we sometimes fall short of your expectations regarding X or Y."

Finally, sharpening your authenticity and building trust isn't a one-time thing. The steps I've described here should lead to powerful and positive changes in your philosophy and approach to what you do. Your customers and employees will notice ... and you will too, especially when it comes to the bottom line.

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