

Be Credible: A Key Tactic of Persuasion

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If you want to persuade a reader to do something, you probably focus on how you will write the appeal, but you can increase your likelihood of success long before you ever craft your message.

The ability to influence an audience begins in what is called the pre-persuasion phase, when you create an atmosphere for persuasion to occur. This is where you can strengthen your credibility in the mind of the audience, which can be a significant factor in your effort to persuade. In *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle said a communicator must be a person of good character because credibility is “the controlling factor in persuasion.”

Credibility is an audience’s judgment of whether or not you are an honorable, believable person. Psychologists have found that people judge credibility according to certain attributes, such as whether the person is knowledgeable, trustworthy, or attractive, whether the person is of a high social status, or whether the person is similar to the audience. Credibility is important because people often decide how to respond to a persuasive appeal based not on the content of the message but on whether they consider the communicator to be credible.

If you are not perceived as credible in the eyes of your audience, whether they are colleagues or strangers, you can strengthen your image. Here are suggestions, based on how people judge credibility:

Expertise

Become an expert in your field, because people are persuaded to do things for people or organizations they view as subject matter experts, according to social psychologists. The first place millions of Americans turn to for insight on a product before buying it is Consumer Reports. It does its own independent research, accepts no corporate funding, and carries no advertising.

Deep knowledge and first-hand experience are key elements of expertise, which is why few people are so respected on military matters as Colin Powell: a highly educated and decorated soldier who rose to become a four-star general.

Jay Conger, an expert on executive leadership, says managers can deepen their expertise by researching extensively and by asking to be on project teams where they can learn more about a topic.

Cite respected sources

Including significant facts, statistics, and insight in a persuasive message helps to convey expertise, but going a step further and citing the sources of that evidence “appears to enhance perception of the communicator’s expertise,” says Dan O’Keefe, a psychologist at Northwestern.

It can be particularly helpful to include sources that the audience views as authoritative.

Trustworthiness

Be fair, honest, tolerant, and respectful of others’ views. Be genuine. Authenticity and sincerity are directly related to judgments of credibility. The tone of the communicator, in oral speech or in writing, can influence the audience’s.

Be friendly and helpful

While expertise and trustworthiness are more directly linked to judgments of credibility, there also “soft sell” qualities, such as likeability, says Anthony Pratkanis, a psychologist at the University of Southern California. By being friendly and helpful to someone, that person will consider you more likeable, and people are persuaded to do things for people they like.

Let’s say you work with a colleague whom you don’t like. You don’t share the right chemistry, yet you need to get along with her because you need to collaborate to be productive. Try finding similarities that you share. Perhaps you like the same restaurants, the same social activities, or the same sports. Maybe you face similar parenting challenges, or you majored in the same field of study.

By finding similarities, you begin to build a bond based on things you share in common, and it is more difficult for someone to be unfriendly or resentful if she views you as a fellow team member.

If your colleague needs a favor, be helpful, because you will increase the likelihood of success if you need to persuade her to do something or to accept your ideas in the future. That’s because people feel obligated to repay favors. Reciprocity is a well-established principle of social psychology.

Ken O’Quinn is a writing coach who teaches workshops in corporations and PR agencies throughout the world. Writing is the only thing he has wanted to do since eighth grade, so after a journalism career with the Associated Press and newspapers, he started Writing With Clarity. In addition to extensive work with corporate communications and PR specialists, he also helps other staff and managers at all levels to sharpen their professional writing skills. When he is not teaching, he enjoys fitness training, hiking, playing competitive softball, walking the ocean beach near his home, and reading nonfiction and fiction.