

Credibility Counts. Do You Have It?

Your audience is uncritical and unquestioning—they'll believe anything anyone tells them. They never notice problems—if you pretend nothing's wrong, they'll be happily oblivious. Plus, they're semiliterate and ignorant of most facts, so carefully edited communications are lost on them.

Offended? You should be. Yet many organizations unknowingly deliver these insults—which means their audience is offended (or unimpressed and unpersuaded, which is just as bad). If you want to see how your communications' credibility quotient measures up, review them with these key standards in mind:

Support for Claims Just saying something doesn't make it so. Do you claim that you'll help clients reduce their energy consumption? You'd better say how, and provide real-world sample results. Do you declare an urgent need for your program? You should be detailing it. Do you tout a unique solution or approach? Show how it's unique and why it's better (and make sure you're not misrepresenting your competitors or peers to make the case).

Even soft claims need support. You can say "we see our clients as

partners" or "we understand your problems," but unless you provide some evidence, those phrases are just meaningless clichés. Hyperbole counts too: it may seem harmless to say that people are "amazed" by your effectiveness, but unless they really are, this sounds like hucksterism. The general rule: any claim that's not blindingly obvious ("the sun rises daily") needs backup.

Response to Challenges Every organization encounters problems now and then—leadership crises, organizational change, products that don't work quite as they should, and so on. The temptation to paper them over—to minimize, ignore, divert attention—can be strong.

But it's a mistake. The people who are directly affected (and many who are not) know something's up; failing to communicate frankly has all sorts

of credibility-killing consequences. The rumor mill may start grinding, leading to speculation that paints the problem as worse than it is. People may lose trust in leaders who seem evasive or dishonest. As a result, the truth may also be greeted with suspicion.

Considering the possible outcomes, it's best to take your lumps. Acknowledge issues promptly, recognize any distress people may have suffered, and—crucially—say what's being done to address problems and overcome challenges. Few people expect others to be perfect; those who deal with difficulties forthrightly earn respect—and usually a second chance.

Professional Presentation Copy that's clear, accurate, and error free isn't just a nicety—it's a measure of credibility. Sloppy writing indicates sloppy thinking and low standards to many, and factual errors undermine every statement you make. Fact checking and careful proofreading are steps that often get sacrificed, but you're better off with a short delay to ensure quality. After all, your credibility is at stake. ▶

What You Say, What They Hear

Most organizations have an internal language—a patois of professional jargon, insider concepts, and in-house categories. And it should stay internal. Alas, too many broadcast their group-speak to an uncomprehending public through websites and collateral materials that attempt to persuade but often baffle.

It reminds us of a famous Far Side cartoon in which a man is earnestly lecturing his dog, who hears only "Blah blah Ginger, blah blah blah..." When your org chart defines your website's architecture, when you use terminology that's not widely recognized outside your organization, when you describe your products or services from your

perspective rather than your target market's perspective, your audience is likely to hear only "blah, blah, blah."

Internal language seeps into external communications so often because it's difficult to catch yourself using it. Few of us can switch automatically from insider to outsider language—it takes conscious effort. But it's worth it: People usually won't tell you they don't understand your terminology; they'll just make assumptions. If they don't find information in the expected place on your website, they'll assume it's not there. If a word has a common meaning that differs from a particular meaning within your organization, they'll assume the common meaning.

So make sure your message doesn't get lost in translation: speak your audience's language. ▶