

Trust, Reason and Relations

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During the election for President of the United States in 2004, there was an eye-opening moment when exit polling showed John Kerry, the Democratic challenger, with a healthy lead over George Bush, the Republican incumbent. The poll baffled some but thrilled others, especially Kerry supporters. By the late evening hours, everyone understood the exit polls were inaccurate, and George Bush went on to win.

The surprise was not so much in polling error but the power of polls themselves. People put faith in exit polling because they assumed it is an objective, rational process, and there had been accurate exit polling in previous elections. But in recent years, polling has been anything but scientific because of cell phones that disrupt random geographic selection pollsters need and because respondents fail to cooperate. But, we trust polls irrationally because we don't have anything else on which to rely.

What this incident highlighted is an issue that communicators often ignore but which can wreck efforts to persuade. Relationships are built on trust, or secular faith, in another's intent and actions and on trust, or secular faith, that a future event or scenario will occur. Trust is supported by some or no evidence. In an absence of facts, we believe and act.

All societies, primitive or sophisticated, trust and believe. We cannot live without it. We believe cars will stop as we enter crosswalks. We trust a pilot will not fly a plane into the ground or a tower. We expect electrical sockets will not electrocute us. We trust doctors, lawyers and financial advisors. Yet, cars have run through crosswalks and mowed people down. Terrorists have commandeered planes and destroyed them with the passengers. Badly installed or maintained electrical systems have electrocuted the unwary. Doctors, lawyers and financial advisors have all failed us at one time or another. Nevertheless, the complexities of advanced societies are so intertwined, one can only proceed with faith in people, machines and infrastructure.

When trust breaks, as we have seen in a Bosnia or Iraq, society shatters and so does persuasiveness and message power. One irony of Sarajevo during the four-year siege of the city in Bosnia and Herzegovina were photos of the 1984 Winter Olympics site around which fighters were killing each other. The redemptive and binding power of sport was lost.

What is trust? Little is known scientifically, but it pervades human existence, especially persuasive communications. That is why communicators should examine belief closely rather than assuming its presence and force. One must trust another to respond positively to that person's message.

What we know

Trust, or secular faith, is belief, based on experience or not, that certain attitudes, values, facts or other circumstances exist or will occur. Belief is bounded by time, by object, by geography and by individuals, and relationships built on belief are bounded similarly.

Time may be short or lifelong. E.G., do I trust this person enough to complete this transaction? The buyer and seller may know they will never meet another again. It is a transient relationship. A second example: Do I trust this person enough to ask her to marry me and stay with me for the rest of my life? In this case, one believes in long-term character traits of another.

One might distrust a company, but believe in its products and services. Or, consumers might trust an organization and buy its brand, even when the brand extends beyond what a company is known for. I might not trust Microsoft, but I trust its operating system and Office package because they work. (If I didn't, I would seek alternatives, as some have in Linux.) Yet, I can still support breaking up Microsoft because I believe the company to be an untrustworthy monopoly. On the other hand, millions trust Dell Computer, which built its reputation on the strength of direct marketing PCs. When Dell announced it was moving into printers and other electronics, consumers followed.

Locale may also influence trust in messages. For example, people living on the side of volcanoes or in earthquake country tend to trust what authorities tell them about safety. Humorist James Thurber wrote an hilarious short story, "The Day the Dam Broke," that recounted mass hysteria that can occur when people live near something that causes anxiety for personal safety. In this case, it was a baseless rumor about a dam in his hometown of Columbus, Ohio.

How much one believes an individual is an essential element of communications that seek to motivate action. In the 2004 presidential campaign, the issue of whom one could trust generated spirited, and often ugly, debate. The validation of trust was a vote cast for John Kerry or George Bush, or for neither. Hundreds of millions of dollars spent on advertising, public relations, events, speeches, phone banks, surveying, web sites and more were designed to build trust with the American public and to motivate them to vote. The results left some elements of society disgusted with and distrustful of others.

In business, trust is a condition of every economic transaction. In a free market, buyers enter relationships with sellers, no matter how brief, in order to obtain a

product or service that equals buyers' expectations for a value that equals sellers' expectations. In a monopoly market, the buyer may know a product or service is inadequate but buys it because the buyer trusts it will fill some of what one needs. E.G., phone calls may be of poor quality and service lousy, but one can still get a call through. If one believes a seller will not deliver a product or service at all, one would not trust the seller and would not enter an economic relationship.

Scientists do not know why people trust or the elements of the brain that foster trust. People just do.ⁱ Trust, or secular faith, has been the subject of academic study for decades, and scientists continue to examine it. Psychoanalyst Erik Eriksonⁱⁱ formulated the concept of "social trust" in the 1950s. Trust also is a foundation of neuroeconomics, an ongoing effort to understand brain activity of humans engaged in economic transactions.

It takes no research to understand that trust is hardwired into humans, as it is into animal populations. It is certainly integral in language and communications. As infants, neither humans nor most animals can survive without dependence on mature members of the species. The most a baby can do is cry. A baby learns that a cry provokes parental action to relieve stress – an unconscious communication of trust. At some point, however, in a brain's evolution, unconscious trust becomes semi-conscious, or fully so. One decides to show secular faith in another, whether through a personal value system, cues from effective persuasion or through logical progression based on fact or experience. One also chooses to distrust another or upcoming events or circumstances in the same way.

Illogic pervades trust. Humans do not have time to fact-check every element of their existences and still accomplish what they need to do to survive. That is why they look for authoritative sources they can trust to inform them – such as the news media. Those who show profound lack of secular faith, or trust, we call paranoids. Even the richest can suffer from that failing, as Howard Hughes' life showed.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the end, trust is a mystery. While no one can define it in biological terms, humans know what it is. What they don't know is when to trust and when not – a conundrum communicators address constantly.

How humans trust

Humans trust in two ways – rationally and irrationally. A scientist's belief is built on replicated experiments and direct observation that moves hypotheses to tested theories. It is rationalized trust. A purchaser of a critical product, such as heart-lung machine, will research the product, the seller, the circumstances in which the product will be used, the potential payoff and other factors before deciding to trust the product and seller in a purchase.

Trust toward another human incorporates both rational and irrational belief. A first-time anonymous seller on eBay still finds buyers even though there is no evidence or cues that one can trust the person – an irrational act. On the other hand, one may believe in another because he or she has been trustworthy time and again – a rational deduction. But, there can be no guarantee any person will be true all of the time. Married couples have divorced after 35 or more years of marriage when one or both partners ceased to believe in the other. Sellers cheat buyers regularly no matter how much due diligence a buyer has undertaken.

A scientist believes that past performance equals future performance – a fundamental law of the mechanistic world. But where material and human existence meet, the law breaks down. Drop a ball from a tower and its acceleration is the same over and over. Buy a stock today because it did well yesterday and a thousand days before that ignores irrational fear and greed that drive trading. That is why Federal law mandates a warning on all investments that past performance does not equal future performance. Ironically, vagaries of human trust underlie scientific investigation. There is not enough time and manpower to peer review every experiment conducted in every laboratory of the world. Scientists trust – i.e. have secular faith in -- one another or science cannot carry on.^{iv} Scientists have been shaken when peers fake results and get away with it for a time.

The same human trust that is essential to the scientific community is fundamental to society. Political scientists have spent much time examining trust and its origins as a component of a healthy society with moral foundations.^v Where it breaks down, civilization can deteriorate into warfare, as we witness in Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Humans are so given to trust that it comprises its own category of knowledge -- conventional wisdom. A large number of any populace chooses to believe an explanation of certain events and actions without necessarily having facts to back their belief. Thus, for example, instances of extreme weather are assigned to global warming^{vi}, whether or not there is evidence this is true. Levels of arsenic in water are assigned to pollution, even though arsenic can occur naturally. Disappearance of a species is assigned to actions of man, even though the largest mass extinctions on earth occurred before man was a factor. Convenient explanations obviate the need for exploring a topic in a pressured existence. We trust communicators of a message without looking closely at their agenda. We do so partially because we do not have understanding or skill to interpret their messages. We rely on others to vet the data, and this is not always done promptly or well. Communicators know this psychological behavior intimately and abuse it often with phony experts and celebrity spokespersons.

Trust – what it isn't

Trust, or secular faith, stops with a material world and individuals in it. It makes no assumptions about divinity. Its purview is what happens within the limits of human experience. Religious faith accepts a divinity and acts of a divinity on material existence. Secular and religious faith may overlap but they are distinct in attitude and polar opposites. Both apparently come from the same neurobiological function(s) that wires one toward trust. However, some religious faiths have components of distrust. They accept that the worst can happen to humans in this life and therefore, they trust there must be another existence where the unjust are punished and the just rewarded. Secular faith does not recognize divine intervention of any kind, and the word, "miracle," should not enter the lexicon of secularist. Communicators should consider trust, or secular belief, an extension of each human's self-interest in survival. One cannot live without trust in others and events. Even a hermit without human contact trusts in natural events to provide food and water.

Trust, credibility and persuasion

Trust and credibility are synonymous and a necessary base for persuasion in communications. The ability to manipulate sensory signals to create and build trust is well known in humans from the instant of birth through courtship and explanations for returning home at 1 a.m. in the morning. The mechanics of credibility are studied in many areas, especially in law where there is concern for witnesses. Time and again, researchers have shown that one cannot trust eyewitness testimony, even with credible witnesses^{vii}, and those skilled in detecting falsehoods, such as detectives, might not be adept after all.^{viii} There is a journal dedicated to the research of trust in the legal environment -- *The Journal of Credibility Assessment and Witness Psychology*.^{ix} Articles cover a wide range of credibility issues from the reliability of children's testimony through *The Effect of Attorneys' Nonverbal Communication on Perceived Credibility*. There are books devoted to the topic^x, internet resource guides^{xi} and even a television documentary.^{xii} What all these sources show is that persuasion and trust interact constantly and can be easily misdirected.

This insight is second-nature to communicators, but the extent to which trust and persuasion interact might not be as familiar. We know about the attractiveness of presenters in delivering a message. We understand the need for credibility in communications products we produce^{xiii}. We might not grasp the profound depths to which trust can extend – even to the point of committing unintended injustices. Thus, for example, a trend for authorities to trust in the validity of recalled, or repressed, memory resulted in jailing of individuals later judged innocent.^{xiv} The belief was that an individual with a recalled memory would have no reason to lie. Authorities misunderstood that memories could be distorted by suggestions from investigators.

Trust, persuasion and values

Trust affects and is affected by value systems. Those with like values tend to trust each other more than those without. Birds of a feather flock together. There is an argument, for example, that university professors tend to choose full professors with value systems that correlate with theirs. This is a basis for complaints about the lack of conservative professors in US universities.^{xv}

The split between Red and Blue America in the 2004 Presidential election indicated a gulf between value systems of Americans. While urbanites proclaimed the incompetence of President Bush and distrusted him, rural and suburban populations were of opposite persuasion. So too, those who see humans as *homo economicus* versus those who consider man *homo religiosus* cannot trust nor persuade one another. They come from points of view with little overlap and their animosity toward each other makes trust difficult.

In order for diametrically opposed individuals to exist in the same society, they must have a third set of values on which they can agree and can communicate -- meta-values, perhaps. Meta-values might be, for example, a shared love of a country and its political system. But as the Civil War proved, tolerances to shared values can break down under pressure. Friction over slavery and states' rights were too much to bear in the South. Frictions between the beliefs and values of Shiites and Sunni Muslims have led to profound breakdowns in Iraqi society.

It should be a warning to every society and to communicators that value systems and trust must be aligned for long term success. It also should be a warning, as the Democratic Party learned in 2004, that one must understand a value system to communicate a message effectively. "Spinning" a value system can work for a while. One can pretend to share a point of view to achieve an objective, but living a value system eventually wins out. People usually catch on to message-senders without shared values, and they cease trusting them. That is certainly true in business where employees detect quickly whether management has regard for employees or not.

Summary

If you haven't studied how much a target audience trusts a message sender before fashioning a message, then you are likely to create an ineffective message that fails to build a relationship. If an audience does not trust a message sender, the first communications should be to build trust and not to set an agenda or deliver a message. The earliest rhetoricians from before Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, grasped this principle and exploited it. Every use of an expert spokesperson apes the Grecian formula. But, getting an expert in front of an audience may not be enough in a time of instant experts and celebrity spokespersons. Target audiences show an understandable cynicism for a flack

of the day, and emotional factors that accrue to well known spokespersons may not be enough to carry a point. Just because entertainer Barbara Streisand supports the Democratic Party may not be enough to ensure a Democratic victory on Election Day. On the other hand, President Ronald Reagan was often shown to be factually wrong when he made a point, but people trusted him to do the right thing.

Communicators should spend more time evaluating trust than they do. In many instances, it is more important than the message itself.

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ⁱ <http://fac.cgu.edu/~zakp/CNS/projects.htm>

ⁱⁱ http://psychology.about.com/library/bl/blbio_erikson.htm .
http://neuroeconomics.typepad.com/neuroeconomics/2003/09/neuroeconomics_.html).

<http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0817589.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0824455.html>

^{iv} http://www.wi.mit.edu/news/archives/2002/db_0219.html

^v <http://www.colbud.hu/honesty-trust/delhey/abs.doc> . See also,

<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/uslaner/uslanermoralfoundations.pdf>

^{vi} <http://www.techcentralstation.com/083004F.html>

^{vii} http://www.psy.unsw.edu.au/Users/KWilliams/Lectures/3rdYearPsychLaw/PL7-Eyewitness_files/v3_document.htm

^{viii} <http://static.highbeam.com/t/thejournalofsocialpsychology/october011993/credibilityjudgmentsofdetectivestheimpactofnonverbal/index.html>

^{ix} <http://truth.boisestate.edu/jcaawp/default.html>

^x <http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470850604.html>

^{xi} <http://faculty.ncwc.edu/toconnor/psy/psylinks.htm>

^{xii} <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/dna/photos/>

^{xiii} <http://www.webcredibility.org/guidelines/>

^{xiv} <http://www.exploratorium.edu/memory/links.html#repressed>

^{xv} <http://chronicle.com/temp/reprint.php?id=56a4b06e770shwaiq5psszuc2gti5neb> Also, <http://hnn.us/blogs/entries/8525.html>