

How to earn web credibility

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First impressions: Think about the moment when you meet someone for the first time. What do you notice about them?

Most likely in the first two seconds you will have formed an opinion based on what you notice about their gender, ethnicity, attractiveness and age. You do this before hearing a single word they say.

We've all heard that first impressions count. The subtle clues about honesty, respectability and trustworthiness are especially important when we are handing over money. Would you do business with a person who doesn't seem trustworthy? How do you know you can trust them? What makes them credible?

Simply put, credibility can be defined as believability (see "A Matter of Trust: what users want from websites", www.consumerwebwatch.org/news/h_abstract). Credible people are believable people. Credible information is believable information.

Credibility on the web is harder to earn than in the real world. When a site lacks credibility, users are less likely to remain there for long, buy the products and services or sign up for the newsletter. Above all, they are much less likely to return or tell others about the site. They certainly won't think favourably of an organisation whose website appears incompetent. Given the high cost of attracting customers, it is foolish to lose them by not paying enough attention to their perception of your site.

In evaluating web credibility, people are assessing two traits: trustworthiness and expertise. The ease of publishing on the web adds to a general level of distrust of websites. In fact, the study cited above found that only 29% of users say that they trust websites that sell products or services.

Can users trust your site to be truthful and unbiased? Can they rely on your competence and experience? If you prove to be both trustworthy and knowledgeable, your website will stand out.

Credibility is based on perception. We all have different subjective views on exactly what is credible, so improving credibility is an exercise in enhancing the user's perception of your site. Fortunately this does not need to be an expensive or prolonged exercise. We have identified four main areas to focus on to improve web credibility.

1. Design

Since at least the 1940s, social psychologists have known that good-looking people are perceived to be credible sources. It has long been known that people who are perceived as physically attractive tend to be stereotyped with more desirable personality traits than physically unattractive people.

Recent studies have shown this to be true for websites as well. In 2002 the largest study on website credibility to date, involving over 2600 participants, found that people paid far more attention to the superficial aspects of a site than to its content (www.consumerwebwatch.org/news). Nearly half the participants assessed the credibility of a site based on its overall visual design including layout, typography, font size and colour schemes. As with people, first impressions count.

However, web credibility is not as simple as creating a good-looking site. With

the power of choice on the web, users have developed screening strategies. The first test of web credibility is the visual design. Once this prerequisite is met, the user then focuses on evaluating other aspects of the site.

2. Usability

According to the study cited above, the next most important factor in determining a site's credibility is its usability. This refers to how easy it is to use a website, how effective the website is in fulfilling user goals and the measure of satisfaction a user had in interacting with the website. Websites that are easy to use, well-organised and present information effectively are seen as being more credible than those that are over-designed. It's akin to having a well-designed and professional-looking reception area at your company. While it may look fantastic, what would happen to your company's reputation if the receptionist was nowhere to be found, or was unhelpful? Credibility can be a fragile thing, and can be helped or hurt on every page of your site.

Many people on the web are task-oriented – they are on the web looking for specific information or have a specific purpose. Good navigation and the design of your information on your site not only helps them find what they are looking for, it also communicates respect for their time and indirectly promises good service. Good usability is providing good customer service – like having a receptionist who is both friendly and helpful.

3. Content

It's amazing to think that that after a 150-page requirements document, a year's worth of development and a \$500,000 investment, a simple spelling mistake can do so much damage to your website. Alarm bells start to ring when users spot carelessness. It is like having a scruffy salesperson or dusty shelves. Spelling and grammar errors make your site look unprofessional and damage your credibility.

Similarly, one of the biggest advantages of the web is the immediacy of the content. What use are last week's TV listings? Outdated content erodes trust. It may seem like a minor mistake to make, but outdated content can undermine the integrity of the rest of the site.

The web is full of promotional writing and subjective claims. However, excessive exaggeration slows people down by forcing them to filter out unnecessary information. They have to understand what is being said and then decide if it is valid. People will begin to question the trustworthiness of information at your site if your language is over-hyped.

In addition, if your site contains advertising, make sure that users can tell the difference between advertising and content. Users expect a clear line between advertising and the site itself so they can tell what is worth clicking on.

4. Brand

It may be stating the obvious, but for a website to be credible, the company behind it has to be credible. The reputation of an existing real-life brand generally carries over to the web. One common strategy people use for evaluating credibility is to rely on name recognition or the reputation.

There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that your site will be perceived as trustworthy if a user has dealt successfully with your site previously, knows of someone who has, has heard good things about the site or has heard of the brand name.

Building on the trust customers already have with you is among the most effective methods of improving website credibility. Don't be afraid to be proud of your brand, but be careful to ensure that your customers receive the same consistent quality of interaction. Make sure there is a match between what you say and what you do, and be rigorous about how your brand identity is managed.

Your website should also emphasise that you are more than just a virtual brand – you are a real company. This can be as simple as: listing your organisation's physical address, giving a contact phone number, and providing quick responses to customer-service questions.

Conclusion

Trust is the basis for any business relationship. If people don't feel they can trust you, they simply won't buy from you. On the web, it's even more important because many of the clues we normally use to evaluate credibility in the real world are missing.

On every page of your website you have the opportunity to either help or hinder trust.

Small errors can undermine years of slowly accumulated trust.

Credibility online is fragile, but can be a powerful asset. If you are perceived to be credible online it is more likely that people will pay attention to your site. By implementing these principles, you can improve people's trust in your company and the likelihood that they will deal with you.

The bottom line

- Design your site so it looks professional (or is appropriate for your purpose).
- Make your site easy to use – and useful.
- Update your site's content often (at least show it's been reviewed recently).
- Use restraint with any promotional content (eg ads, offers).
- Avoid errors of all types, no matter how small they seem.
- Show that honest and trustworthy people stand behind your site.
- Highlight the expertise in your organisation and in the content and services you provide.
- Make it easy to verify the accuracy of the information on your site.
- Show that there is a real organisation behind your site.
- Make it easy to contact you.

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