

Communicating in an “Age of Authenticity”: Strategies for Maintaining Trust with Clients

by Dan Logan

“No man can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne in **The Scarlet Letter**

These days, much attention is being paid to the ins and outs of Obama’s economic stimulus plan. The President has been very vocal on the subject of taxpayer dollars being used to bailout big companies and he remains focused on making sure that the money does not go to funding salaries or big bonuses—a very public problem in the media. But what about the bigger issue this problem presents for anyone looking to capture and retain the trust of customers and clients?

The Consumer Confidence Index reached a historic all-time low in February 2009, according to the Conference Board. Because of this and an overall decline in trust, the way in which companies communicate with customers and clients may forever be altered.

For most businesses, 2009 will be an uphill battle. It will be a year for experimenting—changing what isn’t working, playing up more of what is and trying new things. Below are some communication tactics that can help you maintain the trust of those you serve in this new era:

Straight Talk Is In.

Recently, Northern Trust came under scrutiny for sponsoring a PGA golf tournament amidst incredibly difficult financial times. The CEO responded by quickly issuing an open letter to all the stakeholders, acknowledging the sponsorship but very clearly articulating that this sponsorship was upheld in accordance with previous contractual obligations and normal operating funds.

Similar companies are issuing letters—both in print and on their websites—that help bring clients into the loop. This includes disclosing financial information, sharing cost-cutting strategies or reassuring clients about the stability of the organization. With Internet usage increasing all the time, clients can find almost anything they need or want to know about your company so it’s best if they can get that information directly from you.



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Solicit Feedback and Respond Accordingly.

Marketing is quickly becoming less one-dimensional. Social media sites have created a two-way process that engages a brand and its clients. This presents a great opportunity to reach out to clients and find out what's on their minds. Instead of trying to shape the conversation, you can let someone else start the conversation and then respond. This type of communication builds client engagement and good will between you and your stakeholders, particularly if you are able to respond in a timely and genuine fashion.

Demonstrate Values and Empathy

Times are tough for just about everyone right now. One important way to further connect with clients is by showing them you understand. This type of empathy can be demonstrated and delivered through special offers and promotions. Wachovia has just announced free portfolio reviews on Tuesday and Thursday evenings to help ease worries and address questions about retirement accounts, saving for college education, or money lost in portfolios. These reviews are open to the general public, regardless of whether the consumer works with Wachovia or not. This type of value-added service helps to support the company's values while in turn offering something to the public.

The Role of Online Video.

When it comes to portraying genuine passion and credibility, there is perhaps no better medium than video. Video has an emotional power that cannot easily be achieved in print. Furthermore, video allows you to share the personalities of many service brands most valuable asset—it's people.

For those organizations not yet experimenting with video, the time has come. Clients don't just want to hear from you, they want to see you. As they seek out information on the web, studies have shown that users prefer watching a short video to reading lengthy content. Perhaps even more important, Google and similar search engines will rank pages with video higher than they will pure text pages. In a time when so many are rethinking who they do business with, you can't afford to not be easily found on the web.

In a few years, the business world will look back at those that gained and lost in this environment. It will not be surprising that the winners will be those who strived for communicating and instilling trust.

“The US uses approximately 68 million trees each year to produce 17 billion catalogs and 65 billion pieces of direct mail.”*

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*Source: American Forest and Paper Association.