Here’s the Biggest Mistake You Can Make When Correcting a Lie

When combating a lie, your instinctive response could make matters worse.

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I’ve always believed it to be true, but studies now prove it. When correcting a lie, *don’t repeat it.* Yes, this is counterintuitive. When you see a lie, your human reaction is to call it out and correct it. But as it turns out, the strategy often backfires. Repeating the lie calls more attention to it and makes it more familiar, leading people to be *more* likely (not less) to believe that it’s true.

What can you do to combat lies about you or your business?

Some studies suggest that our brains have a harder time with statements that include a negation. The statement “John is not a criminal,” for example, leaves the suggestion in readers’ minds that perhaps John is, indeed, a criminal. How can you combat this issue? For starters, avoid posting blogs or articles with negation in their titles. Don’t headline your story with “ACME is not a scam.” Instead, psychologists suggest, lead with facts. A headline like “ACME Achieves A+ Rating From the BBB” would be a better way to refute a negative rumor than to associate your name with the concept of

“scam.” It is also a better way to tamp down the propensity of Google to initiate negative auto-suggestions for search such as “ACME scam,” and “ACME scandal,” etc.

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An even more powerful strategy: Tell the truth first. Then identify the lie you’re correcting. Present your evidentiary facts and summarize by reiterating, once again, the conclusion of truth. “The facts in this situation are X. Some false reports have claimed Y, but here are five points of evidence that show the truth to be X.” Some experts such as UC Berkeley Cognitive Linguist George Lakoff call this strategy the Truth Sandwich. You eliminate the power of fake news by beginning and ending your post with true statements to be sure they are the first and the last thing readers hear.

Related: Use This Secret Military Trick to Tell if Someone Is Lying

Dealing with a lie is never a pleasant undertaking, but often our gut reactions can compound the damage. Try these techniques to extinguish falsehoods about your business in a thoughtful, measured and effective way.

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