How to Earn Your Clients' Trust (and Keep It)

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> *"Trust is like blood pressure. It's silent, vital to good health, and if abused it can be deadly." – Frank Sonnenberg, author of Follow Your Conscience*

There's a lot that goes into building a business: a solid vision, a talented team, and a product that resonates with consumers and investors.

Each is essential to a company's success. But the glue that holds it all together is trust. In the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report, respondents identified brand trust as one of the most important factors they consider before buying something: Eighty-one percent of respondents said they "must be able to trust the brand to do what is right."

We've seen over and over what happens when a company betrays the public's trust – take Facebook, Volkswagen, Uber, and Equifax. Once trust is undermined, even the most powerful behemoths will struggle to recover –and many never do.

Beyond the risk of irreparably damaging your reputation, there's also a huge economic impact. In 2018, the *Economist* studied eight of the biggest recent business scandals and found that the median firm was valued at 30 percent less than it would have been otherwise.

Companies that have broken trust have taught us that, though

it takes time to build trust, it can be lost in an instant. Here’s how to make sure you never let your stakeholders down.

Be transparent

Clients, like all people, like to be in the know. While it’s certainly possible to over-communicate, keeping your customers abreast of what’s going on is always better than being opaque. Let them in on your goals and processes, and if something goes wrong, acknowledge the error. If you’re caught trying to hide details, the goodwill you’ve established may be jeopardized.

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As startup founder Rebekah Campbell said in an interview, telling small lies is “the No. 1 reason entrepreneurs fail.”

“Not because you are a bad person,” Campbell explained. “But because the act of lying plucks you from the present, preventing you from facing what is really going on in your world. Every time you overreport a metric, underreport a cost, are less than honest with a client or a member of your team, you create a false reality and you start living in it.”

At my company, JotForm, we launched a company Medium channel. I blog there myself, but also encourage every employee to write candidly about their work. This creates a window into what’s going on behind the scenes. For existing clients, that window builds trust. For new clients, it creates buzz around our products.

Under-promise (then over-deliver)

The many corporate scandals that have littered the news cycle in recent years have taken their toll on consumer confidence. These days, when a customer feels they’ve been deceived or manipulated, they’re unlikely to bring their business back to the brand responsible.

That means it’s important to not only meet but exceed expectations. Entrepreneurs often over-commit because they want stakeholders to like them. But the quickest way to lose respect is to fail to keep promises.

If it takes a week for a product to be delivered, say it will take two. If something will last for ten years, say it will last eight. Delivering more than expected — be it service, time, convenience, or all three — will add value to your brand and keep your clients loyal.

As the poet George Macdonald said: “To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.” This is especially true in business, where trust means netting customers who will stick with you for the long haul.

Be consistent

Being consistent is one of the best ways to build trust. The more consistent you are with your brand, customer service, and offerings, the more your client base (and reputation) will grow.

As the CEO of JotForm, much of my day is dedicated to maintaining a clear, compelling company narrative that extends both inward to my employees and outward to customers. Having a defined focus allows your team to excel at what they do while establishing a niche in the market.

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As Bo Bothe of BrandExtract wrote in a blog post, there are three main building blocks of a consistent brand:

Messaging: This may seem obvious, but your brand’s message should align with your company’s values. If what you’re offering feels inauthentic, or worse, can’t be delivered, customers will feel misled.

Design: Your brand's imagery is an easy way to build customer recognition, and therefore, trust. Using the same themes across your logo, social media networks and print materials gives visible cohesion to your message.

Delivery: How you communicate to your audience is a big part of maintaining consistency. Maybe you want a lively and engaging Twitter account, or maybe weekly blog posts are more your style. You can fine-tune your communication over time as you build a customer base and learn more about their preferences.

When you do make changes, don't assume you know what customers want. Listen to feedback. Test any updates to products, processes, and systems on a small group, then measure user reactions and adjust accordingly. This helps to avoid jolting your customers with unexpected shifts and potentially undermining their trust.

Be competent

The *Harvard Business Review* points out that there are two types of competence. First, there's technical competence, which refers to the workaday aspects of developing, manufacturing, and selling a product or service.

Then there's social competence, which involves having insight into your business environment and being able to adjust and react to changes accordingly.

In the short term, technical competence is king. But social competence is necessary for any business that wants to flourish in the long term.

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A great example is Uber: The rideshare company has had many missteps and scandals but continues to attract users because it fills a need and does it well.

But over time, many of Uber’s users became ambivalent about its social competence. As HBR claims: “We don’t trust Uber to treat its employees or customers well or to conduct business cleanly. In other words, we don’t trust Uber’s motives, means, or impact.”

As a result, the company has faltered, falling short of its projected users by three million in 2017, and eventually, ceding the market share to Lyft. Its IPO underperformed after its drivers went on strike and stock prices fell by 11 percent.

Uber’s floundering provides a valuable lesson for the rest of us: Trust isn’t a short-term proposition. You need to prove, every day, that your values match your message.

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