

Special Report

Path of Persuasion

Winning Customers in the Age of Suspicion

The *Mighty* Copywriter 
Clarity is King

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Executive Summary

Customers have become habitual skeptics. As a result, they deflect marketing messages from most organizations. To capture and hold customers' attention, marketers must "adjust for mistrust." They must harmonize their messages with customers' preconceived notions of "truth;" speak only in the manner of an authentic organization; and achieve artless clarity in their communications. Organizations that follow these rules will create a comfort zone in which customer engagement and conversation can occur.

Welcome to the Age of Suspicion

Five years ago, marketing gurus cautioned us: customers' worldviews had changed.¹

They no longer trusted institutions of any kind, whether business, government, nonprofit or media.

Arguably, the distrust was deserved. Rascals and reprobates ruled the day's headlines. Kenneth Lay. Bernie Ebbers. Jack Abramoff. Jayson Blair. I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby.²

But that wasn't the whole story.

The gurus held out another warning at the time. Trust—the bedrock of purchasing—had not merely ebbed. It was in near-mortal danger.

As things turned out, the gurus were right. The years of distrust have ended.

We've entered the Age of Suspicion.

We Don't Believe You

Customers today aren't just distrustful. They're downright suspicious.

They no longer give you a pass to treat them as lemming-like receptacles for marketing messages. Instead, they *discredit your messages* before they've even taken them in.

Everyday objectivity has given way to habitual disbelief. It's as if your attempts to communicate were toxic or, worse, "candy from strangers."

Old-fashioned curiosity, open-mindedness and the benefit of the doubt have vanished. Ordinary trust is a dinosaur.

Social scientists teach that trust is a bond based on one party's willingness to become vulnerable to another.

Sadly, that bond has been broken once too often in recent years.³

As a result customers no longer feel safe enough to consider unfamiliar risks, even trivial ones.

And their refusal to lower their defenses makes customers virtually immune to most forms of persuasion.

Adjust for Mistrust

“Adjust for mistrust.”

That’s sage advice from research strategist and author Michael Maslansky, whose 2010 book *The Language of Trust: Selling Ideas in a World of Skeptics* should be at the top of your reading list.

According to Maslansky, today’s customers reject most of the tools that have traditionally functioned as marketers’ stock in trade.

Customers no longer tolerate the expert opinion, the reasoned argument, the manufacturer’s warranty, the “act now” deadline, or the product-claim based on the avoidance of pain.

“A world that once looked up to experts and complexity, believed in promises made, and responded to threats and fear now demands authenticity and simplicity,” Maslansky writes. “The messages and approaches that worked well in the past must be reevaluated in light of this new paradigm.”⁴

In other words, if you want to win customers in the Age of Suspicion, you cannot rely on outmoded means of persuasion. You must “adjust for mistrust.”

But adjust how?

Rule Number 1: Start with Truth

You can begin to adjust by becoming what philosophers call a “relativist.” Modify your definition of truth.

Because in the Age of Suspicion, a cat can bark; a circle have corners; and two plus two equal five. At least you must be willing to grant as much.

In the Age of Suspicion, truth, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder (in this case, your customer).

And you *don't* want to contradict customers. They'll “dis” you.

To avoid the trap, get out of your office and converse with customers. Lots of them. Large ones. Small ones. Happy ones. Not-so-happy ones.

Don't stop until you have a firm grasp of the language they use to portray things and situations. And get a good feeling for the distinct “scene” they've painted inside their heads. Because, for better or worse, that scene is the world they inhabit. And the only one they know.

Once you've mastered that worldview, go home and examine your marketing message. Revise its premise, so the message conforms faithfully to *your customers'* version of reality. When you next tell your story, begin with *their* truth. And when you next speak, at all costs resist the temptation to *challenge* your customers' worldview.

Recognize that the form and substance of your message, if it's to have a prayer of sidestepping suspicion, must correspond to your customers' worldview. Customers will dignify your effort with a moment of their attention *only* if your message meshes with their preconceived notions of who's sincere, honest and caring.

Of course, they may not buy what you're selling. But at least you'll get a hearing.

In his blog, best-selling author Seth Godin puts it nicely. "Start with truth. Identify the worldview of the people you need to reach. That's your story. When you overreach, you always fail. Not today, but sooner or later, the truth wins out. Negative or positive, the challenge isn't just to tell the truth. It's to tell truth that resonates."⁵

Rule Number 2: Keep It Real

To resonate, marketing messages must align with their target customers' worldview. But persuasion won't occur if the sender seems inauthentic.

Volumes have been written about personal and institutional authenticity. But for communicators, authenticity boils down to three major ingredients:

- **Providing unbiased information.** Customers' radar detectors are tuned to spot disingenuous organizations and dubious offers. The words you use to promote yourself and your products can trigger those detectors—even if you're squeaky clean. In your marketing communications, avoid superlatives, ambiguities, unsupported claims, advertising clichés, jargon, legalisms and anything that reads like fine print.⁶ Instead of spin, give customers the straight scoop—including any important drawbacks—and let them make up their own minds. That's the sure way to get them to buy from you.
- **Telling stories.** "Marketing stories are the best way to attract today's informed buyers," according to business-to-business marketer Ardath Albee, author of *eMarketing Strategies for the Complex Sale* (another must-read book of 2010).⁷ Because they're typically told from your customers' vantage-point, stories put a human face (other than the CEO's) on your organization and add credibility to your message. As important, stories help customers "connect the dots" between their problems and *your* product in a way facts and features alone cannot.

- **Abandoning fear-based selling.** If you hope to win customers in the Age of Suspicion, don't resort to scare tactics. Today's consumers resent organizations that try to push them into buying products by fear mongering. Attempts to depict a pain-filled future or impending doom only make those organizations look cunning. All things considered, customers would prefer to be associated with organizations that are upbeat and forward-thinking. They run from the rest.

Rule Number 3: Keep It Simple

Today's customers demand simplicity, even in complex matters. If you keep things simple, you're trustworthy. If you don't, you're not.

It should be self-evident that a message can't be persuasive if it's unintelligible. But most marketers seem to dismiss that evidence.

The key to simplicity in marketing communications is artless clarity. Practically speaking, that means you must:

- **Communicate as tersely as possible.** For example, instead of saying "membership in the association provides professionals the opportunity the pre-register for our annual conference at the member-only rate of \$495 instead of the non-member rate of \$595" say "membership saves you \$100 on our annual conference."
- **Include enough context to assure you're understood.** For example, instead of saying "we serve a user base of more than 100,000 dentists" say "we serve a user base of more than 100,000 dentists, two-thirds of all dentists practicing in the US today."
- **Omit unimportant facts.** For example, instead of saying "with more than 300 programmable features, the MLX is a workhorse that directly replaces our SP-88 series" say "the MLX is a powerful new workhorse, with more than 300 programmable features."

- **Use plain, crisp words and lively figures of speech.** For example, instead of saying “our exhibition is the most comprehensive and efficient way to see the industry’s latest offerings” say “a day at our show gives you a year’s worth of trends, tips and technologies.”
- **Minimize the use of technical language and corporate-speak.** For example, instead of saying “our face-to-face and e-learning opportunities will provide leading-edge techniques to expand your skill set through world-class experts” say “learn the latest techniques from experts in our seminars and Webinars.”

“You get one chance to be clear with people nowadays,” writes Michael Maslansky in *The Language of Trust*, “and if you blow it, their trust goes out the window along with their comprehension. This is because they now put the burden of understanding squarely on your shoulders.”⁸

Narrowing the Trust Deficit

Night after night, cagey politicians, high-handed CEOs and white collar bandits vie for the top story. Joining that lineup are the hordes of con artists, jackleg manufacturers, self-dealing bloggers and unsavory street marketers all competing for our wallets.

It's no wonder organizations face a "trust deficit" of Biblical proportions.⁹

You can help narrow the deficit by following three rules:

- Start with your customers' truth.
- Keep your organization real.
- Keep your communications simple.

By following the rules, you'll do more than allay suspicion.

You'll build a comfort zone where customer engagement and conversation can begin.

And inside that zone you'll earn trust—the trust that's prerequisite to purchasing.¹⁰

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Godin, Seth, *All Marketers are Liars: The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low-Trust World*. New York: Portfolio, 2005. Covey, Stephen, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*. New York: Free Press. 2006.
And “Edelman Annual Trust Barometer,” Edelman, January 2005.
2. Kenneth Lay was convicted of conspiracy and fraud in connection with an accounting scandal at Enron, the Texas-based company he founded. Bernie Ebbers was also convicted of conspiracy and fraud in connection with an accounting scandal at his firm, Mississippi-based WorldCom. Washington, DC lobbyist Jack Abramoff pleaded guilty to three felonies in connection with defrauding American Indian tribes and corrupting public officials. Reporter Jayson Blair resigned from *The New York Times* after investigators concluded that he fabricated and plagiarized many of his stories. “Scooter” Libby, chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney, was convicted of perjury and obstruction of justice in connection with the “outing” by his office of CIA agent Valerie Plame.
3. Innumerable wrongdoers have destroyed the bonds of trust during the past five years. Among the most notorious are Bernie Madoff, investment broker and former NASDAQ chair, who pleaded guilty to defrauding customers of \$18 billion through a Ponzi scheme (the largest in US history); Angelo Mozilo, CEO of Countrywide Financial, who not only originated thousands of shaky “subprime” mortgages, but concealed the weakness of those loans so he could dump his stock before the price collapsed; Richard Heene, a Fort Collins, Colorado, handyman who currently faces felony charges for perpetrating the “Balloon Boy” hoax in an attempt to achieve TV stardom;

Tim Donaghy, National Basketball Association referee, who pleaded guilty to making calls that affected the point spread in games on which he'd placed tens of thousands of dollars in bets; and Eliot Spitzer, anti-crime crusader and governor of New York, who resigned his office after the FBI revealed he'd been trysting with a \$1,500 an hour prostitute.

4. Maslansky, Michael, et al., *The Language of Trust: Selling Ideas in a World of Skeptics*. New York: Prentice Hall Press. 2010. 54.
5. Godin, Seth, blog post: "Creating stories that resonate," August 20, 2008; <http://sethgodin.typepad.com>.
6. Examples of what to avoid:
 - Superlatives like "the superior choice among practitioners;"
 - Ambiguities like "our pesticides are environmentally friendly;"
 - Unsupported claims like "our commitment to clients is unsurpassed;"
 - Advertising clichés like "the headquarters for all your temporary staffing needs;"
 - Jargon like "the industry-leading provider of SME-friendly ECMS solutions;"
 - Legalisms like "no warranties of merchantability are made;" and
 - Fine print like "the statements on this page are for educational purposes only."
7. Albee, Ardath, *eMarketing Strategies for the Complex Sale*. McGraw Hill: New York. 2010. 122.
8. Maslansky, *The Language of Trust*. 72.
9. "Edelman Annual Trust Barometer," Edelman, January 2009.
10. Word derivations say a lot. The English word *trust* comes from the German *Trost*, which means "comfort."

About The Mighty Copywriter

Bob James is the Washington, DC area's go-to professional for on-demand copywriting, with more than 30 years experience writing for associations and businesses. When you hire Bob, you get an experienced wordsmith and marketing advisor committed to the proven principle that clear copy is the key to results.

To learn more, go to www.TheMightyCopywriter.com or call 202.537.1169.