

A LINE ON LIFE

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Creating Credibility *

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We are told not to believe everything we hear. Assuming that others have also been given the same warning, how can we create greater credibility on our part?

Credible communicators tend to be both **expert** and **trustworthy**. To be expert, one must be **knowledgeable** on the topic that is being discussed. With some topics, just being older leads to being seen as "*wiser*." On the other hand, having extensive training also increases credibility. For example, which message about the importance of brushing your teeth are you more likely to believe – from "*Dr. James Rundle of the Canadian Dental Association*" or "*Jim Rundle, a college student who did a term paper on dental hygiene*"?

**The way you say something
can be just as important
as what you say.**

Even if you have accurate information, the way you present it may affect your credibility. Two psychological studies had college students evaluate courtroom testimony. The testimony was given in either a **straightforward** manner (said to be typical of "*men's speech*") or in a **hesitating** manner (more characteristic of "*women's speech*"). Suppose the witness was asked, "*Approximately how long did you stay there before the ambulance arrived?*"

***Straightforward answer:** "Twenty minutes. Long enough to help get Mrs. David straightened out."*

***Hesitating Answer:** "Oh, it seemed like it was about, uh... twenty minutes. Just long enough to help my friend Mrs. David, you know, get straightened out."*

Regardless of the sex of the witness, those who were straightforward were rated as much more competent and credible than those who hesitated.

Even your **speaking rate** can affect your trustworthiness and credibility. The average rate of speech is about 140-150 words per minute. In a 1976 study, psychologists found that credibility is increased by *talking fast*. In the Los Angeles area, subjects listened to tape-recorded messages on topics like "*the danger of coffee drinking*." Fast speakers (190 words per minute) were rated as more objective, intelligent, knowledgeable, and

persuasive than slower speakers (110 words per minute). (The normal speech rate can almost be doubled before it becomes difficult to understand.)

Eye contact seems to be another important point when trying to be credible. In a 1978 study, psychologists videotaped witnesses while testifying. When witnesses looked their questioner straight in the eye rather than looking down, they impressed observers as being more believable.

To convince your audience, it helps if the audience sees you as being **similar** to them. To illustrate, let's use an absurd example. Mr. I. M. Wright – a middle-aged, conservative American – is watching the television news. A group of radicals is tearing down the American flag. As they do, one shouts that whenever any government becomes oppressive, "*It is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it.... It is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such a government!*" Mr. Wright may mutter to himself, "*It's sickening to hear them spouting that Communist line.*"

In another news story, Mr. Wright hears a presidential candidate speaking before an anti-tax rally. "*Thrift should be the guiding principle in our government expenditure. It should be made clear to all government workers that corruption and waste are very great crimes.*" Mr. Wright would probably smile and think, "*Now that's the kind of good sense we need. That's my kinda guy.*"

However, if he is judging the statements from the similarity of the speakers, Mr. Wright is in for a big surprise. The statement about overthrowing an oppressive government comes from our *Declaration of Independence*, while the emphasis on governmental thrift comes from *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung*, the late leader of Communist China. The credibility of these statements will change, depending on the perceived similarity between the speaker and yourself.

You are also seen as more trustworthy if you have nothing to gain – or even something to lose – by what you say. For example, Jimmy Carter, in a *Playboy* interview, admitted that he had "*lusted in his heart*" for women other than his wife. Although essentially all men do this "*lusting*," he was the only political figure that admitted to it. Even if you thought his feelings were wrong, admitting feelings that might make him *less* popular led to him seeming more trustworthy and credible. (At least, it helped to swing my vote.)

It all seems to boil down to **attribution**. Do you attribute a person's position to personal bias or to factual evidence? If the speaker takes an *unexpected* position, we are more likely to attribute the message to the evidence presented – and are likely to be persuaded. In a 1981 study, when the arguments came from a stingy, "*Scrooge-type*" person, student jurors were more persuaded for a *generous* settlement in a personal injury case. If they came from a normally warm, generous person, arguments for a *small* settlement were more persuading.

If you use these methods, you can be more credible.

You do believe me, don't you? Well, don't you?

* Adapted from David G. Myers' *Social Psychology*, McGraw-Hill Publishing, 1990, pages 238-241.