

## The Criticality of Credibility (Jan 08)

By Tony Jeary

Dictionary.com defines Credibility as the quality of being believable or trustworthy, or the quality, capability, or power to elicit belief. In the presentation world, Credibility walks hand in hand with Rapport, but is a distinct quality.

People will assign you their own rating relative to your power to elicit belief based on a wide range of inputs that include, but are not limited to, what you say at the front of the room on a given day. Some of the unspoken "test questions" include:

1. Does he know what he's talking about? (Understanding of the subject matter, accuracy of facts, understanding of the situation, etc.)
2. Can I take what she says at face value? (Truthfulness, candor, absence of hidden agendas, etc.)
3. Can I trust his recommendations? (Solid logic, consideration of all critical factors, feasibility and practicality, etc.)

We headlined this article "The Criticality of Credibility" simply because your presentation won't get anything done if you don't have Credibility. People may listen politely and even give you a warm (but disingenuous) "good job!" at the end of your pitch, but will NOT do what you've asked if you aren't believable. You will have wasted your time and theirs, and won't have a happy ending.

As with Rapport, work on building your Credibility starts with homework to understand your audience. With a good idea of the participants' backgrounds and issues about the topics you'll be covering, you can identify what needs to go in your "credentials" package for the event at hand.

Here are 8 specific suggestions on what information you may want to convey to build your credibility and how to go about it:

**1. Set up your "Authority".** Early on, explain why you have the right to talk to them on the topic by highlighting relevant elements of your background:

- a. If it's a technical topic and you were trained as an engineer, say so.
- b. If you've been working in the field for the last 2 years, say so.
- c. If you've studied the subject in depth and interviewed experts, say so.
- d. If you don't have direct but do have parallel experience, say something like: "when I was working in (this other field), I had considerable experience in (the topic) that I believe applies here..."
- e. If you can arrange to use a Host Introduction (See Volume 2) to present your "credentials package", you get a bonus in the trust transference from the person handling the introduction.

**2. Demonstrate Understanding.** Prove that you know what you're talking about by:

- a. Quickly recapping the preparation you've done for the session.
- b. Using the audience's language. Learn and use the terms your audience knows to facilitate understanding and demonstrate that you took time to prepare. Be careful with acronyms and jargon - the terms can help move you along if all have a shared understanding of the meanings, but can cause you a credibility loss if you're perceived as "speaking in buzzwords".

c. Acknowledge that there may be people in the room that know more than you do about some aspects of the matter at hand, but that your study gives you a good grasp of what needs to be done.

**3. Establish Facts Both Verbally and Visually:** Identify the source of the information you are using (e.g. "the sales report for the month just ended shows..."; "the data from the field test conducted in Pittsburgh last month indicates..."; "the recent research survey of XXX customers in the Southwest concludes...") Your visual aids should clearly identify the origin of data used in charts and graphs.

**4. Defuse Candor Issues:** Clear statements of your objectives and desired outcomes can help a lot to avoid questions about hidden agendas. Even some humor (e.g. "of course, your view on this may depend on whether you're buying or selling...") can position you as being honest about your point of view, as can emphasis on finding "win/win" solutions that are compatible with the needs of all stakeholders.

**5. Tell the truth.** This one is pretty simple. Your audience will never really trust you if they catch you in a lie. Avoid the temptation to pretend to know the answer to a question and fake it. It's better say "I don't know" and find the answer from the group or commit to research the issue after the session.

**6. Be yourself.** Trying to be someone you're not is almost as bad as telling a lie. It's also a lot more work. You can, however, take up a temporary role to illustrate your understanding of the views of others by using introductory phrases such as:

- a. "If I was the parent of a teenage girl, I might be thinking..."
- b. "An engineer I spoke to the other day said that we ought to consider..."
- c. "If we were walking in the shoes of the customer, we might..."

**7. Doing what you say you will do.** If you say you're starting at 8:30 a.m. then start at 8:30 a.m. If you promise frequent breaks, allow for frequent breaks. If you say you're going to take all questions, do so. If you say you're going to get people out the door by 3:30PM, make it happen.

**8. Speak with conviction and enthusiasm.** Say it like you mean it, and your audience will believe in your words. If you sound tentative, people will book you as "squishy" and question your commitment on the matter. Eye contact is extremely important.

Establishing solid credibility improves your chances of success in several ways:

- a. It works to solve two key tensions (Audience vs. Presenter and Audience vs. Material)
- b. It allows the group to listen to what you have to say without having to spend time wondering who you are or where you got your information
- c. It sets a "trust" level that will allow people to seriously consider and then act on your recommendations.
- d. It builds your reputation for future presentations and everything!

**Action Plan:**

- a. Do your homework before your next presentation - study the topic, get the facts, vet your logic with experts, etc.

b. Know your audience - define a "credentials package" that will set you up as an appropriate authority. If possible arrange for a strong Host Introduction.

c. Rehearse with real people, and ask them to give you candid feedback on things you do and say that impact your credibility.

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