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How To Improve Your Professional Credibility

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Although often overlooked, a professional reputation is crucial to your marketing plan

by Doug Swanson

Credibility exists in the mind of the observer ... How you see your business doesn’t matter. It’s how the public sees you that counts.

The concept of marketing is often defined exclusively in terms of advertising. Quite frequently (and erroneously), business people portray their marketing efforts in purely physical terms: display ads published, number of brochures printed, dollars spent on trade show displays, etc.

Advertising is certainly a component of marketing, along with promotions, publicity and public relations. But a successful marketing effort includes numerous subtle elements which are often overlooked simply because you can’t count them or tie them directly to sales activity.

One of the most important of these elements is professional credibility. While most business owners don’t give much thought to its establishment or maintenance as part of an overall marketing plan, you simply cannot operate a successful business without it, and you certainly cannot grow your business unless you establish your business as professionally credible.

By definition, a business which is professionally credible is worthy of confidence and reliability on the part of its customers and offers products and services which are capable of being believed in by the people who use them.

One of the most important things to keep in mind about credibility is that it exists in the mind of the observer and not in your professional representation. How you see yourself and your business doesn’t matter. It’s how the public sees you that counts.

Credibility comes about through the development of two attributes. The first is competence... how people regard your professional intelligence, knowledge and expertise. One way to foster competence is through licensing and certification as an industry professional. Make sure you and your business are appropriately equipped (professional certification, state or local business license, Chamber of Commerce membership, etc.). These certifications should be prominently displayed in your advertising and on your business cards. They illustrate that your company is in business for the long haul, not to sell customers a product and then just disappear.

Another way to nurture competence is through effective presentation skills to customers. Everyone in your employ should be able to talk clearly and intelligently about your business and the products/services you offer. Typically, companies train their sales and office staff for such encounters, but it’s common to forget that route drivers, installers and even plant personnel come into contact with customers, too. You never know when an employee will have to talk to customers, so make sure they’re prepared and have all the materials necessary for the task — keep a supply of general purpose brochures and business cards in every service vehicle, for example.

It has been my experience that a route driver or installer can effectively upsell a customer to better service or equipment even more effectively than the salesperson, because customers often feel more at ease with a blue-collar worker than with someone in a business suit.

Effective presentation to customers involves an effort to make everything connected with your business as professional as it can be: attractive, easy-to-use equipment, clearly marked with your business name.
and phone number; clear, easy-to-read business forms and statements and well-groomed, uniformed workers driving clean, well-maintained service vehicles.

The second attribute of credibility is character, how the public regards your trustworthiness, sincerity and concern for people’s wellbeing. Like competence, character is something which can be displayed both personally through employees’ conduct and “corporately” through actions taken by your business. Your company demonstrates good character by treating customers politely and fairly, even when they have a problem. It’s always best to consider a problem not as an irritation but as a customer’s need which you are uniquely equipped to fill.

Another way to demonstrate character is through civic action which benefits the community. Give some support to the United Way, the Red Cross or some other charitable organization. Donate some much-needed plumbing supplies for a low-income housing rehabilitation project or install and maintain a water softener for the local battered women’s shelter. Whatever you choose to do will show people that your company is interested in the needs and concerns of the community at large.

It is, of course, possible to be seen as professionally competent but not of good character. We all know businesses that are licensed and professionally able to carry out a certain line of work but whose standards and trustworthiness are not what we would consider acceptable. It is also possible to have a reputation for fine character but at the same time be professionally incompetent (everyone knows a “Mr. Know-It-All” mechanic who is a nice person but doesn’t have nearly as much skill as he thinks he does). Therefore, it’s important that your business and your employees work hard to be seen as both competent and of good character.

So, while advertising, promotions, publicity and public relations form the core of your marketing effort, they are all held together by credibility — the extent to which customers and potential customers will find your business and employees to be professionally competent and of good character. Credibility can be established without your company actually doing anything for anyone. The look of your ad in the phone book, the cleanliness and attractiveness of your service trucks on the street and word of mouth in the community help establish credibility in the minds of people who have never dealt with your firm. That’s why it is so important to make your business professionally credible, to help stimulate the most successful marketing of your products and services.

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