Building trust and acceptance

How to build trust so communications are accepted and can achieve behaviour change.

First published 29 November 2023

Practice points

1. Decide how to assess whether the source of the message will be perceived as credible and legitimate.
2. Decide what message characteristics will be used to make the message relatable, authentic, factually sound and widely accepted.
3. Consider using positive message framing and priming to reduce defensiveness.

Importance of trust

For communications to be effective in achieving behaviour change the messages must be accepted. This requires trust.

Acceptance of messaging requires trust in both the source of the message and the message itself. The audience must believe the information presented in the message and must consider any request or command to be legitimate and reasonable, given whom it is coming from. Research evidence points to some useful principles to apply in order to build trust in a message. (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Giffin, 1967; Albarracin and Shavitt, 2018; Crano and Prislin, 2006; Cialdini, 2016).

The following list is not exhaustive but contains principles that are likely to be helpful in a policing context.

Features of the message source

Credibility

Messages should be seen as coming from a source that the audience identifies with and respects as knowledgeable, competent and unbiased (Cialdini, 2016). In some cases, this may be chief officers or direct supervisors. People who have experienced sexism, or those who have changed

their beliefs and behaviours, can also be impactful.

The source and the message should be tested together in audience research, because different sources will be more or less credible depending on the message.

Legitimacy

When messaging contains commands or requests, the source must be seen as having legitimacy. This may be because they are in a position of authority or by virtue of their personal experiences or needs.

Features of the message itself

Connection

Messages that resonate with personal experiences or feelings can help to build trust. Personal stories can be powerful tools for changing perspectives and can help make information more relatable. However, audiences must also be able to identify with the source (Cohen, Atad and Mevorach, 2023). For example, personal testimonies should involve people with whom the audience can identify and say 'that could be me'.

Authenticity

The delivery of the messaging must come across as authentic and not scripted. This can be assessed in audience research by directly asking participants to judge how real or contrived the delivery seems to them (Petraglia, 2009).

Social proof

People are more likely to believe and act on messages they see have been approved by other people with whom they identify (Cialdini, 2016). Messaging can therefore usefully refer to other people who take the same view.

Repetition

It has been well established that simply repeating messaging increases how likely it is to be accepted (Cacioppo and Petty, 1979). Campaigns should therefore use every opportunity to

present the messaging to audiences, ideally with multiple sources, using the same or similar wording to enhance the sense of familiarity.

Data and evidence

When making factual claims, it can help to present data and evidence that the audience can understand and relate to, and that they find convincing (Williams and others, 2023). This can include providing facts and figures embedded in a simple narrative (Krause and Rucker, 2020).

Addressing defensiveness

It is common for audiences who receive communications they find challenging to become defensive. This can be a result of cognitive dissonance – an uncomfortable feeling that occurs when we have beliefs that conflict with each other (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019). Audiences would need to accept this uncomfortable feeling in order to believe the message and act on it. Instead, audiences may seek to reduce cognitive dissonance by:

- denying the truth of the message
- downplaying the importance of the message
- finding reasons as to why the message does not apply to them
- accepting the message but finding a reason why they cannot act on it

It is difficult to counter these reactions through short, persuasive messages, such as posters, emails and videos. One way to prevent them is to focus on positive features of what one is requesting and on what can be done in the future. For example, instead of leading with messaging along the lines of 'sexist jokes are wrong, no excuses', consider something like 'we work together to make our workplace inclusive and respectful, so there's no room for sexist jokes'.

Another way to reduce defensiveness is to develop messaging that supports the audience's sense of autonomy and choice. Officers and staff who believe they have choice over their actions have been shown to have lower levels of prejudice (Weinstein and others, 2023).

Positive priming

When presented with uncomfortable information, advice or requests, people are more likely to go along with it if it is accompanied by positive, affirming statements about them as people (Sherman,

2013).

Research has shown that when presenting challenging information or asking someone to change their behaviour, it can help to precede the information or request with some kind of affirmation of the audience's positive characteristics – for example, 'you work hard every day to deliver a professional service' (Cohen and Sherman, 2014; Sweeny and Moyer, 2015).

It might also involve encouraging the audience to reflect on their positive core values. There is some evidence that reflecting on values can increase the impact of anti-sexism messaging (Knasel, 2019) and can help encourage people to become active supporters against sexism (Drury and Kaiser, 2014).

References

- Pornpitakpan C. (2004). 'The persuasiveness of source credibility: A critical review of five decades' evidence'.
  Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 34(2), pp 243–281.
- Giffin K. (1967). 'The contribution of studies of source credibility to a theory of interpersonal trust in the communication process'. Psychological Bulletin, 68(2), pp 104–120.
- Albarracin D and Shavitt S. (2018). 'Attitudes and attitude change'. Annual Review of Psychology, 69, 299–327.
- Crano WD and Prislin R. (2006). 'Attitudes and persuasion'. Annual Review of Psychology, 57, pp 345–374.
- Cialdini RB. (2016). 'Pre-suasion: A revolutionary way to influence and persuade'. London: Penguin Random House.
- Cohen J, Atad E and Mevorach T. (2023). 'Does it matter who tells the story? An experimental test of the effects of narrative perspective on credibility, identification, and persuasion'. Communication Research Reports, 40, pp 101–110.
- Petraglia J. (2009). 'The importance of being authentic: Persuasion, narration, and dialogue in health communication and education'. Health Communication, 24(2), pp 176–185.
- Cacioppo JT and Petty RE. (1979). 'Effects of message repetition and position on cognitive response, recall, and persuasion'. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37(1), pp 97–109.
- Williams SN, Dienes K, Jaheed J, Wardman JK and Petts J. (2023). **Effectiveness of communications in enhancing adherence to public health behavioural interventions: A**

COVID-19 evidence review. Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences, 381, 20230129 [internet]. [Accessed 10 November 2023]

- Krause RJ and Rucker DD. (2020). 'Strategic storytelling: When narratives help versus hurt the persuasive power of facts'. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 46(2), pp 216–227.
- Harmon-Jones E and Mills J. (2019). 'An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory'. In: Harmon-Jones E, ed. 'Cognitive dissonance: Reexamining a pivotal theory in psychology'. 2nd ed. American Psychological Association. pp 3–24.
- Weinstein N, Legate N, Graham L, Zheng Y, Plater M, Al-Khouja M, Moller AC. (2023). 'The role of perceived autonomy-supportive communication for motivating prejudice reduction and avoiding defiant backlash within the police force workplace'. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 53(5), pp 443–454.
- Sherman DK. (2013). 'Self-affirmation: Understanding the effects'. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 7(11), pp 834–845.
- Cohen GL and Sherman DK. (2014). **The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention**. Annual Review of Psychology, 65, pp 333–371 [internet]. [Accessed 10 November 2023]
- Sweeney AM and Moyer A. (2015). 'Self-affirmation and responses to health messages: A meta-analysis on intentions and behavior'. Health Psychology, 34(2), pp 149–159.
- Knasel R. (2019). 'Reducing gender bias against women in STEM through self-affirmation and persuasive arguments'. Thesis, The Ohio State University.
- Drury BJ and Kaiser CR. (2014). 'Allies against sexism: The role of men in confronting sexism'. Journal of Social Issues, 70(4), pp 637–652.

Tags

Violence against women and girls