Chapter 6

Measuring Trust and Mistrust

It is error only, and not truth, that shrinks from inquiry.
—Thomas Paine

Trust, or lack thereof, has a measurable effect on the financial health of an organization. The accounting firm Arthur Anderson was destroyed after the Enron scandal because its clients lost their trust in its results. Whenever news of tainted beef hits the airwaves consumers lose trust in the safety of their favorite burger and fast food sales take a dive. Conversely, a key to FedEx's success is that customers trust the company's pledge to deliver "When it absolutely, positively has to be there" overnight.

When trust helps an organization build relationships with key constituencies, it saves that organization money by reducing the costs of litigation, regulation, legislation, pressure campaigns, boycotts, or lost revenue that result from bad relationships. A high level of trust helps cultivate relationships with donors, consumers, investors, and legislators who are needed to support organizational goals. When employees trust their employer they are more likely to support the mission of the organization and be satisfied with their jobs. Lower employee turnover has a direct impact on the bottom line. Trust from the financial community is critical to an organization's access to capital and therefore its ability to grow. Good relationships with the media can often avert a crisis.

Typical Outputs, Outtakes, and Outcomes for Measuring Trust

Outputs: Number of times your brand is mentioned as trustworthy by the media

Outtakes: Change in perception of your organization as a trustworthy organization

Outcomes: Percent change in number of people that reinvest in your company and/or become repeat purchasers

Even though examples such as these make it clear that trust is important, few companies actually measure the trust that their constituencies have in them. This chapter provides guidelines, generated with the help of the Institute for Public Relations, for helping organizations measure the degree to which their customers or constituencies trust them. See Appendix 2 for more references on trust measurement.

What Is Trust?

Trust has been a widely studied concept both by itself and, most importantly, as a component of the quality of relationships. Research by Jim Grunig and Linda Hon (see Appendix 1) has shown that trust is one of six independently measurable components of relationships. Two of the other components are *exchange* and *communal*, each with its own relationship to trust:

- *Exchange relationship*: In an exchange relationship, one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future. Exchange is the essence of marketing relationships between organizations and customers and is the central concept of marketing theory. Many relationships begin as exchange relationships and then develop into communal relationships as they mature. Often, mutually beneficial exchanges can begin to build trust, but exchange relationships never develop the same levels of trust that accompanies communal relationships.

- *Communal relationship*: All parties in a communal relationship provide benefits to each other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other, even when they get nothing in return. Communal relationships are essential to developing and enhancing trust in an organization. Communal relationships are important if organizations are to be socially responsible and add value to society as well as to client organizations. They also greatly reduce the likelihood of negative behaviors from stakeholders.

The Grunig Trust Dimensions

Research on trust has shown that it is a multi-dimensional concept. Jim Grunig has identified three dimensions of trust that are measurable by the Grunig Relationship Survey (see Appendix 1):

- *Competence*: The belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do, including the extent to which an organization is seen as being effective, and that it can compete and survive in the marketplace;
- *Integrity*: The belief that an organization is fair and just;
- *Dependability/reliability*: The belief that an organization will do what it says it will do, that it acts consistently and dependably.

Other Components of Trust

Although the experts are not in complete agreement, trust between an organization and its publics is generally described as having the following independently quantifiable characteristics:

- *Multilevel*: Trust results from interactions that span coworker, team, organizational, and interorganizational alliances, which is why you need to cast a wide net when you survey your publics on trust.
- *Culturally-rooted*: Trust is closely tied to the norms, values, and beliefs of the organizational culture. Therefore it is critical to understand the self-image and self-definitions of your publics if you are going to accurately measure trust.
- *Communication-based*: Trust is the outcome of communications behaviors, such as providing accurate information, giving explanations for decisions, and demonstrating sincere and appropriate openness, which is why communications metrics are critical in trust measurement.
- *Dynamic*: Trust is constantly changing as it cycles through phases of building, destabilization, and dissolving, so it is important to measure trust on a continuum over time.
- *Multidimensional*: Trust consists of multiple factors at the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels, all of which affect an individual's perceptions of trust.

Tucker's Three Varieties of Trust

Just to add another wrinkle to this discussion, Andrew Tucker, in a paper delivered at the 2006 International Public Relations Research Conference (IPRRC), postulated three measurable varieties of trust:

- *Short term trust*, which is based on financial performance and product quality metrics like *Fortune*'s Most Admired list;
- *Medium term trust* (which he calls "reflexive mistrust"), which translates roughly to, "I can't totally trust you

because I don't know you, but I need to trust you somewhat to do my job or fill my need";

- *Long-term trust*, which is based on customer loyalty.

Reflexive Trust

I believe that there's another variety of trust, something I call "reflexive trust." That's the situation in which a source loses its trustworthiness because of frequent obfuscation or spin, and as a result an opposing or contradictory source takes on greater trustworthiness. As an example, while listening to an interview on the BBC last night with representatives from Hamas, I realized that my usual skeptical response was flipped around, and I actually had more faith in what the Hamas representative had to say than what the representative of the U.S. government was saying. That was because, to my mind at least, the U.S. government had been lying so consistently about events in the Middle East that in addition to losing its own credibility, it had provided a sort of reverse recommendation to any opposing view. There's a lesson in this for many organizations: If you consistently obfuscate, lie, and spin, at some point your very statements begin to enhance your competitor's—or enemy's—credibility.

Trust, Bullshit, and the Truth

That's exactly what Brad Rawlins and Kevin Stoker were talking about in their 2006 IPRRC paper on BS in PR. Their point was that bullshit is more damaging than lies. Liars, they argue, have a fundamental respect for—or at least knowledge of—the truth, and they choose not to use it. Bullshitters (and, I argue, those who spin PR), on the other hand, use language to blur the truth, and are intentionally careless and vague about the truth. He cites the book *On Bullshit*, by Henry G. Frankfurt (Princeton University Press, 2005). Frankfurt's point is that bullshit isn't false, it's fake. Its intent is not to mislead about facts but about impressions and to create favorable impressions despite unfavorable facts.

Rawlins and Stoker argue that bullshit is insidious not because the person speaking the bullshit believes it, but because he or she is trying to manipulate people with it. They claim we need to change this environment and inject more honesty, loyalty, and moral values into what we say and write as part of our profession. In this new era of transparency, your target audience is putting greater emphasis on character value. To increase your trust and credibility, make sure that the things you do and the things you espouse and believe in are the same. Rawlins argues that this is good strategy–not just a virtuous model–and that organizations need to take responsibility for their actions.

Even more important, he argues that a PR professional can't blame bullshit on the organization, and that it comes down to personal integrity. The bottom line is, according to Rawlins: hold on to the virtue. Abandon the vices. Get rid of the disconnects between what you believe and what you do. Work for organizations that have character in the way they operate, in their visions and values. If the organization doesn't have character, and hasn't changed its character to correct a crisis, then you are communicating bullshit. "You have to be willing to say the things that no one wants to hear," said Rawlins. His final point—which returns to my point about reflexive trust—is that if everything we say is tainted by bullshit, no one will believe anything we try to communicate.

Trust Measurement

Trust measurement and evaluation involves assessing the success or failure of an organization's effort to improve and enhance its relationships with key constituents. More specifically, trust measurement is a way of giving a result a precise specification, generally by comparison to some standard or baseline, and usually is done in a quantifiable or numerical manner. It seeks to answer questions such as:

- Have the behaviors, programs, and activities we implemented changed what people know, think, and feel about the organization, and how they actually act (as exhibited by protests, votes, and purchases)?
- Have the actions or behaviors of our organization had an effect on the trust that our constituencies feel toward our organization?
- Have the public relations and communications efforts that were initiated to build trust had an effect? If so, how can we support and document that with research?

As with any measurement program, trust measurement involves the steps described in Chapter 1, although somewhat altered for this application.

Step 1: Define Your Publics

Identify those groups or individuals with whom your organization has or needs relationships. Once these publics have been identified, you can begin to create a system to measure the degree to which each trusts your organization.

Step 2: Set Specific, Measurable Goals and Objectives

No one can really measure the effectiveness of anything without first figuring out exactly what it is they are measuring. The communications practitioner, counselor, and/or research supplier ought to ask: What are or were the goals or objectives of the organization? What exactly did the program or the activities hope to accomplish? The more specific the answers, the more meaningful the research will be. For example: Trust will be increased by 10 percent in 2010."

Step 3: Select a Measurement Tool

There is no one, simple, all-encompassing research tool, technique or methodology you can rely on to measure and evaluate trust. You will usually need to devise a combination of different measurement techniques appropriate for your company or client. Some of the tools and techniques to measure trust include:

- Surveys
- Focus groups
- Before-and-after polls
- Ethnographic studies
- Experimental and quasi-experimental designs
- Multivariate analysis projects
- Model building

To measure the perceptions of an organization's relationships with key constituencies, focusing on the elements of trust as defined above, we suggest administering a questionnaire that includes a series of agree/disagree statements pertaining to the relationship, such as those of the Grunig Relationship Survey (see Appendix 1). Respondents are asked to use a 1-to-7 scale to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree that each item listed describes their relationship with that particular organization.

Over the long term, the value of increasing the level of trust in your organization can be measured in money saved from lower costs of expansion, lower litigation fees, lower costs of recruitment and, ultimately, lower cost of operations.

Step 4: Analyze Results

First identify any opposition to management goals and decisions before it results in a crisis or develops into an issue with your constituencies. Second, use your data to help management understand that certain decisions might have adverse consequences on the public's trust. Recent research by Brad Rawlins implies that greater organizational transparency tends to build trust, while less transparency tends to diminish it. With data in hand, management might make different decisions and behave differently than otherwise.

There are many times when improved trust or relationships do not lead to immediate changes in behavior, so it is important to set realistic expectations. Trust and good relationships keep publics from engaging in negative behaviors such as litigation, strikes, protests, or negative publicity. It is very difficult to measure a behavior that did not occur because of a good relationship. If a controversy never hits the media as a result of relationship building efforts, and if you are only measuring media relations, there will be no statistical evidence that your relationship building efforts worked.

One way around this is to interview members of the community to test their perceptions. Another way to approach it is to look at your organization's share of negatives as compared to that of peer companies or competitors. If your share of negatives is declining while the others' are holding steady or going up, you know your strategy is working.

At other times, there may be a long lead time between the development of a good relationship and a behavior. For example, if you make a habit of inviting members of a community to social events and other relationship-building occasions, they may see you as friendlier or nicer or easier to deal with. As a result, you are more likely to find that differences or misunderstandings between that audience and your organization can be resolved by conversations rather than litigation. However, it may take months or, more likely, years before your social efforts have a measurable effect on legal fees.