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The Science Behind Professional Credibility

By Michael Lovas, C. Ft.

Want to start building your credibility with prospects from the first time you meet them? Here are some ways you can make sure you're earning and maintaining your credibility for times when you need it most.

As an advisor, credibility is essential to your success. In fact, establishing rapport and building credibility are among the biggest issues advisors face. If you knew how to improve your credibility from your first impression through building the relationship, would you be interested? If so, read on.

Credibility is not the result of an event or a single thing. It's not a place or destination; it's a process. In fact, it is a highly complex process that moves through a psychological minefield, from unconscious to conscious and from the "old brain" to the conscious mind. It's not a quick fix or silver bullet, but it will certainly prove to be the missing link between you and a higher level of success.

As a practical example, let's take the current economic situation: a downward slide. When your [clients freak out](#) over it, who are they going to call? Who are they going to blame? Who are they going to replace? You. Which of the following do you think will help you most to weather that pressure: Your products? Your firm's advertising campaign? The back-office support from your firm? Your technical skills?

The real answer to that question is, [your credibility](#). Your clients can take comfort that you are there—but only if you

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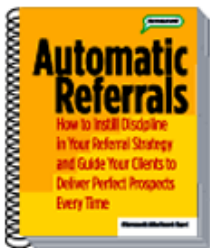
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have already built your credibility with them. If you have not taken the specific steps to build your credibility in their eyes, you're already losing the race.

The science of credibility

Remember, credibility is the result of a scientific process. And once you've earned credibility, you have to work hard to [maintain it](#). To get started, you have to learn the steps of the process, then strategically put them into play. With each step, you increase your credibility a little more. The more you know about the process, the better prepared you will be to create opportunities and improve your credibility. And the process begins with science.

We've been researching, exploring, pursuing the "how to" of credibility for nearly 20 years, and have finally defined the process in simple language. To make sense of it, let's first look at it in two ways, and then go in-depth on the seven steps of the credibility-building process.

View 1: The scientific perspective

When considering the scientific aspects of credibility, there are unconscious and conscious behaviors:

Unconscious behaviors

- **Trustworthiness.** Do your clients feel that they can trust you with their money, or do they think you're just trying to make a quick sale? Does your face show that you truly care about your clients and have their best interests at heart?
- **Attractiveness.** As silly as it may seem, first impressions count. The way you dress and present yourself matters. Are you putting your best foot forward, or does your personal style need tweaking? How can you improve?

Conscious behaviors

- **Likability.** Consider the following a formula for likability:

$$(\text{Familiarity} \times \text{Similarity}) + (\text{Connection} \times \text{Attractiveness}) = \text{Likability}$$

When you have accomplished the steps above and [earned likability](#), you're on your way to establishing initial credibility. But this is just the beginning. Being likable doesn't guarantee instant credibility; it just gives you the opportunity to prove your worth.

View 2: A practical look

Let's say you are meeting prospects for the first time. To

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establish credibility, here are the practical steps you'll face to win them over:

- First, your prospects must feel safe enough to take the next step. That means they must feel comfortable with you based on unconscious first impressions.
- Your prospects must be interested enough to want to take the next step.
- You need to form a connection. Do you and this prospect form a connection based on familiarity, similarity, and empathy?
- Exhibit likable behaviors. For example, have a positive attitude. Show that you're nonjudgmental and empathetic.
- Prove to the prospects that you're relevant. For instance, show them you have the specific knowledge and expertise to help them with the issues they're facing.

If you can do all of those things, it's likely that your prospect will pay attention long enough to determine your competence and believability. Once your prospect considers you competent and believable, the next step is initial credibility.

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7 simple, scientific steps to credibility

Following are the seven elements that create professional credibility. They build upon each other in order, but you must continue to maintain and strengthen each area once you have it established.

1. **Safety.** Good first impressions are essential. These are based on the subconscious perceptions others make of us instantaneously. Creating a good first impression is essential to creating a relationship.

Princeton researcher and professor Alexander Todorov has discovered that when we see a new face, our brains unconsciously decide whether a person is attractive and trustworthy—or not. And we do that within

one 10th of a second. In other words, in the time it takes for you to blink your eyes, your prospects have nailed you. They respond intuitively to your face so rapidly that their reasoning minds simply don't have time to influence the decision.

Todorov says, "The link between facial features and character may be tenuous at best, but that doesn't stop our minds from sizing up other people at a glance. We decide very quickly whether a person possesses many of the traits we feel are important, such as likability and competence, even though we have not exchanged a single word with them. It appears that we are hardwired to draw these inferences in a fast, unreflective way."

2. **Attractiveness.** This is the unconscious assessment of whether this person possesses similar qualities to people who took care of us as infants. Are you confident and reassuring? Here are a few other things you can do:

- **Consider your appearance.** You must determine what you need to do to appear as attractive and professional as possible, in the most appropriate way.
- **Pay attention to details.** Make sure your [appearance](#) is neat, clothes pressed, and your presentation is polished. But also make sure that you are organized and have prepared questions and an agenda ahead of time.

When you take care of the details and go through the effort to make yourself look and perform your best, a wee bit of magic happens. It's called the halo effect. This is a psychological phenomenon known as [cognitive bias](#). In other words, when you succeed in making yourself likable and attractive (combined with confident, qualified, and thorough), you initiate a perceptual chain reaction whereby the prospect infers or projects more and more attributes on you, based on your initial positive impression.

It works like this: the first traits we recognize in another person influence our interpretation and perception of latter ones. Some of these are harsh, but unfortunately they are real. Consider these perceptions:

- Attractive people are often judged as having a more desirable personality and more skills than someone of average appearance.
- Polite and attentive people are seen as trustworthy.
- Quiet people are seen as timid.

- Strong-minded people can be seen as obstinate.
 - Overweight people can be seen as stupid.
3. **Likability.** How do you project and presume positive or negative qualities to prospects? Is your glass half full or half empty? Do you have a positive outlook? Do others perceive you as being likable?

The Gallup organization has conducted a personality factor poll prior to every presidential election since 1960. The three most important factors are: (1) issues, (2) party affiliation, and (3) likability. How we would love for issues to be the real litmus test, but they're not. Gallup says that likability proves to be the most consistent prognosticator of the final election result.

4. **Relevance.** How do you fare when it comes to bridging from personal dealings to business connections? If you're perceived as a positive person who is a good problem solver, it's likely that this will carry over to your business. If you are experienced in solving the problems of a unique niche, such as offering solutions for small-business owners, you have a lot of relevance to that group of prospects.
5. **Believability.** This is how we consciously verify that first impression in the business context. Taking this concept a step further, consider how your clients see you:
- Are you reliable?
 - Are you consistent?
 - Do you [follow up](#)?
 - Do you actively reach out to your clients and show genuine concern?
 - Are you prompt?
 - Are you a [good listener](#) who understands your clients' needs?
6. **Trust.** Also known as the "commitment step," establishing trust is essential to winning new clients. Prospects make the decision to accept you at your word and trust you. Once clients trust you, you have credibility, but you have to work hard to maintain it.
- Do your clients trust your judgment totally?
 - Do they trust that you are looking out for their best interest?

- Are you polite and attentive? Understand that polite and attentive people are seen as being more trustworthy—an important trait for advisors.
7. **Communication.** Prospects tell other people about their experience, thus spreading word-of-mouth advertising and generating referrals.
- Do your clients see the [value you provide](#) enough to refer family and close friends to you?

Finally, once you've established credibility with a prospect and he or she becomes a client, holding onto that credibility takes effort and is essential for retaining your clients. Here are some things to consider:

- Do you return phone calls and answer questions promptly?
- Do you always follow through on your promises and do things in a timely manner?
- Are you always professional in your behavior and dress?
- Do you complete research and client recommendations on time or ahead of schedule?
- Are you reliable and on time for meetings and other obligations?
- Do you do your homework before meetings and conduct client meetings with an agenda to show clients that you aren't wasting their time?
- Are you communicating your value to clients?

Remember, there's no silver bullet to obtain and maintain credibility—it requires hard work, conscientiousness, forethought, and follow-through. The study of professional credibility is a combination of personal development, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science.

It isn't easy to find appropriate research related to professional credibility—we've found it because we've spent 20 years looking for it. But now you've had a peek inside the science that can help you improve your own professional credibility and take your business up a notch. Just remember to keep building your credibility and to maintain it—that way it's there when you need it!

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*Michael Lovas is an expert at reading people. He is the author of nine books, including **Face Values – how to read people and connect with them in***

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