BUILDING A TRUSTED BRAND

Trust is the bedrock of any brand-consumer relationship, yet it's increasingly hard to come by. This has marketers deeply perplexed.

SHEP HYKEN was disappointed, but unsurprised. After all, he'd been through this before. His daughter had arrived home from college, but her luggage had not survived the flight unscathed. The handle of her bag had been mangled, an unfortunate experience he'd had twice himself. He walked over to the Southwest Airlines baggage service desk, girding himself for an extended wait followed by some apathetic assistance.

But Shep found just one customer in line, whom the Southwest employee helped within minutes. Then when Shep explained his problem, he was offered two options: Fill out some paperwork so Southwest could pay for the repair, or select a brand new bag free of charge. Shep thought he'd misheard the gentleman helping him, until the employee opened a door behind him, revealing a room full of untouched bags for the taking. Shep simply picked the bag most like his daughter's, transferred her things into it, and walked away thrilled.

"This was an unexpected and amazing experience," he wrote of the encounter later. On reflection, though, he wondered why he'd doubted Southwest, an airline guided by an explicit emphasis on service. If he didn't trust the brand's mission before, he certainly did now. "Southwest is very clear about what they offer," he said. "It's their brand promise."

Trust: The Lifeblood of a Brand

Branding serves to tell a **company's individual story,** project its **essence**, and **plant a stake** in the marketplace. A brand is the sum total of **people's experiences with a company.**
In other words, brands don't build trust; they are born of trust.
A brand lives in the human mind as a heuristic—a mental model that offers a **cognitive shortcut and expedites decision-making**. Heuristics allow consumers to choose between multiple brands with ease, based on previous brand engagements and expectations of quality and performance.

There are three essential elements of a brand heuristic: **promise, competence** (fulfilling that promise), **and integrity** (the willingness to fulfill that promise). Trust takes root only when all three are established in the consumer's mind, after which the brand comes to life.

BRANDS DON'T BUILD TRUST; THEY'RE BORN OF TRUST.

Despite most consumers stating they value competence and integrity, and choosing brands accordingly, rational judgment is only a bit player in our decision-making process. Once a brand heuristic is established, **it takes on a life of its own in the nonconscious mind**, which drives **95 percent of decision-making**[1].

This is where the emotional aspects of trust develop, harden, and grow. We humans need to trust brands on an emotional level, just as we do people. We want to be certain of both the message and the messenger's utter sincerity, but this measure of trust is the most challenging to build.

The good news? That measure is also the toughest to break.

Trust: Simmering Deep Beneath the Surface

In reviewing existing literature, we explored the origins of trust and how it operates in the nonconscious mind. What we uncovered was both fascinating and highly relevant to marketers.

WHEN WE TRUST BRANDS, THEY BECOME HUMAN TO US.

Humans see brands as "active, contributing member[s]" of the brand-consumer relationship.[2] Indeed, we anthropomorphize brands to **"recognize, control, and anticipate" brand behavior.**[3,4] Since direct contact isn't always possible, consumers form relationships with brands based on brand performance and marketing execution.[5]

TRUST IS A KALEIDOSCOPE OF PERCEPTION AND FEELING.

If a brand can be seen as "the promise of a future performance," trust is the assurance of "the accomplishment of that promise . . . [resulting in] future satisfaction."[6] Trust develops when a brand demonstrates the **qualities of a committed partner**, including the following:

- A positive orientation toward the consumer/customer (i.e., making the consumer/customer feel cared for)
- Consistent delivery of what is desired
- Accountability for its actions[7]

Interestingly, **the opposite of trust isn't mistrust; it's disgust.**[8] **This indicates trust falls under the theory of negativity bias, meaning the absence of trust affects consumers' psychological processes and state more acutely than trust.**

TRUST IS MORE A MATTER OF THE HEART.

Trust can be broken down into motivational (emotional) factors and technical (rational/calculative) factors.[9,10] Emotional factors, such as a **perception of integrity and congruency with a brand's values**, play a more significant role in determining and maintaining trust than rational factors do.[11]

Long-term trust is not necessarily lost when a brand fails to deliver on a functional promise—as long as it compensates by sticking to its fundamental brand values and fulfilling its emotional promises when rectifying mistakes.[12]

TRUST IS TOUGH (BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE) TO MEASURE.

Since consumers are largely unaware of their own decision-making processes, **attitudinal survey questions do not significantly predict trust and trusting behavior.** Measures of past trusting behavior are better indicators and predictors of trust.[13] Social connectedness strongly predicts trustworthiness, emphasizing the importance of a brand's relationship with the consumer.[14]

RISK-TAKING IS PART OF THE EQUATION.

Confident expectations and risk are critical components of trust. **Consider the following ways** social psychologists have defined trust:

- "The confidence that one will find what is desired from another . . . rather than feared"[16]
- "The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party . . ."[17]
- "The mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit another's vulnerability"[18]

The less consumers know about a brand, the more risk they assume by putting their faith in the brand. When brands make themselves vulnerable (i.e., take risks as a show of commitment and good faith), consumers see a brand confident in its ability to perform and deliver, and that confidence helps build trust.

WHEN BRANDS TAKE RISKS, THEY BECOME VULNERABLE AND EARN CONSUMERS' CONFIDENCE.

These conclusions validated our assumptions about trust. **Competence and integrity,** the themes on which most marketers tend to focus, are only the first steps toward building brand trust. We were eager to address our new hypotheses—**Are there emotional dimensions of trust?** *If so, how can marketers unlock them? Could vulnerability be the key?*—through our exploration of the nonconscious.

Trust's Hidden Truths: What Our Study Revealed

As we considered our research methods, we asked, "How should we start a conversation about trust?" We knew if we asked about it directly, our study participants would go straight to the rational part of their brains for answers.

To bypass the conflicts of the conscious mind and understand the deepest underpinnings of human belief and behavior, we used our own Emotional Inquiry® methodology, a process borrowed from clinical psychology that we've refined over the course of two decades and thousands of consumer interviews.
Emotional Inquiry relies on guided visualization and relaxation techniques to get people out of their rational "System 2" thinking (e.g., price concerns, convenience, quality, etc.) and to **engage the "System 1" part of their brains ruled by decision-making, emotion, and intuition.**

PEOPLE DON'T SPEAK THEIR MINDS BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW THEIR MINDS.

During Emotional Inquiry sessions, participants access their memories and study pictures in their mind's eye. They engage as many senses as they can and describe what stands out: what's most important to them, how they felt, why it mattered, and what they did about it. These sessions often end with participants expressing surprise at what they learned about themselves.

We saw the same type of response when we conducted Emotional Inquiry sessions with loyal Amazon® customers. We regarded Amazon as an ideal proxy for a trusted brand, given its historically high customer-satisfaction scores. Our study participants told us they buy from Amazon on a regular basis, and they named Amazon (unaided) as a brand they trust.

We not only came away from these interviews with a wealth of new insights, but found more than we had bargained for. Rather than identifying a single missing component of trust, **we uncovered seven distinct requisites and drivers of a trusting brand-customer relationship.**

Establishing brand trust requires an enterprise-level commitment to overcoming consumer resistance by creating opportunities for trust.

01 Vulnerability breeds trust.

Vulnerability, which is forged through risk and reward, opens the door for trust. **When a brand becomes vulnerable to consumers, it's clear the brand has a stake in their joint venture.**

"[T]RUST ENABLED ME TO TAKE A DEEP BREATH, UNWIND, AND NOT BE AS WOUND UP AND COMBATIVE OR FIGHTING."

—A STUDY PARTICIPANT

Being "flawsome" means openly admitting (or even embracing) one's inadequacies and failures. Domino's Pizza® tried it in 2010, launching a campaign that featured its self-described lousy pizzas and vowing to fix the problem. Since then, Domino's has increased its revenues year over year, and is now reportedly "crushing" other pizza chains in sales growth. "Flawsome" brands demonstrate empathy, humility, and personality—the very human traits that endear us to each other and encourage meaningful relationships.

02 Trust must be earned.

A brand initiates trust by going out on a proverbial limb and offering up its capabilities and vulnerabilities. Trust can't simply be given away; it **requires a show of both competence and willingness.**

"I'll give you the opportunity . . . but until you've proven yourself, that I can trust you, that you are dependable, you're not in that circle of trust[.]"—a study participant

From its earliest days as a startup in 1998, Honest Tea has gone to considerable lengths to earn trust. The company's founders—a Yale business professor and his student—offered initial investors 100 percent ownership of the company until the company's stock price doubled in value. As Honest Tea grew, it honored its brand promise in refusing to substitute cheaper ingredients. After a decade in business and a $43 million buyout, Honest Tea became one of the Coca-Cola® Company's healthiest (and, yes, most trusted) brands.

03 Brands must "have my back."

Brands must show a selfless concern for consumers, with their best interests at heart.

"They've got my back. It feels like money well spent. Feels good. The worth and value is there, so I don't have a problem spending money on the products."—a study participant

Nothing says, "We have your back!" like a lifetime guarantee—a brand promise that consumers can literally take to the bank. **Brands that stand fully behind their products and make hassle-free exchanges and returns demonstrate a deep-seated commitment to doing the right thing by delivering value at all costs.** Craftsman Tools® are a perfect example of how a lifetime guarantee leads to a trusted brand with a dominant market share.

04 Promises must be realistic and consistently kept.

By consistently fulfilling promises, and meeting or exceeding expectations, brands make the brand-consumer relationship feel effortless.

"Consistency is huge in trust. That they deliver on their promise. Once I build trust, I don't have to think so much. It is easy, relieving . . . [It] feels good and makes me proud to be smart."—a study participant

Zappos.com™ became a trusted brand—and a $2 billion business—by building its culture with painstaking care. The first of the company's 10 core values, "Deliver WOW Through Service," is followed by nine values related to creativity, honesty, and personal development. Zappos offers its employees a wide variety of professional courses, and all company stakeholders, including external suppliers and vendors, are treated (and valued) like family. By investing so much in the people who serve its customers, Zappos has ensured a consistently excellent brand experience.

05 Integrity and accountability are essential.

Sharing a set of values satisfies the human need for belonging. When a brand sticks to its values, it proves authenticity. Choosing to adhere to a belief system, even when risky or difficult, substantiates the brand's worth.

"**They lived up to their promise. That was the point where I decided they would deliver when they say they will.** [P]ersonally, a big thing to me is not lying or falling through on things. I never say I'll do something unless I'm going to do it. It was good to see a company that was like that[.]"—a study participant

Patagonia, Inc.® took a big risk in 2011 when it ran an ad with the words "DON'T BUY THIS JACKET" obscuring its trademark outerwear. Buying a new jacket, the ad explained, damages the environment; better to repair or recycle a used jacket. The ad went on to explain that, if a new jacket was the only option, Patagonia would donate a portion of the profits to environmental causes. Because the brand demonstrated its commitment to its core values—and took a risk doing so—like-minded consumers responded with enthusiasm.

06 Trust requires reciprocity

(SCRATCH MY BACK, I SCRATCH YOURS.)

Beyond the risk/reward calculation, trust is an emotional exchange. It's necessary and expected on the part of both brand and consumer. **Their mutual participation in this exchange creates a sense of equality and partnership.**

"It's about mutual respect. I feel like if I'm going to purchase something from you, I have to know that it's going to go both ways. You're going to get something out of it and I am, and we're both going to walk away happy."—a study participant

In 2013, WestJet Airlines, Ltd.® treated more than 250 of its customers to an amazing holiday surprise: Passengers at three different airports scanned their tickets at an interactive kiosk where "Santa" then asked about their gift wish lists. When passengers arrived at their destination in Calgary, the requested gifts appeared on the baggage carousel, individually wrapped and addressed.

07 Honesty and transparency are key.

A brand's honesty reveals its intent and motive for the exchange (i.e., to prove equal stakes on both sides). **Transparency is a proactive measure brands can take to ensure consumers feel secure in their choice.**

"It's not breaking a trust [when] something is out of stock, [because] they tell me up front that it won't be ready for a few weeks[.] Tell me the parameters that I can trust you and I will[.] I know if I'm working within these parameters, then I don't mind[.] I don't get mad."—a study participant

Fashion companies in recent years faced a growing chorus of questions about their supply chains, but some have been more open and committed to positive change than others. In 2016, Fashion Revolution and Ethical Consumer introduced their Fashion Transparency Index, which ranks 40 global fashion brands based on their commitment to transparency. "Shoppers have the right to know that their money is not supporting exploitation, human rights abuses, and environment destruction," Carry Somers, cofounder of Fashion Revolution says. **"Lack of transparency costs lives."**

Transparency in a crisis can forge brand trust in an instant. In 1982, the response of Johnson & Johnson® to seven deaths resulting from cyanide-laced Extra-Strength Tylenol® capsules was virtually unprecedented in the marketplace: 31 million bottles recalled, new tamper-proof packaging, and free product replacements—all of which cost the company more than $100 million. The company's quick, transparent action not only saved it from ruin, but also cemented Johnson & Johnson's reputation as one of the world's most trusted brands, more than three decades later.

08 Trust's Bottom Line

BE THE (HUMAN) PARTNER CONSUMERS CRAVE

Establishing brand trust requires an enterprise-level commitment to overcoming consumer resistance by creating opportunities for trust. This is a steep climb, and it carries a certain amount of risk. Most brands remain stuck at base camp, making familiar appeals to functional trust but overlooking or struggling to establish emotional trust. As a result, brands fail to distinguish themselves in the mind of the consumer.

"Sharing a set of values satisfies the human need for belonging. When a brand sticks to its values, **it proves authenticity.**"

Trust is first established when brands demonstrate competence and integrity.

For brands that reach the top of the pyramid on the left, the brand-consumer relationship becomes deeply embedded, thus facilitating forgiveness of imperfect experiences. No singular hiccup or miscue is a deal breaker, because consumers know the trusted brand reflects their values, cares for and is honest with them, is true to itself, and takes responsibility when things go wrong. This emotional connection keeps customers feeling comfortable, loyal, and safe, and the heuristic it creates makes choosing that brand a no-brainer.

A marketer's job grows easier upon establishing higher levels of trust, as well. Trusted brands don't need to spend time and resources chasing the problems that, in the absence of trust, consumers will complain about or see as a reason to abandon the brand and never look back.

So, how can brands move beyond functional trust, win hearts, and remain top-of-mind with consumers?

- Be willing to take creative and business risks; put some skin in the game.
- Show personality.
- Give generously, in terms of both information and value.
- When a problem arises, take responsibility immediately and make it right at all costs.
- Once in awhile, behave selflessly to show your customers, and society at large, how deeply you value them.

When Southwest stunned Shep by delivering on their brand promise, he felt each of these principles in action, from taking accountability for his damaged bag to selflessly replacing it. He'd known of their mission to serve travelers before – now, he believes it.

A brand's DNA is forever changed once these imperatives take priority over profit. This is how brand promise is honored, and how brand trust is born.

So for the cost of one bag, Southwest earned a loyal customer for life. That's a pretty good return on investment.

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Business challenges are human challenges, and humans are complicated.

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