

# The Art and Neuroscience of Building Brand Trust

By Neil Adler and Daryl Weber

*We humans have evolved highly sensitive gauges for judging the intention of others.<sup>1</sup> Throughout our evolution we have had to decide between trusting someone else, or finding other ways to achieve our goals. And often, the results of that decision could mean life or death.*

The decision to trust can be thought of as an evaluation of risk, where you have to decide whether or not your trust will be reciprocated.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the degree of trust we choose to place in relationships to mitigate that risk can be "conditionally dependent". For example, I may not trust my neighbor to borrow my electric saw until he returns my hammer.

Support for the concept of conditionally dependent trust can be found in a brain-imaging study that investigated whether there are separate neural correlates for conditional and unconditional trust. Using an online reciprocal trust game, researchers found that the paracingulate cortex was involved when inferring another person's intentions, and this structure engaged more primitive systems to then actively maintain partnerships in the game. Specifically, conditional trust activated the ventral tegmental area, a region linked to the evaluation of expected and realized reward, and unconditional trust activated the septal area, a region linked to social attachment behavior.<sup>3</sup> These findings help to provide a framework to understand how trust may be built in the brain on a conditional to unconditional continuum.

Let's look at some approaches marketers use to encourage consumers to take the risk to buy their products and/or services and move consumers' intent along a trust continuum.

## Everything is branding

Our brains are constantly learning from things we encounter in our environment, and tagging them as either positive or negative. Throughout evolution, this helped us to make quick and efficient decisions on what to trust, and what not to trust. It is likely that brands are treated in much the same way - we build trust through many interactions and encounters over time.

In the book; *Brand Seduction - How Neuroscience Can Help Marketers Build Memorable Brands*, Daryl Weber describes how the unconscious mind is constantly learning from and evaluating the environment, and in doing so picks up on many subtle cues from brands, often without the person realizing it. This means that each interaction and encounter a consumer has with a brand is part of a trust-building process. Every customer service communication, press mention, and brand sighting -including other brands or people the brand is seen with -combine to create a perception of a brand in the consumer's mind. These elements also accumulate over time to give a brand a sense of trustworthiness, or not.

This means trust is not something that can be built overnight, or in a single marketing campaign. It happens over the course of years, through every touchpoint and interaction consumers have with the brand.



## Familiarity can breed trust

You may have heard of the mere-exposure effect (MEE), also known as the familiarity principle. This is the idea that people tend to have a preference for things they are familiar with. Evolutionarily, this makes sense. If we've experienced something before, and it has not harmed us, it must be okay. Of course, the opposite may also be true - if something has harmed us, greater familiarity will result in increased dislike.

A study on visual attention supports MEE as influential in increasing the likelihood of building trust. Findings showed that participants were more likely to view faces as trustworthy when they had been presented in previous trials, compared to novel faces. Importantly, this effect was not due to participants recalling which faces they had already seen.<sup>4</sup>

This is why mass brands, like Coca-Cola, enjoy a level of trust simply by being mass. By being seen around in life - in ads, on the shelf, with people holding/wearing/consuming the product, etc. - we've grown familiar with it. And that means it already has more trust than a totally new brand, or a private label brand we don't know.

## Show you're part of the same in-group

We have a natural tendency to trust those who are like us. We form tribes, prefer those in our tribe ("in-groups"), and think negatively of those not in it ("out-groups"). This has been shown in studies to happen even when the groups created are totally random.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, there is support from brain-imaging studies showing neurological differences in how we think about in-groups and out-groups. For example, even under minimally differentiating conditions, medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC) activity was found to increase when participants identified as part of the in-group.<sup>6</sup> These results reflect the role of the MPFC in social categorization, whether this is for newly formed groups in this case, or existing groups.<sup>7</sup>

You can see this approach being used when brands pick one side of an issue despite fear of alienating the other side, such as political topics, or even supporting a local sports team. By picking a side, they show themselves as part of the in-group with those that agree, and can then earn their goodwill and trust.

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## It's more about what you do than what you say

Imagine being in a store, and in the process of telling you about an item the salesperson keeps saying, "trust me." What is your likely reaction? The tactic will probably backfire as you're less inclined to trust someone who tells you to do so. The far better route is to build your trust through actions - by helping your customer pick what's best for them, without trying to upsell them to a more expensive item.

The same is true for how to market brands. You can't simply tell consumers to trust you directly. Promises and expectations set through advertising will backfire if you don't follow through with them in your brand's actions and the product experience you provide. Talk is cheap, and with all the noise out there in today's media landscape, it keeps getting cheaper. So the only way to build meaningful trust is through what your brand does. Actions speak volumes.

## Keep up your end of the bargain

We can think of a brand as a promise to consumers - it provides a set of expectations that must be met in order for trust to build. Through your branding and marketing over the long term, you build and strengthen this set of expectations in the mind. When a consumer then buys the product or service, you must deliver on that promise to keep up your end of the bargain. If you overpromise and underdeliver, consumers will lose trust for your brand. Your promises in marketing will feel hollow, and will no longer be believed.

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## Once you have it, make sure you keep it

Trust is hard to build, but it's easily broken. A consumer can have years of implicitly trusting your brand (without thinking about it too much), but that trust can be lost in a flash. Volkswagen had built up a very strong brand for decades, but all that goodwill and equity was thrown into question with their recent environmental cheating scandal. Or think of Nike and its sweatshop controversy, or Apple and its Chinese factory working conditions. Of course, these are some of the strongest brands in the world, and they have been able to overcome these breaches of trust. But smaller brands with less deeply seated brand love may not be so lucky.

## Trust starts from within

Lastly, trust is not sustainable if it is not authentic. You can't effectively express it outwardly, without truly having it internally. Trust must be baked into the corporate culture with principled people who treat customers fairly and respectfully. When that happens, trust will naturally spread outward to the consumer. On the other hand, when it's inauthentic, consumers' keen ability to gauge trust will probably sniff you out eventually.

By steadily and consistently taking the right actions, you can build trust for your brand over the long term. Remember, trust is highly valuable, and not to be taken lightly. So once you have this precious commodity, guard it with your life. The life of your brand may just depend on it.

### About the author

**Daryl Weber** is a brand consultant, speaker, and author of *Brand Seduction: How Neuroscience Can Help Marketers Build Memorable Brands.*

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