

The Psychology of Trust in Digital Relationships

Why people trust (or don't) digital channels

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WE HAVE A TRUST PROBLEM

61%

of adults regularly
question if online
content is real

74%

list social media
among content
they trust least

3%

trust in news media
(down from 6%
in 2024)

And yet - 50% of social media users visit platforms specifically to learn about brands and organisations. Your audience is there. But they are sceptical. The opportunity is real - if you earn it.

WHAT IS TRUST, ACTUALLY?

Can they do it?

COMPETENCE

Do they have the skill, experience, and track record to deliver what they promise?

Do they lie?

HONESTY

Are they transparent about what they do, who funds them, and what they don't know?

Do they care?

KINDNESS

Is their mission genuine? Would they act in my interest even when I'm not watching?

Trust is often decided in seconds, not through careful analysis, but through a gut feeling. Your audience is not studying your mission statement. They are sensing whether they believe you.

TRUST IS DECIDED BEFORE YOU SPEAK

What people judge - before reading a single word:

7

seconds

Design & visual quality

70% of users judge credibility by design alone

Perceived reputation

Prior exposure, known endorsers, platform signals

Structural cues

Certifications, privacy notice, human contact option

Familiarity & recognition

Does this look like somewhere I have been before?

01

Clear mission

Not 'we do good' — what specific problem, for whom, and how you measure it

02

Human voice

Named people, not logos. Staff stories, beneficiary voices, faces — not institutional tone

03

Visible proof

Specific evidence: numbers, named beneficiaries, documented change. Not claims — evidence

04

Consistent response

Reply within hours. Acknowledge mistakes. Two-way dialogue, not broadcast. Show up regularly

Overpromising without proof

'We helped thousands' with no names, data, or evidence = impact washing. Audiences spot it fast.

Hidden sponsorships & partnerships

Undisclosed paid content erodes trust permanently. Platforms and regulators are watching too.

Slow or anonymous response

People expect replies in 1-3 h on Instagram, 3-6 h on Facebook. Silence means you don't care.

Saying one thing, doing another

Claiming to be community-driven while making decisions behind closed doors destroys credibility.

Manipulative design or urgency

Users who detect manipulation are 90% less likely to return - and share the experience widely.

5 RULES YOU CAN APPLY TOMORROW

Say less.

One clear message per post. Cognitive overload is the enemy of trust - simplicity signals clarity of thought.

Show more.

Specific evidence over general claims. Photos, numbers, named people beat vague promises every time.

Label clearly.

Disclose all partnerships, sponsorships, and paid content - clearly, visibly, upfront. Not in footnotes.

Reply fast.

Within hours, not days. Speed signals you are present, human, and that you care about your community.

Learn publicly.

Share failures, corrections, and 'work in progress'. Honesty about limits builds more trust than polished perfection.

**"Trust online is not built
by sounding important."**

"It is built by being clear,
being human, and being provable."