



# Your Image of Trust

Here's how it flows to your bottom line.

BY WILLIAM J. LYNOTT

**H**ave you ever thought about why you choose to do business with some companies and not others? Perhaps you haven't thought much about it, but chances are that you'd have no trouble coming up with your own answers to that question. If you're like most people, your reasons would include such things as advertising that caught your eye, an image that suggests quality and reasonable price, convenient location, stocking the brands or types of items you prefer, friendly employees, and so on.

However, when it comes to intimate services such as podiatric care, my informal poll highlighted another important reason people choose one provider over another—a subtle, less frequently discussed reason: When we are in the market for a service—especially a highly personal service, we tend to seek out people we TRUST.

Because of the highly personal nature of podiatric medicine, the el-

ement of trust tends to play a bigger role in our selection of podiatrists than it might in many other types of consumer transactions. So, how does a podiatrist go about building an image of trustworthiness?

### Likability

At best, this may sound like a vague term. Still, psychologists agree that likability is a critical characteristic in developing trust. Over the centuries, human nature has evolved

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As a first step, you may want to remind yourself that the elements required to build trust between a buyer and seller are precisely the same as those that are necessary for building trust between any two individuals. Unless you've mastered the basics of developing trust in personal relationships, you'll have a difficult time gaining trust in the professional services that you provide. Consider the characteristics that are present in the people YOU trust.

in a way that makes it almost impossible for us to trust someone we dislike.

So, it makes sense, if you want people to trust you and your practice, you must learn to help people to like you.

Among the more important ways to do that is developing the habit of making good eye contact when you're talking with another person. Do you know anyone who avoids

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looking you in the eye during conversations? If you do, chances are that you're not inclined to trust that person.

## **Believability**

In some ways, the terms believability and trust are synonymous. If you have difficulty believing a person, you aren't likely to trust that person. Believability, like trust itself, must be earned, and there's only one way to do that. In any business or professional transaction, believability translates into one simple dictum: Never promise something you can't deliver. Once you make a promise, it is essential that you keep that promise.

Of course, you say. A promise is a promise. The trouble is that too many professionals don't seem to realize that such simple statements as, "I'll call you with the results on Tuesday," or "I'll discuss this with your doctor later today" are promises. Any time you fail to deliver on these or any other promises, your believability and your practice will suffer serious damage.

Moreover, once you learn that circumstances have made it impossible to keep a promise, it is essential that you contact your patient immediately. A broken promise is a serious problem; a promise broken at the last minute is an image killer.

## **Willingness to Listen**

Let's be honest about this. Very few of us are good listeners by nature. Most people want to do much more talking than listening. Although we may not be conscious of the reason, most of us feel comfortable in the company of that rare person who is a good listener.

Have you ever found yourself thinking more about what you want to say next, rather than what the person who is speaking to you is saying? If you have that tendency, you are almost certainly not a good listener.

Learning to listen well is not an easy task. It takes a great deal of self-discipline but, from a business

standpoint, it's well worth the effort. We tend to trust people who are willing to take the time to listen to what we have to say. And we tend to trust people who seem to make a genuine effort to understand what we are saying.

Author and adjunct professor at NYU's Stern School of Business Michele Tillis Lederman agrees.

"Regardless of where you are in your professional career," she says, "Listening is a skill that you must work on. Listening is not a passive activity. It takes energy and concentration to focus on what people are saying and what they mean by it. Too often, we are caught up in our

## **"Trust or Consequences"**

**"M**any hard-nosed business folks think trust is a soft value. It's not like a blockbuster new product, a savvy acquisition, or an ingenious cost-cutting measure. Don't make the mistake, however, of equating soft with 'unimportant' or 'minor.'

"Trust offers benefits that may take time to materialize, but when they do, they can make a huge difference in performance."—from *Trust or Consequences*, by Al Golin, Chairman, Golin-Harris International. •

passing in a hallway:

*Employee:* "Good morning, Mr. Smith. Looks like we're going to have a nice day."

*Boss:* "Fine, thank you. And how are you?"

One of the most effective ways to develop and demonstrate sincere

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own agendas, concerns, and intentions, and listen only on a superficial level. Effective listening is the single most powerful thing you can do to build and maintain a climate of trust and collaboration."

In this light, the importance of a podiatrist listening skillfully to a patient is quite obvious. "You have to listen to understand," says Lederman, "and listening well is a pathway to implementing the other requirements for building an image of trust."

## **Sincere Interest**

In the course of our daily activities, it's easy to fall into a pattern of superficial contacts with patients, friends, and family. If you listen carefully, you'll be able to hear actual examples, like this exchange that I once overheard between a business owner and an employee

interest in your patients is to take the time to find out a little something about each one, and then follow through from time to time with questions that show you care.

Allow patients time to fully express their thoughts about their symptoms, their concerns, and their ideas about what might need to be done. Even if you expect to offer alternative suggestions, show respect to the patient by listening to her thoughts about her needs.

## **Enthusiasm**

I don't know about you, but I'm not comfortable with people who never seem to display any sort of emotion. A flat, guarded personality is difficult to read... and difficult to trust. Since you're never quite sure of that person's reaction to what you say and do, it becomes

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almost impossible to build up a trusting relationship.

On the other hand, people who aren't afraid to display genuine en-

effectively as a reputation for following up. If you say you'll get information for someone, get it. No matter what, get it. If you say you'll look into a problem, do it. Any successful business executive can tell you that

the subject of building trust, but most of the basic elements are contained in these few paragraphs.

It's no secret: building a reputation for trustworthiness is a demanding, never-ending job. Nevertheless, it's a critical element in professional success. While it can be very difficult to win it, trust is surprisingly easy to lose. Every time you stray from the basic principles outlined here, you chip away at the trust others have in you and in your practice. **PM**

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thusiasm over things that excite them generate an open image of the type that suggests honesty and interest.

One of the easiest ways to demonstrate enthusiasm is to smile. Smiling is easy to do and it's a proven way to smooth the path to trust in any relationship.

### Follow-up

On both a professional and personal level, few characteristics are as capable of building a level of trust as

a reputation for poor follow-up will be a serious, perhaps deadly, impediment in a business or professional career.

And you must never allow yourself to overlook the critical importance of following up on promises. Always remember: A broken promise, either by you or by an office assistant, is an almost certain path to patient alienation.

You get the idea. Thousands of additional words could be written on



**Bill Lynott** is a management consultant, author and lecturer who writes on business and financial topics for a number of publications. His latest book, *Money: How to Make the Most of What You've Got* is available in bookstores.

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