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THE TRUST FACTOR

Stop obsessing over engagement.
Trust is the new holy grail.

on tap / By Hannah Kinnersley

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Without Trust, What's Left?

Who do you trust? I mean really trust? Probably not your bank; financial institutions seem to get hacked every few months. Even the credit agencies are not immune and are now charging to keep an eye on your credit—an activity that was their job to begin with. Surely not the news. Whichever newspaper, site, or TV channel you rely on to find out what's happening in the world, there is another one telling a different story entirely.

Lack of trust seems to be the new normal, but what does that mean for business? Well for one thing, if employees don't trust their employer, they are likely to look for a job elsewhere. If clients lose faith in a company, the odds are good that they can take their business to a different one. So how do you increase trust?

Meeting planners, it turns out, are ideally positioned to help companies increase trust. Neuroscience shows that it is

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easier to create trust between people in face-to-face meetings; humans like to read visual cues when they talk to each other, and meetings provide other trust-affirming opportunities. Fusion Performance Group incorporates trust-building activities such as storytelling into events, and works to improve communication from management, to help employee retention. Tanya Perry, president of sales, says, "Part of feeling invested is liking the company and feeling that it's got your back." That feeling is not engagement; attendees can be engaged and entertained during your meeting or conference, but developing trust, a belief that the company is being honest with them, will enable attendees to take those positive feelings for an organization home with them after the event.

Trust takes time to build up, but once established it can be a huge asset for an organization when things don't go as planned. Crisis management strategist Melissa Agnes says, "If something does go wrong, people will say, 'Let's wait and hear your side of it,' before making a judgment."

Read our cover story for practical ideas on using your events to help build trust within your organization, between your attendees, and with your clients, and to understand the neuroscience behind it.

Trust me, it's science.

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Cover Story

THE TRUST FACTOR

Stop obsessing over engagement.
Trust is the new holy grail.

By Hannah Kinnersley
Illustrations by Sharon Carlson

In the era of Bernie Madoff and Enron, Shakespeare's "Love all, trust a few" rings truer than ever. And yet trust also is the basis for a whole new economy.

Uber and Airbnb turned into multimillion-dollar companies within three years of inception because both consumers and contractors were prepared to trust each other. And their interactions prove that the trust-based model works.

But it's not just for "sharing economy" companies. trust is the basis for any high-functioning corporate culture; one where staff trust each other and management, and one that the organization's customers can believe in, too. A meeting planner's job is all about bringing people together in an environment safe enough to build relationships—who could be better placed to encourage trust, both between a company and its employees, and a business and its clients?

As Rachel Botsman, author of the forthcoming book *Who Can You Trust?* and a visiting academic at Oxford University's Saïd Business School, says, "As much as technology such as videoconferencing provides ways to see and interact with [people] virtually, it's no substitute for face-to-face meetings. Without meeting in person, it is hard for most people to commit to trust."

Without Trust, There's No Engagement

Engagement may be the big buzzword right now, but if all you're doing is engaging attendees by entertaining them with a keynote speaker or event app game, you're just building a happy memory, not a real connection to the host company.

Rob Adams, president and CEO of meetings and events producer Bishop-McCann says that once he was introduced to

The 8 Building Blocks of Trust

How do you create trust? Design your conference considering the elements Dr. Paul Zak has identified as the foundation of trust. Zak's building blocks spell out oxytocin, a hormone he has associated with trustworthiness.

Ovation: Recognize excellence and celebrate it.

eXpectation: Create challenges that are realistic.

Yield: Delegate generously to show trust in others.

Transfer: Enable job crafting by giving more autonomy to employees.

Openness: Share information and, therefore, a sense of purpose.

Caring: Intentionally build relationships between departments, chapters, and managers and workers.

Invest: Facilitate whole-person growth.

Natural: Be authentic and vulnerable.

Here's the Science

Paul J. Zak, PhD, director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University and a member of the neurology department at Loma Linda University Medical Center, believes that trust is the foundation for engagement, collaboration, innovation, and many other qualities that define a successful and effective meeting.

Zak is the founder of Ofactor, a business culture management platform designed to help build high-trust organizations by identifying and addressing areas of low trust.

The O in Ofactor comes from oxytocin, a hormone that acts as a neurotransmitter in the brain. The hormone is known to regulate social interaction, and Dr. Zak's research, which has included taking blood samples from subsistence farmers in Papua New Guinea, suggests its release signals that one person finds another trustworthy, and even that they are more likely to act in a trustworthy manner themselves. Using this chemical marker, he researched environments and behaviors that can produce a high-trust culture. Trust can lead to benefits Zak outlined in a *Harvard Business Review* article on "The Neuroscience of Trust" where he suggests that, compared with people at low-trust companies, workers in high-trust companies had 50 percent higher productivity, 74 percent less stress, 76 percent more engagement, and 106 percent more energy.

research that found that trust and purpose create engagement (see sidebar, left), "I realized that the industry is measuring the wrong thing. Without trust, you'll never have engagement."

That research, spearheaded by Paul J. Zak, PhD, director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University and a member of the neurology department at Loma Linda University Medical Center, caused his company to adopt trust as a metric of success both for the events it plans for clients and internally, for its own employees.

To focus on trust, Bishop-McCann uses a survey based on Zak's neuroscience research. The 26 questions are designed to take a snapshot of eight building blocks for trust defined by Zak, five of which are applicable to meetings:

OVATION: Recognize excellence and celebrate it. Publicly recognize people who have made particular contributions to the company, with either an awards ceremony or a more informal celebration that makes people feel noticed and valued.

YIELD: Delegate generously to show trust in others. Having senior members of the organization engage with attendees and sit with them during presentations reduces hierarchy and makes others feel empowered.

OPENNESS: Share information and, therefore, a sense of purpose. Communicate the core goals of the organization so that employees or association members understand them, and can help work toward them with a sense of purpose. Whether the news is good or bad, communicating with employees fosters trust.

CARING: Intentionally build relationships between departments, chapters, and managers and workers. Networking between groups that do not normally interact face to face increases trust and leads to more cooperation between chapters or offices in an organization.

NATURAL: Be authentic and vulnerable. Showing vulnerability to your employees or membership shows that you trust them to see your weaknesses.

Once these indicators are measured, the results are used to identify an organization's needs when it comes to trust. Adams says, "These needs are taken into consideration when designing an impactful event. When the event is over, we resurvey and analyze the data to determine if there is a meaningful change in trust. The results give the organization's leadership team the roadmap for further improvements."

Planning for Trust

Zak's "Ovation" building block—recognizing a team or employee's contribution—is the most obvious way to begin the process of nurturing trust through meetings. Adams likes to use peer nominations for awards because, he says, feeling listened to can increase oxytocin—the "trust" hormone (see "Here's the Science)—for the nominators, not just the award recipients. Adams will sometimes reallocate budget funds to celebrate attendees because it is likely to give a bigger bump in oxytocin for everyone, compared to a similar increase in,

Trust Me, You Want to Be Trustworthy

Two surprising things about high-trust organizations from Dr. Paul Zak's research.

1. Employees are paid more, by an average of $6,450 dollars a year.

2. Employees are 29 percent happier with their lives outside of work.

"If the audience doesn't trust the message, they won't engage with the purpose."

—Rob Adams

say, the food and beverage funding. Zak says, "The science shows that 'ovation' is most powerful when it is close in time to the goal that's been met, is public, unexpected, and tangible, and comes from peers. Creating a peer-based recognition program immediately increased trust [for a business he consulted for] because colleagues began noticing the effort others put in."

Bishop-McCann is also careful to promote inclusiveness in activities with an eye to intentionally building relationships, rather

How to Signal Your Trustworthiness

Holly H. Brower, PhD, associate professor and faculty advisor in the Business and Enterprise Management Program at Wake Forest University, has studied trust in organizations. She says, "By definition, trust involves some sort of risk-taking so you have to feel that you are vulnerable to the other party. In the context of a face-to-face meeting or networking opportunities at conferences, you want to be seen as trustworthy to lay the groundwork for an ongoing relationship." Brower notes that her research indicates that there are typically three factors that indicate trustworthiness to other people: ability, benevolence, and integrity.

For attendees, it can be hard to signal these attributes, but there are ways to do it. Here are some of Brower's suggestions:

- **"Be both interesting and interested."** To prove your ability, it is OK to discuss your accomplishments but don't show off because listeners will find it arrogant and inauthentic. If you bring up a challenge you have met, she suggests sharing the story in a way that other people will find useful if they have the same problem. Make sure you ask other people about challenges they have faced, and what they did to overcome them. This shows you are interested in them, and also that you are keen to learn.
- **Cover the basics to show your benevolence and integrity.** Get to appointments on time and prepared, and if you are late, don't be that person who makes everyone start again; it is up to you to catch up on what you missed.
- **Follow through on things you say you are going to do.** If, for example, someone is interested in an expert you know, following up with contact information demonstrates benevolence (you cared) and integrity (you did what you said you would do).

Meeting planners can help their attendees by ensuring they can contact each other (usually through an app or attendance information) and providing networking opportunities in environments that encourage conversation, have few distractions, and are comfortable enough for people to relax. It is hard to be your authentic self when you feel uncomfortable.

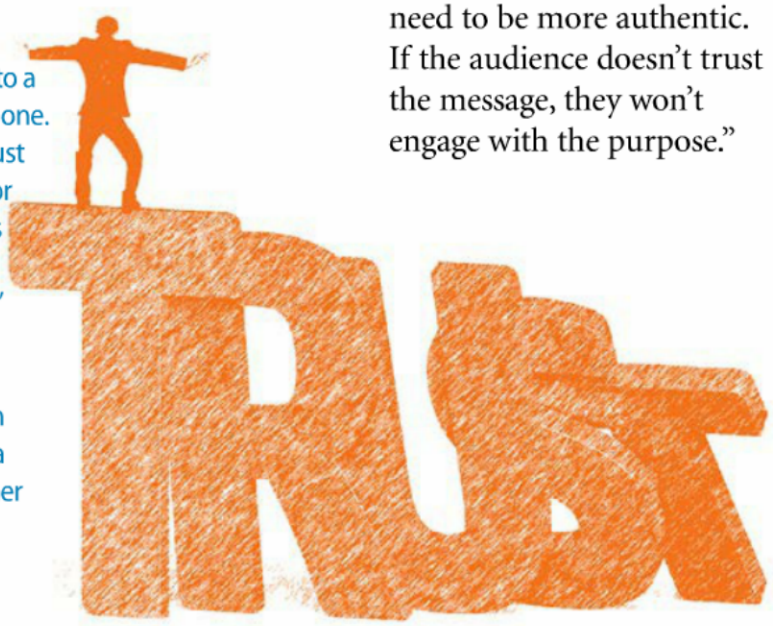
Taking Trust for Granted

Crisis management strategist and keynote speaker, Melissa Agnes, calls trust, "an essential element." Companies need to build trust with employees and clients, she says, not just because of the business advantages: In the event of a crisis, a company that has earned trust will be given the benefit of the doubt. "If something does go wrong, people will say, 'Let's wait and hear your side of it,' before making a judgment," says Agnes. "If a company is trusted, it will be given a second chance, whether it's a corporate executive scandal or terrible food at a sales conference."

Agnes relates this personal anecdote. The first of many conferences that she attended this year was held at a venue in Florida that she calls "subpar even for average," but the organizers didn't consider themselves accountable to the attendees for the choice of venue. On top of an insect problem and terrible service, Agnes says, "The venue was so cold that at one point the organizers brought out blankets on stage as a joke, but they didn't really take responsibility."

Agnes trusted the conference's choice of venue; her trust was misplaced, and the issue was not addressed. Her recommendation for them would be, "an email blast acknowledging that there were problems and saying 'rest assured that next year we will do more due diligence.'" Communication is especially important here because Agnes was a first-time attendee. She did not have loyalty built up by previous good experiences. Highlighting failures and mistakes might make planners feel vulnerable, but Agnes says, "Don't avoid the elephant in the room. If you don't say that you've fixed it, people will assume you haven't."

As a meeting planner, it's hard to fall short of perfection, but fear of admitting to a mistake can keep you from learning from one. One piece of advice for creating a high-trust environment from Paul J. Zak PhD, director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University, is a monthly "congratulations you messed up" celebration, so nothing is swept under the rug and trust is established between teams and managers. Any celebration can boost morale, but turning a mistake into a learning experience brings people together with a common purpose and lets them innovate without fear.



than competition. Using the data gathered from Ofactor surveys, Adams says, "We had to redesign group activities for one particular client to make them more integrated. Let's say there are four offices across the country. We found that the one in the East felt the least included, so we integrated them with the central group because they were the people who felt the most included." Zak's research suggests that team-building activities—think whitewater rafting or CSR projects like building a playground—rather than solo outings, increase trust.

Adams also designs meetings around communication, believing it is critical to creating trust. He says, "Leaders delivering messages need to be more authentic. If the audience doesn't trust the message, they won't engage with the purpose."

Rather than using buzzwords to paint a rosy picture, to build trust research shows an organization should be specific about what it wants to accomplish. Meeting planners can further this process by: suggesting ways to deliver the message; designing an appropriate setting; advising on the right messengers (perhaps having several members of senior management onstage to contribute department-specific information); and choosing the right time to deliver the information. Too early on the first day and attendees may be jet legged, too late in the conference and attendees may not have time to digest the information and contribute to the program. Planners can also demonstrate trust in their attendees by addressing topics and including approaches suggested in pre-event surveys.

"The trust and emotional tie-in is amazing. You can't help respecting them for sharing. Sometimes you see someone and you think life came easy to them, and then you hear their story and you think 'Wow!"

—Tanya Perry

Adams is not just talking the talk on trust; he is designing Bishop-McCann's annual retreat around the results of a survey he just sent out. He says, "In years past we would already have started planning speakers, activities, food, etc. But now we're listening in a new way to what our associates are telling us we need to do."

Get Comfortable with Vulnerability

There are several ways to show vulnerability, a key building block of trust, ranging from asking for help with a particular goal, to sharing personal stories. Tanya Perry, president of sales at Fusion Performance Group, says that one method her company has used to promote trust contributes to both networking and expressing vulnerability at events. They use a storytelling company, Dear World, to help participants identify an experience that reveals who they are and what makes them tick. Perry says stories could be about the birth of their first child, or how they felt making a multimillion-dollar deal.

She says Dear World, "finds a way to boil it down to just a few words, and then they literally draw those words on the participant's body." As well as using photographs of the people in a slideshow and choosing a few people to share their stories with the whole audience on stage, participants share their stories one on one. Perry says, "The trust and emotional tie-in is amazing. You can't help respecting them for sharing. Sometimes you see someone and you think life came easy to them, and then you hear their story and you think 'Wow!'"

Perry has found that this vulnerability activity is particularly powerful when

employees are spread out around the country. It can show them that they all have things in common and helps them relate to each other. She also says the best implementation of this technique is to have senior managers tell their stories; these are the people an organization needs to trust the most.

Although Perry says that this vulnerability exercise has proven effective for many of Fusion's events, it is important to consult with a client about how they want to approach trust. For example, sharing too much information, and exposing vulnerability in leaders, can actually damage trust in a financial company, so it is important to define the type of trust a client wants to nurture. Perry says, "For pharmaceutical and financial services clients, it is often a retention issue. They want their sales people to be more engaged and invested in the company because they tend to move around a lot." Fusion uses events to increase attendees' investment in a company, and, she says, "Part of feeling invested is liking the company and feeling that they've got your back."

Promoting Trust Post-Event

Perry warns that while events are a good place to start the process, "Trust takes time!" She explains that Fusion does extensive follow-up after the "honeymoon period"—the three months after the event—but the questions are posed in such a way as to measure trust from different angles without actually mentioning the word. One example might be, "Do you feel like you can truly talk about anything to your supervisor?" Bishop-McCann also reaches out after events to follow up with attendees, and also to make sure that action on promises made during the event is communicated. Adams says, "We make the leaders of the company give those messages, and also progress updates throughout the year." Ofactor's Zak suggests attendees make presentations to peers who could not attend the meeting to share information. He says, "The reason for the meeting doesn't end when people go home, it needs to be renewed and kept alive."