

How SA businesses can rebuild trust

By [Gary Turner](#)

19 Jun 2017

Trust is an essential component of running a business in South Africa, and indeed, across the rest of the world. Sadly, at present, it's somewhat lacking - and it's not hard to see why. The country's economic and political troubles have collided with a wider, global movement away from the Western liberal consensus and towards populism and anti-establishment ideology.



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The upshot of this is that people don't believe in institutions or the individuals running them anymore. According to the [2017 Edelman Trust Barometer](#), only 15% of South Africans trust the government, and 67% believe the system is actively failing. Business trust declined by 4% between 2016 and 2017, and CEO credibility declined by 16%.

The significance of this problem shouldn't be understated. A business that is mistrusted is a business that customers aren't likely to patronise. When your institutional and personal credibility are in doubt, convincing people to put their faith in your offering is something of an uphill battle.

Fortunately, there's much your company can do to build confidence and trust among your target audience.

Trust people, and people will trust

It's not particularly controversial to say that your staff is the key to your business' success, but it is true nonetheless. Real leaders build and nurture their teams: they help them develop their unique talents and capabilities and they create environments where creativity, passion, and collaboration can thrive. When your employees are happy and productive, they do better work – and they're more likely to advocate for the business. This can make you more attractive to potential customers, potential hires, and the buying public.

Trust in your people – and people will come to trust you.

Customers don't speak 'corporate'

Insincerity breeds distrust. Most corporate communication teams are more or less tasked with targeting jargon-filled, personality-free messaging that neither offends nor appeals to anyone. The logic behind it makes a kind of sense: if you say nothing of substance, nobody can accuse you of anything substantial.

But this kind of careful, manicured communications strategy often has the effect of annoying people more. When you use language that the end-user finds boring or doesn't understand, you alienate them, and you make them suspect that you're hiding something. An apology that starts with 'We're sorry if X was offended by Y', or "We regret that Z was unhappy with our service" expresses denial more than contrition.

Be open, be honest, be outspoken, be blunt (if necessary), and admit your mistakes. A little honesty and personality go a long way.

Taking responsibility

It's not all doom and gloom: the Edelman Trust Barometer also suggests that 58% of those surveyed trust business more than government, media, and NGOs. At their best, businesses contribute to their community and take partial responsibility for its welfare.

Xero is a good example as it was founded with this precise goal in mind. Rod Drury, the CEO, obviously started out with the aim of making money – like any entrepreneur. But he saw no reason that he couldn't help the New Zealand economy at the same time, so he created a company that would help small businesses thrive. This is more important than you might think: when companies prosper, they pump money into the local communities; most obviously through tax, but also through creating jobs, and often through social responsibility initiatives.

Engaging with your team, with the public, and with your community in a productive and mutually beneficial way will help you build trust with all of them. Be conscious of your company, its place in the world, and its duty to the world and you can't go far wrong.

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