

What will make us *trust* *businesses?*

In moments of crisis, people need businesses to be empathetic and human. Rebecca Pardon explores how businesses can earn trust, starting with their employees.

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This article was originally published [communicatemagazine.com](https://www.communicatemagazine.com)

Big businesses are being watched with ever-greater scrutiny. As Ben and Jerry's publicly feuds with parent company Unilever and Credit Suisse surpasses its annual crisis-quota, social media serves as a stage upon which big players' misfortunes unfold like a tragic play.

Contrary to received wisdom, transparency doesn't seem to be making businesses behave better. Before today's increasingly inquisitive and sceptical audience, loyalty to big companies has long disappeared from the script.

Leading voice in employer branding, Simon Barrow, says being trustworthy is about sticking to strong values. "Basic company culture should be based on a level of integrity which shouldn't stop them from making mistakes, but when they do make a mistake, they shouldn't fudge it and should stick to their strong values," Barrow says.

A 'fudging' often occurs when business leaders spend too long enjoying the generous legroom of the say-do gap, while their hypocrisy spreads as disenchantment among employees. Internal communication is critical if a company wants to win back employee trust. Unfortunately, it is common for companies to prioritise their relationships with consumers first.

Indeed, it is rare that businesses are honest enough to admit to being largely driven by personal gain, with most big corporations falsely claiming to be "all about community, when they're not".

However, headlines forecasting a 'post-Covid organisational culture crisis' suggest that, in the remote landscape, loyalty to companies is dwindling inevitably as people prioritise quality time spent with their children or tending to neglected flowerbeds.

Despite efforts to extend an embracing arm into employees' home lives by organisations like Goldman Sachs, which ran virtual storytelling sessions for children of staff during lockdowns, the dispersion and subsequent depletion of corporate culture makes businesses far more prone to a fudge-up.

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The outward movement of office culture alone has resulted in the breakdown of the formal hierarchical company structures that are familiar. In a now-famous letter to Tesla employees in 2017, Elon Musk argues that the most effective communications flow freely within a company.

Yet what seemed quirky and experimental five years ago is now the reality companies are grappling with, as remote working has produced a more democratic work culture. This is proving to be too much freedom for the Tesla CEO however, who is now demanding that staff return to the office and tweeted a meme suggesting that home workers are 'lazy dogs'. Remote working means internal communications is facing an unprecedented challenge.

The real trustworthiness-test for companies is how the organisation is perceived by potential employees.



Nimai Swaroop, director of employer branding at Philip Morris, explains how companies need to approach talent in a conversational way, and put employees' stories at the forefront of employer branding. "Employer brand binds together everything you represent as an employer: what you stand for and what the 'lived experience' at your company is," Swaroop says.

"The truth behind a company culture is in the stories of employees. At Philip Morris, our employee brand activation focuses on employees telling their stories and sees them living the brand." While Philip Morris may well be winning hearts and minds through the stories of its employees, elsewhere the general concept of blind loyalty to an employer brand has long gone up in tobacco smoke.

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Trust is no longer placed in businesses and brands, but in people. Swaroop reiterates the importance of a consistent value system, but believes the flexibility and adaptability of how a company communicates is more important: "The truth of a company lies in the 'deal' you offer to potential employees. This is what will tell people how you are managing to adapt to meet people's needs."

Today, 'watercooler moments' have been replaced by chat pop-ups in the welcome Zoom-meeting intermission as someone's Wi-Fi re-boots. Employers are attending interviews nervous for the final 'any questions?' round, in which 20-somethings grill companies on their social responsibility commitments.

Businesses need to embrace the chaos and motley of the increasingly democratic, modern work culture and the opportunities that it brings. Instead of trying to win people's trust, they need to instead learn how to become trustworthy and, when faced with the spotlight of media scrutiny, prioritise communicating with their workforce first.



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