

A MATTER OF TRUST:

Understanding the Impact of Trust-Driving Attributes in Three Major American Companies in Media and Public Perceptions

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BACKGROUND

Trust is a critical factor in public relations scholarship and practice. It appears in several theories and models in the discipline. For instance, organization-public relationships scholarship emphasizes trust (Huang, 2001), and the common measure of reputation in crisis scholarship is also focused on trust (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In the profession, trust is viewed as the currency of relationships. While it has been studied and valued for decades, increasing distrust around fake news and demand for corporate advocacy and social responsibility have made understanding trust even more important today.

Trust is the result of trustworthiness, which has three distinct dimensions: ability, benevolence and integrity (Dirks & de Jong, 2022; Mayer et al., 1995; Mayer & Gavin, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method analysis that examines trustworthiness of three major companies (Amazon, Walt Disney, Walmart) through a survey of a nationally representative sample of the American public ($n = 354$) and a content analysis of recent news articles ($n = 1201$).

In the content analysis, the attributes of trustworthiness and sentiment of articles are measured and intercoder reliability is established. The survey uses a three-factor model of trustworthiness (Mayer & Gavin, 2005) to predict reputation (Net Promoter Score & negative word of mouth), as well as past purchases and future purchase intentions.

| Test | t | p | β | F | df | p | R^2 |
|--------------------|------|---------|---------|-------|---------|---------|-------|
| Trust Predicts NPS | | | | 554.7 | 3, 1061 | .000*** | .611 |
| Ability | 10.4 | .000*** | .324 | | | | |
| Benevolence | 4.6 | .000*** | .193 | | | | |
| Integrity | 6.9 | .000*** | .323 | | | | |

*Sourced from Table 2: Regression Tests -- * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$*

RESULTS

RQ1: Which attributes of trustworthiness contribute most to reputation and purchase intent?

The survey results show that, taken together, the three factors of trustworthiness significantly improved reputation with a large effect (word of mouth $R^2 = .630$, NPS $R^2 = .611$) and purchase intentions with small but significant effects (past purchases $R^2 = .075$, future intentions $R^2 = .104$).

To answer the primary research question, multiple regression found that ability and integrity are the most important predictors of the reputation factors, while benevolence is the only significant predictor of future purchase intentions.

RQ2: Which attributes of trustworthiness most improve media coverage?

The content analysis results show that incorporating attributes of trustworthiness into stories significantly influences the overall sentiment of articles toward organizations with ability ($\eta^2 = .737$) having a larger effect than benevolence ($\eta^2 = .226$) or integrity ($\eta^2 = .276$).

RQ3: How does news coverage of trustworthiness manifest in public opinion?

Finally, a side-by-side comparison of news coverage of the three companies taken in the month prior to the survey along with reported attitudes of participants regarding the companies shows that Amazon is rated the most trustworthy company, even though in the month prior to the survey, Disney was portrayed most positively in news coverage, showing trust is more likely built over a longer period of time.

IMPLEMENTATION & LIMITATIONS

In a time of misinformation and general distrust, this research can provide guidance to companies—the beacons customers look to—to build trust with content that emphasizes ability, benevolence and integrity. Increased trust leads to positive outcomes for business in the form of reputation and purchase intent.

However, different attributes of trustworthiness have a greater effect on different outcomes. An organization seeking better news coverage should emphasize **ability**. An organization seeking increased purchases should emphasize **benevolence**, while organizations concerned about word of mouth should emphasize **integrity** and ability. Based upon the comparison between the two methods, this study shows that trust is gained over a long period of time and not in a short window. In other words, building trust is a long-term investment that can pay big dividends.

This study lays the foundation for public relations professionals to create content that is more likely to build trust as well as develop metrics to measure the elements of trust aligned with organizational goals.

Some limitations of this study may include the focus on only three brands that do not span all industries, the size of companies analyzed that may not represent small to midsize companies and a limited timeframe of the news analysis. As such, we recommend replicating the study for other brands of different sizes, name recognition level and varied industries to further compare or challenge the broader application of results.



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Table 1: Survey - Descriptive Statistics of Variables

| Variable | α | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---------------------------|----------|-------|------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1. Ability | .945 | 31.06 | 8.00 | - | | |
| 2. Integrity | .926 | 27.55 | 8.69 | .784*** | - | |
| 3. Benevolence | .932 | 27.61 | 7.62 | .724*** | .888*** | - |
| 4. Negative Word of Mouth | .836 | 8.68 | 4.52 | -.731*** | -.762*** | -.662*** |

Table 2: Survey - Regression Tests

| Test | t | p | β | F | df | p | R ² |
|---------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Trust Predicts Negative Word of Mouth | | | | 600.249 | 3, 1061 | .000 | .630 |
| Ability | -11.695 | .000*** | -.354 | | | | |
| Benevolence | 2.870 | .004** | .118 | | | | |
| Integrity | -12.937 | .000*** | -.589 | | | | |
| Trust Predicts NPS | | | | 554.714 | 3, 1061 | .000 | .611 |
| Ability | 10.427 | .000*** | .324 | | | | |
| Benevolence | 4.603 | .000*** | .193 | | | | |
| Integrity | 6.921 | .000*** | .323 | | | | |
| Trust Predicts Past Purchases | | | | 28.585 | 3, 1061 | .000 | .075 |
| Ability | -1.994 | .046* | -.095 | | | | |
| Benevolence | -2.262 | .024* | -.146 | | | | |
| Integrity | -.727 | .464 | -.052 | | | | |
| Trust Predicts Future Purchases | | | | 41.033 | 3, 1061 | .000 | .104 |
| Ability | -1.504 | .133 | -.071 | | | | |
| Benevolence | -3.418 | .001** | -.218 | | | | |
| Integrity | -.755 | .451 | -.053 | | | | |

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 3: Content Analysis - Tukey's Post Hoc Tests

| Trustworthiness Attribute | Cond. 1 | Cond. 2 | Mean Diff. | S.E. | p |
|---------------------------|---------|---------|------------|------|-------|
| Ability | N/M | NEG | .811 | .039 | .000 |
| | N/M | NEU | -.178 | .087 | .172 |
| | N/M | POS | -1.130 | .028 | .000 |
| | NEG | NEU | -.989 | .090 | .000 |
| | NEG | POS | -1.940 | .037 | .000 |
| | NEU | POS | -.952 | .086 | .000 |
| Benevolence | N/M | NEG | 1.307 | .081 | .000 |
| | N/M | NEU | .318 | .307 | .730 |
| | N/M | POS | -.625 | .077 | .000 |
| | NEG | NEU | -.989 | .316 | .010 |
| | NEG | POS | -1.932 | .107 | .000 |
| | NEU | POS | .942 | .315 | .015 |
| Integrity | N/M | NEG | 1.373 | .066 | .000 |
| | N/M | NEU | 1.417 | .420 | .004 |
| | N/M | POS | -.583 | .168 | .003 |
| | NEG | NEU | .044 | .424 | 1.000 |
| | NEG | POS | -1.956 | .178 | .000 |
| | NEU | POS | -2.000 | .451 | .000 |

