

“Alternative Facts” and “Fake News”

Dealing with the Loss of Trust



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Communicators face a tough challenge today: gaining and maintaining trust. The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer recently reported the largest-ever drop in trust across the institutions of government, business, media, and non-government organizations.

This is a serious problem for people who have to communicate for any of these organizations.

The authors of the study say the general public now considers the average person just as credible a source of information about a company as is a technical or academic expert.

Think about that. For a large portion of the population, a disgruntled worker who falsely claims a plant is unsafe could have more credence than company officials, technical experts, or OSHA reports. An example on a broader scale is this: 97% of scientists who have studied global warming link it to human activity such as the use of fossil fuels. But even top officials of the Trump government and many citizens ignore the science or say they don't believe it.

Why this disbelief in the face of such credible and overwhelming evidence to the contrary? The Edelman report provides some insight with this comment, “The cycle of distrust is magnified by the emergence of a media echo chamber that reinforces personal beliefs while shutting out opposing points of view.” In other words, to many people an unsupported statement by a Rush Limbaugh or even the fact-bending President Trump will carry more weight than a fully-researched and documented story in the Washington Post. Fox News devotees don't tune in to MSNBC and vice versa.

The late New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan was fond of saying, “Everybody is entitled to his own opinion but not his own facts.” Moynihan must be turning over in his grave.

Miami attorney Alejandro Miyar, a former national spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, says “society is more concerned with getting things first than getting things right. The era of ‘alternative facts’ is an obvious symptom of technological disruption and evolution.” In this context, the Edelman report says 53% of respondents believe the current overall system has failed them, that it is unfair and offers little hope for the future. It

points to “economic and societal fears including corruption, immigration, globalization, eroding social values, and the pace of innovation.”

In such circumstances, how do you maintain and build trust for your organization? Politico’s Sergio Bustos, who is based in Miami, gives this advice to communicators:

- **Know your local journalist.** Personal contacts and personal connections are more valuable than ever in the digital age.
- **Full transparency.** Be as open as possible. Tell us your angle. I insist reporters tell those we are writing about exactly what we are writing about.
- **Source your facts.** Back up your statements by providing the link or source.

Alejandro and Sergio are two of the experts in a seminar I will be moderating in Miami on May 10 entitled “Navigating the Era of Alternative Facts: Restoring Truth and Trust.” It will feature experts in public relations, media, law, and government. The program will have active audience participation. It’s my hope that many such seminars will be held around the country and that they will play a role in returning some sanity to the way we communicate today.