Building Trust

People are more likely to be influenced by someone they perceive as being:

1. Credible
2. Expert
3. Trustworthy

Trust through a credible demeanour

It's important to fully appreciate how you come across, especially when under pressure at critical points in a meeting. For instance, the pressure may be on when meeting someone for the first time.

There is some debate over the efficacy of studies around first impressions – some suggest people come to conclusions about others after the first 7 seconds and 90% of a first impression is based on factors such as appearance, posture, facial expressions and tone of voice.

Whatever the validity of various studies, it is worth avoiding the risk of having to make up for a poor first impression. If nothing else, the primacy effect applies – people will tend to remember the first few things more than those in the middle.

Therefore, it is important to understand what a credible demeanour actually "looks" like. The term suggests credibility without being hesitant or arrogant. It pays to look at how you use your eyes, voice, posture, hands and language and decide whether your use of these tools is likely to create an impression of hesitancy, arrogance or credibility in the eyes of the person you are dealing with.

Also, what does credibility look like for your industry? What does a credible lawyer look like (and sound like), as opposed to a credible banker, or creative director?

It is also worthwhile to examine how you feel as opposed to how you actually come across to another person. It's very common to find that, when a person who is, say, naturally hesitant in a certain situation tries to appear confident they instead may feel arrogant (and as a result quickly default to their comfort zone of hesitancy). We call this a 'perception gap' – in my experience, this is the number one reason people fail to effectively use their personal demeanour for greater credibility.

Trust through relevant expertise

What is it about your background that suggests the client should trust you? Is it your education or career background, the deals that you have done, the issues you have dealt with or the results you have achieved? The expertise needs to be relevant to the client.

Practise and fine-tune sound bites about yourself that you can naturally inject into a conversation at the earliest possible point in your relationship with the client – messages about you that take about 30 seconds to articulate.

Remember that points about your expertise will be more powerful if they come from an independent third party.

Trust through understanding

The more you are able to distil and demonstrate your understanding of the real issues affecting the individual in front of you, the more likely it is you will win that individual's trust.

Obviously, asking a lot of appropriate questions about the client's goals and problems is critical, but also use your expertise where possible. For example, you might assume that the client is possibly facing a number of challenges that, in your experience, are faced by other clients in similar situations, so where appropriate, talk about those challenges and check with the client to establish whether your assumptions are correct.

Trust through candour

As far as the client is concerned, it may be that you come to the table with a certain amount of baggage – rightly or wrongly, they may have formed a belief about you, your organisation or your offer based on past experience. For instance, a client might think: "The firm overcharged me heavily on that last deal and we never cleared it up!"

This can also be described as the 'elephant in the room' – a big (and probably sensitive) issue that both of you are fully aware of but is not being talked about. On some occasions, being upfront about baggage or a deficiency in your offer can be extremely disarming and encourage the client to trust you. Typically, the best way to deal with the elephant is to acknowledge the issue but also quickly provide any solid evidence of how things have changed for the better or how a problem can be fixed.

Trust through professionalism

Sometimes it's the small things that undermine trust – not being on time, not having the right material available or presenting unprofessional material full of spelling mistakes. Maybe it's the shirt you're wearing. Why take the risk? Carry out an audit of every aspect of how you present yourself and communicate with the client using a trusted colleague as a sounding board or devil's advocate. Even experienced business development people revert to bad habits, so a regular audit is a good idea.

Another way to demonstrate professionalism in a meeting is to take control of the agenda where necessary, with the agreement of the client. Sometimes a meeting that meanders may reflect poorly on your credibility in the eyes of the client. Maybe the client wants to hear more about your solution but you want to learn more about the client so that you can present a tailored solution, but the client may get frustrated by your questions and the fact you don't appear to be answering their question about your capability.

Set a mini agenda to overcome this problem – ask if it's okay to provide a broad, thumbnail sketch of your capabilities, then explain you would be keen to learn more about the client so you can provide a more detailed and tailored outline of how you can help.

The key take-away's for you from this lesson should be:

1. In introductory meetings with prospects, make sure you are demonstrating credibility, expertise and trustworthiness.
2. Make sure you test any assumptions you are making with the prospect. Even if you already know a lot about their operating environment or industry.
3. Trust is built on the back of little things like reliability and accuracy.