

Boosting public trust in scientists hangs on communications methods

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Geah Pressgrove, WVU associate professor and program chair of advertising and public relations. Credit: West Virginia University

While debate over COVID-19 guidelines and vaccine development has raised skeptics' eyebrows and undermined confidence, a West Virginia University associate professor says that communication is essential for the science community to gain the American public's trust. According to

[Geah Pressgrove](#), scientists and communications professionals need to rethink how they communicate through four distinct dimensions of trust: competence, integrity, benevolence and openness.

In practice, communication objectives should be considered when assessing [trust](#), Pressgrove says. "In other words, 'What are you trying to accomplish with the communication to your audience?' Those objectives should influence the ways in which you assess perceptions. For instance, we see many science communicators simply assessing the outcome of knowledge gain; however, there is substantial evidence that knowledge doesn't change behaviors," she adds.

The researchers set out to increase conceptual clarity of trust and found that a four-factor measurement scale provides value when measuring perceptions of scientists, depending on the communication objectives and research goals. In this solution, items measure competence (ability/expertise), integrity (honesty), benevolence (warmth) and openness (willingness to listen), explains Pressgrove.

"It is reasonable to assume the public is skeptical of science-related issues," says Pressgrove. "In the past, there has been a tendency towards dumping volumes of information and expecting our audience to naturally understand and accept the claims. Instead, we need to refocus on the communication objectives that make the most sense for science-based [communication](#). Recognizing when and why people trust scientists will help us communicate more effectively by putting the emphasis where needed."

More information: John C. Besley et al, Reassessing the Variables Used to Measure Public Perceptions of Scientists, *Science Communication* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1075547020949547](https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547020949547)

Provided by West Virginia University

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