

Are you good at what you do? Bragging about it could make people trust you less

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The next time you find yourself in a situation that could earn you money, you might do well to keep your confidence in check.

If you don't, it could cost you trust, according to new University of Arizona research—and in business, losing trust often costs you money.

Social scientists have long understood that when people are smart and skilled, they're likely to garner trust in situations where money is involved. Being intelligent and good at your job will earn you raises. Salespeople who know their products well will sell more of them. And businesses that excel at [customer service](#) will get more customers.

To appear more capable—and therefore more trustworthy—many people resort to bragging or intimidation, according to another longstanding theory that researchers call impression management.

But a new paper, to be published this week in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, suggests that common methods people use to garner trust could very well have the opposite effect.

"If you consider yourself a highly capable individual, have a good education, are successful in life, then I would say dial it down a notch in presenting yourself to others or managing impressions about what you can do," said Martin Reimann, an associate professor of marketing in the Eller College of Management and the paper's lead author. "It can backfire, and people might become distrusting or suspicious."

Beyond the day-to-day applications of the study's findings, the research adds new understanding of how humans manage trust in a variety of situations or relationships, said Reimann, whose research involves studying trust in the context of business and marketing. Reimann wrote the paper with Christoph Hueller, a doctoral student studying marketing in the Eller College; associate professor Oliver Schilke; and Karen S. Cook with Stanford University.

"We challenged the underlying theory that ability always leads to trust by

saying, "Step back, wait a minute, is that true under certain conditions?" Reimann said. "And since impression management is so widespread, we wondered how it impacts the well-known effect of ability on trust."

To answer their question, the researchers designed seven online experiments—which mimicked potential real-life scenarios—to gauge participants' trust. The scenarios included buying a TV online, making a judgment call about a coworker's idea, clicking an ad for a product on Facebook and others.

For example, in one experiment, participants shopped for a TV in an online marketplace, similar to Amazon, with third-party vendors. Customer reviews with star ratings told participants how capable or competent vendors were, and each vendor's ad either did or did not include a boastful statement of self-promotion. These conditions were randomly assigned to each study participant.

Designing seven studies, Reimann said, allowed researchers to reach more people and explore a range of variables that might affect someone's willingness to trust. There were more than 106,000 participants across all seven studies.

The experiments showed that participants were more likely, unsurprisingly, to trust people or companies that appeared more capable. But every study also showed that highly capable people or companies were viewed as less trustworthy if they also boastfully promoted themselves.

The finding advances [social scientists'](#) understanding of what drives trust, Reimann said.

"My co-authors and I see trust as a central variable or concept that holds together society," Reimann added. "If we don't trust each other, then a

lot of processes could come to a standstill. It's important to understand what it is in the first place that leads people to [trust](#) each other, and how we can foster that at different levels of society. That's what we want to further uncover."

More information: Impression management attenuates the effect of ability on trust in economic exchange, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2118548119](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2118548119).

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