

You can trust me: Five shortcuts to show that you're for real

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Hack your trustworthiness

Cristian Bortes/EyeEm/Getty

By Douglas Heaven

When you first meet someone, it makes sense to be wary. But the surprising truth is that most people are actually trustworthy – and trusting. That is according to Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist at Claremont Graduate University in California who has studied the chemical underpinnings of trust for more than a decade. Zak has found that the hormone oxytocin plays a critical role in signalling trustworthiness and is triggered by a wide range of cues, including subtle signals like eye contact, body language and even smell.

Read more: [Who can you trust? How tech is reshaping what we believe](#)

We use these cues to make an initial assessment, but building deeper trust with someone new tends to take time. When you haven't got a lot of time to spare – if you're a [surgeon](#) who needs a family to trust in your decision right now, or even a TaskRabbit “tasker” who has to convince a new customer every day that you are competent with a drill, for instance – there are a few shortcuts you can take.

1. Hug people

When Zak meets people he makes a point of [giving them a hug](#) – even the police. “I hug these cops in body armour and they love it, their faces just light up,” he says. “I then tell them that they all like me now because I hacked their

brains.” The trick here takes advantage of some deep-seated but simple assumptions we have about human relationships. Typically, you only hug people you like, says Zak. So hugging someone can make both parties feel more positively towards the other.

Just getting physically close to someone helps too. “My brain gets a ton of info when I’m hugging someone rather than shaking hands from three feet away,” says Zak. “It’s a great way to get to know what someone’s about. I hug everybody so we can get down to business faster.”

2. Feign intimacy

With an increasing number of our interactions taking place online, physical contact is often not an option. We will probably never replace the gut feeling you get when you meet somebody face to face, says Zak. But there are other ways to fake intimacy. If you are selling something on eBay, include a handwritten note, for example. It can change the way a buyer feels about you and make them more likely to leave a good review.

Many companies also push the illusion that they have an intimate relationship with us, using our first name and adopting casual or jokey language – something that writer Leigh Alexander has called the “[intimacy economy](#)”.

3. Flaunt your reputation

The main driver of [trust online](#) is reputation. The sharing economy boom is powered by platforms like [Airbnb](#) and eBay that make it easy for anyone to see how trustworthy an individual is thanks to their reviews. Someone with a lot of good reviews is more likely to be trusted by a more diverse range of people than someone with few reviews – or a lot of bad ones.

But not all bad reviews are bad news. A review that complained that an Airbnb host talked too much might read as a plus to someone who wanted to meet new people. The simple fact that this information was made available makes people feel as if they are familiar with the unknown, helping them get over “stranger danger”, says Nick Shapiro, director of trust and risk management at Airbnb.

Read more: [Leap of faith – How Airbnb gets us to trust complete strangers](#)

4. Show your weakness

You might think you will appear more trustworthy if you seem confident or assertive. But admitting you have a problem and asking for help may be more effective. In his new book *Trust factor: the science of creating high-performance companies*, Zak recommends that instead of always pretending they have everything covered, managers should be more willing to admit defeat and ask their employees for possible solutions. Honest communication beats trying not to look weak, says Zak. He thinks it’s a lesson that political leaders could do well to learn as well.

5. Trust others first

Ultimately, trust begets trust. Experiments have shown that when people are trusted their levels of oxytocin spike, which in turn makes them more inclined to trust others back. These [biological mechanisms](#) probably evolved to encourage cooperation, which is an essential component in all human societies. So if all else fails, suck it up and take a punt on someone else first.

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