

BUILDING A DIGITAL HUMANITY: WAYS TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN TRUST IN VIRTUAL SALES MEETINGS



These are uncertain times for everyone. Businesses across the globe have found themselves navigating a completely new environment, where a ‘trust through touch’ approach is simply no longer possible. While some businesses may have integrated virtual sales into their repertoire long before the coronavirus pandemic, brick and mortar services continue to feel the shift more heavily.

Regardless of your experience, however, this change is all-encompassing and we only need to look at the growth of online communication services such as Zoom, Skype or Microsoft Teams to prove its scale. Zoom’s daily meeting participants soared from 10 million in November 2019 to a colossal 300 million in April 2020 (increasing by 100 million in the month of April alone).

Yet as our mediums shift, are we keeping up? In our survey, 73% of professionals asked said that they found it harder to build trust in virtual face-to-face meetings as opposed to physical ones. This is an issue we hope to change.

WHAT IS TRUST

As an overview, trust is a fundamental part of human decision-making. It is a rational process which builds up over time through social collaboration and is determined by the buyer’s willingness to be vulnerable to a seller. It is important to be aware that trust is a separate entity to distrust, which has a stronger effect on the buyer’s economic decision-making due to it taking place in the primeval areas of the brain (Dimoka 2010). When activated, it shuts down the collaborative part of the brain by evoking an emotional response associated with ‘fight or flight’. It is therefore important for businesses to consider eliminating distrust as well as building trust.

SO WHY DOES THIS MATTER NOW?

Unfortunately, as we become more tuned-in to internet scams and online ads, the internet has become an uncertain place for many. Since distrust is commonly considered as the most powerful element of economic decision-making, we think the ‘why?’ is a fundamental starting point for cultivating a trusting environment. Here we have outlined the key reasons why distrust might be felt in virtual meetings before we look at the solutions.

THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND TRUST

In Angelika Dimoka’s 2010 neurological study ‘What Does the Brain Tell Us About Trust and Distrust?’ she outlines that trust and distrust are associated with two major processes in the brain: The prefrontal cortex and the limbic system.

Trust has been linked to the former - the more cognitive, evolved area of the brain. It is associated with rationality, calculating uncertainty, and prediction.

Distrust, on the other hand, is a separate process which is associated with the limbic system, generally linked to emotional and social processes. It is associated with a ‘fight or flight’ reaction and is much more primitive, instinctual and powerfully felt.





5 REASONS FOR DISTRUST IN VIRTUAL FACE-TO-FACE SALES MEETINGS:

MISUNDERSTANDING

- 80+% of professionals in our survey stated they found it hard to interpret social cues online.

Reason for distrust

- Unclear body language can create artificial cues which are associated with lying, initiating the prospect's intuitive detection of distrust and undermining credibility.

DISTANCE

- The shared, physical space of a meeting room makes it easier to establish similarities with a prospect and create a comfortable and trusting environment.
- The virtual space of the online conference room emphasises the distance between you and your prospect, which might make it harder to find and build on similarities.

Reason for distrust

- Our brains love similarities and it's important to establish these as quickly as possible so we can trust. When we struggle to find them, we feel distanced from the other person and subsequently develop apprehensions which may hinder our capability to cooperate.

DISHONESTY/DECEPTION

- In a [research study](#) carried out by Bekkering and Shim, one of their findings was that 'with a slow signal, it may appear to the viewer that the speaker hesitates, and hesitation in answering is generally considered to be a sign of dishonesty' (2006).

Reason for distrust

- If dishonesty is established, the foundations of trust are broken and a buyer is much more likely to feel the powerful emotional response of fear and much less likely to return for another meeting.

SAFETY

- Virtual conferencing could be a completely new environment for your buyer. They may still hold apprehensions about the legitimacy of online transactions.

Reason for distrust

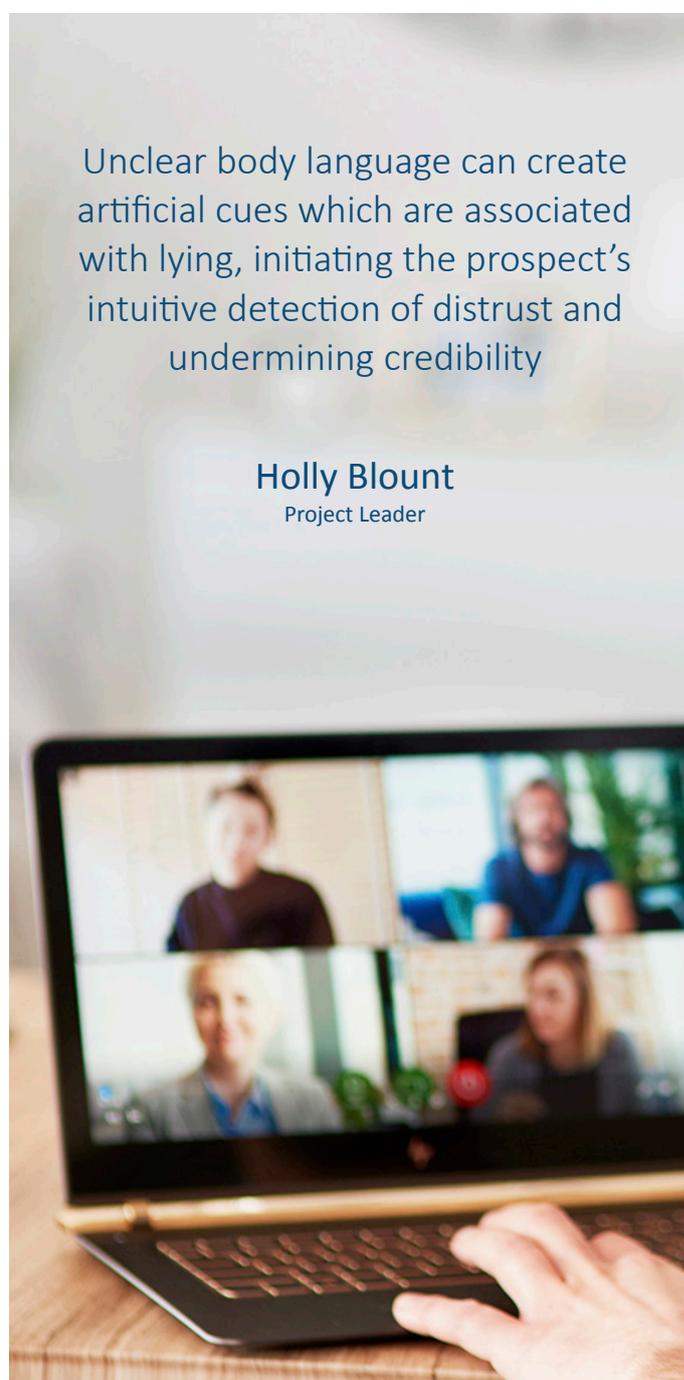
- Distrust is intertwined with our instinctual need to feel safe, hence why it is associated with the primeval areas of our brain. If a person feels unsafe, especially in a new situation like virtual conferencing, they react with fear and are more likely to flee the situation.

LACK OF/LOSS OF INFORMATION

- All of these factors include a lack of or loss of information, undermining the virtual sales meeting.

Reason for distrust

- Once a person feels unsafe, their immediate reaction is to withhold information, creating an ineffective conversation where co-operation is broken down.





SOLUTIONS: ADOPT, ADAPT, ACCENTUATE

Despite our preferences and preconceptions, companies are finding ways to acclimatise in the most innovative (but often the simplest!) ways and they are seeing success. They are achieving this by **adopting** the technology which provides the best online results, **adapting** their findings to their specific goals, then **accentuating** their own characteristics and character. One client of ours has since found virtual face to face meetings a more successful, efficient and cost-effective way of selling to prospects than standard face-to-face meetings. Why? Because they have adopted Virtual Reality into their sales approach, adapted the medium to portray their company ethos, and accentuated their innovative character by providing a unique talking-point to discuss in their online sales meetings.

At Chartered Developments, we understand that a clear routine is fundamental for building trust in any business situation. We have hence split our guide into 3 parts: pre-meeting, the meeting and post meeting, with each section containing advice and solutions for every stage of the negotiation process. Our ideas might not always be the perfect fit for your brand, but it should serve as food for thought as to what is.

PRE-MEETING

It is already a common prerequisite for companies to provide an informative PDF or email before the meeting, in fact, 75% of our survey participants confirmed this. But when we have lost the beautiful building, the meticulous receptionist and all the other visual cues of success which are exhibited in a face-to-face meeting, are our usual methods still enough to incite trust in an online meeting?

1. PRACTICE 'PRE-SUASION'

- Pre-suasion is the method of outlining your company ethos, reputation and success in a PDF, email etc before your meeting. It provides authority on your brand so people know they can trust you.
- Think context: people are engaging more with their phones now than ever before, so you need to connect with them on the most appealing media for this platform.

Possible solution:

- Consider adopting video. There are some staggering statistics which outline video as the most effective online sales media. If people are impressed by your virtual candour, they are much more likely to trust your credibility.

- Many of our clients have found success in tailoring a pre-meeting video personally to each prospect and some are even using VR to provide an in-house tour of their offices.

2. KEEP CONSISTENCY: FAMILIARITY AND COMMITMENT

Familiarity

- It's important that your pre-meeting information matches with your website, your brand and even the person who will hold the virtual meeting in order to provide familiarity.

Possible solution:

- Provide a virtual video introduction of the meeting-holder in their home so people are not surprised by what they see in the online meeting.
- Create familiarity by finding similarity: reduce the feeling of distance in online conferences by researching your prospect's interests or goals beforehand. See if you can work them into your setting (maybe a football scarf or a flag) and your conversation so they feel special and they know you have their priorities in your best interests.

Commitment

- Robert Cialdini's [6 Principles of Persuasion](#) outlines an important point on keeping consistency through commitment.
- Getting people to commit to small, easy and free agreements creates loyalty. It invests people in the journey (see the [sunk cost fallacy](#)) and makes them more likely to see it through and commit to the larger sale at hand.

Possible solution:

- The act of the online meeting itself can be a commitment: try getting your prospect to send you the time and date of the meeting to build co-operation.
- Alternatively, send them a short link to read or a questionnaire to fill out before the meeting takes place – in doing so, the prospect is undertaking an act of commitment.

THE MEETING

It's time to relearn everything you thought you knew – how to speak, how to move, how even to make eye contact. A digital humanity requires us to rethink our habits.

1. ACCENTUATE SOCIAL CUES

BODY LANGUAGE

- Be aware of video limitations. Keep your movement concise and your hands close to your body so that all of your gestures can be seen and understood clearly.
- If you are a gestural person, perhaps sit further away from the screen so you have a wider visual range to move around in.

SPEECH

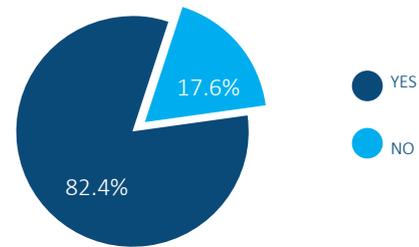
- Slow your speech down – think like an actor on a stage who needs to announce clearly for the audience members on the back row.
- Many of our clients often switch to dramatic monologue. Consider our list of questions you can print out and refer to so you're always remembering to keep the other person engaged.

EYE-CONTACT

- When it comes to virtual face-to-face meetings, eye-contact means looking at the camera, not the person.
- Bekkering and Shim's practical study investigates this issue of eye-contact in virtual conferencing. They suggest using a smaller device such as a mobile phone as a solution. On a mobile, the camera is much closer to the image of the person on the screen, making it easier to look at both their face and the 'eye' of the camera.
- Your prospect will understand that you can't always look at the camera, but you can still maintain conversational flow by looking into the camera every time you finish speaking to give the social cue to speak.

OTHER SOCIAL CUES

- When speaking, lean towards the camera to indicate that the other person should be listening and lean back when it is their turn to speak.
- Consider establishing a clear routine for the meeting beforehand so the prospect knows which cues to expect. For example: 'I'm going to describe our



82.4% of professionals in our survey find it hard to read social cues on virtual conferences.

- company and then afterwards you can ask me any questions'.
- These may seem simple actions, but 80% of people on our survey stated that social cues are hard to read. It is therefore clear that we need to accentuate social cues and adopt them into our online sales meetings.

2. ENGAGE IN LEVEL 3 CONVERSATION

- Judith E. Glaser's Conversational Intelligence notes that trust comes from level 3 conversations: deep and meaningful conversations which are co-operative and driven by benevolence.
- Level 3 conversations require you to understand the other person's needs so they don't feel that you are being altruistic.

Possible Solution:

- Show curiosity in your prospect's interests and goals and engage in meaningful (non-strategic) conversation.
- Let your prospect know that you understand them by relaying their thoughts back to them, for example 'I can see that you have a strong attention to detail and I will accommodate to that'
- Showing vulnerability through having engaging items in your frame (such as photos, memorabilia etc.) can be a really great way to incite conversation and an even better ice breaker than face-to-face meetings.
- Practice 'active listening'; I see, really, goodness me, how did you feel about that, go on, ooh tell me more, what happened next, and more to let the prospective client know you are with them.

POST MEETING

Perhaps you'll notice that we didn't mention anything about sales – that's because we think your sales approach needs to adapt to the way people engage with online meetings.

It is important to understand that online sales meetings are much less engaging than face-to-face meetings. This is why we consider time to be an important part to reconsider. We suggest having shorter online meetings which are split across multiple meetings to keep your prospect engaged and to build trust gradually.

1. SHOW COMMITMENT

- By spreading your time across multiple meetings, you are providing a clear structure and routine for your prospect to follow, it also shows that you are committed to their priorities and willing to build a trusting and cooperative relationship before proposing any contract.
- Online meetings are hard work, an hour of face to face is fine, an hour online is tough, engagement decreases.

KEEP THEM COMMITTED

- It might be counterintuitive to shut off a call with a potential client before talking contracts, but getting your prospect to agree to multiple meetings also feeds back into Cialdini's commitment principle, allowing them to build trust and increase your chances of them agreeing to the big stuff.

Possible Solution:

- One way to ensure your chances of commitment is to get them to write down the time/set up the link for the next call: multiple studies have found that the act of writing a commitment down makes you more likely to follow it through.

2. RECIPROCATION

- Likeability is fundamental to building trust in transactions.

- One way to build this is to reciprocate what your prospect opens up to you in the first meeting – remember their interests and make a conscious effort to recall or research into them – they might have mentioned that they like badminton, if you come across an interesting article about badminton you might want to pass it onto them.

TO CONCLUDE

Virtual meetings are the safest way to maintain social distancing, but they can also provide a unique opportunity to build trust in sales meetings.

Businesses have been adapting to online sales meetings well. 100% of answers in our survey show that business are comfortable with using online face-to-face media. It's just a case of finding ways to excel; to adopt a digital humanity by emphasising what we already know and understanding the limitations and advantages of online meetings.

Virtual face-to-face meetings have and will continue to be a normal way of conducting sales.

We believe that learning how to specialise and excel in this field holds a powerful potential for a quicker, cheaper, environmentally friendly way to sell to prospects without undermining the human and economic importance of trust.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND FURTHER READING

PROJECT LEADER AND AUTHOR:
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ADVISORS:

SARA BURGESS DUXBURY MSC BSC.
PETER ROSENWALD BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT COACH
AND MANY THANKS TO AN EXTENSIVE LIST OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS ASSOCIATED WITH CHARTERED DEVELOPMENTS

FURTHER READING:

JUDITH E. GLASER CONVERSATIONAL INTELLIGENCE.
ROBERT CIALDINI PRE-SUASION: A REVOLUTIONARY WAY TO INFLUENCE AND PERSUADE.
ANGELIKA DIMOKA "WHAT DOES THE BRAIN TELL US ABOUT TRUST?"

WHAT COULD YOU ACHIEVE WITH US ON YOUR TEAM?

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