

*Presenting a credible image is a basic necessity when representing your organization. By building your credibility over time, you can more likely count on the public's good faith support when your stakeholders are critical of actions taken by your agency. Use these tips to build and maintain credibility and to sustain the positive image you have worked hard to create.*

## **PE TIP SHEET NO. 14:**

### **Credibility Matters**

**BY**

**John A. Giachino**  
**Chair, FWEA Public Education Committee**

Credibility is perhaps the most critical factor affecting how you and your organization are viewed. Simply stated, being credible is the perception of being trustworthy and believable. Credibility is something that is earned. So how can you build credibility?

#### ***Building Credibility***

It starts with allowing people to get an inside look at who you are. People want to feel like they know you and your organization. It is increasingly important that you communicate with an attitude of friendliness, helpfulness and professionalism.

#### ***The First 30 Seconds***

According to Linda Kelly, Managing Director for Public Education for the Water Environment Federation, about 50% of the perception that you are credible and can be trusted is established in the first 30 seconds of contact. Once someone decides whether you are credible, they almost never change their minds about it. The other 50% of establishing credibility is composed of your competence and expertise, your honesty and your commitment.

Credibility is all about communication. Effective communication is 55% visual, 38% vocal and 7% verbal. So it's not just what you say, it how you say it and how you look when you say it. Remember to engage your body, your voice and your mind when communicating. Adopt a leader mindset. Make eye contact and use effective body language. Modulate your voice when talking.

#### ***Be Yourself***

You are who you are. People can tell when you try to be someone you're not. Remember there is no "best" style and that every individual has unique behaviors. As Linda Kelly points out, your style, which is made up of your beliefs, values, personal habits and conventions governs who you are and how you communicate. So enjoy being yourself and let people see the real you. Assuredly, your credibility will improve.

### ***Be Prepared***

You can never be overly prepared when communicating. Take the time to learn the facts and understand the issues. Abraham Lincoln said, “Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.” Then communicate the facts with the confidence that you know what you are talking about.

### ***Be Consistent***

A key factor is being consistent. People are more likely to trust an organization or person who acts in a similar manner most of the time. John Sullivan, a technical manager for a Fortune 1000 company who has written extensively on project management issues writes, “Inconsistent behavior—acting differently from what is communicated—is one of the quickest ways for a leader to lose trust.” Consistency applies to every aspect of you and your organization’s practices and performance. Ensure that all of your communications are consistent and your services consistently meet the quality standards that your organization has established.

### ***Tell the Truth***

Telling the truth is always the best way. Mark Twain once said, “Always tell the truth. That way, you don't have to remember what you said.” You don't always have to tell everything, but what you do say must always be truthful.

### ***Sell Benefits, Not Features***

Make sure when you communicate with your customers about a function your organization performs that you emphasize benefits, not features. For example, say your organization is about to establish a stormwater utility and begin collecting fees from your customers to sustain the utility. Describe the utility to your customers in terms of benefits to the environment, public quality of life rather than the number of retention ponds and miles of pipe.

### ***Walk In Your Customers' Shoes***

Take the time to walk in your customers' shoes before developing specific outreach campaigns. This will enable you to clearly state benefits that your customers are looking for in a way that they will find believable. Strive to deliver services that provide even more value than promised.

### ***Maintaining Credibility***

OK. You've finally established your credibility. People know who you are. People trust you. They value you and believe they are getting their money's worth in their dealings with you. That is the reward for having credibility.

But your job isn't over yet. Maintaining your credibility means you have to tirelessly promote yourself and your organization.

### ***Set Standards***

Strong credibility takes a long time and much effort to build. It can be destroyed quickly and sometimes can never be regained. Have you noticed that once a person or a business gains a bad reputation it can be extremely hard to change? For your business to achieve it's full potential, it is important that you set standards and live by them so that you are constantly building your credibility.

### ***Be Responsive***

Be responsive to your customers and stakeholders. Respond to their needs. That's how you encourage loyalty. That's how you maintain credibility.

### ***Keep In Touch***

Maintaining your credibility means keeping in touch. Previous Tip Sheets have provided information on techniques you can use to keep in touch with your customers. See Tip Sheet No. 8, *More Tools for Your Communication Toolkit*, for techniques you can use to reach your customers and other stakeholders.

### ***In the End***

Remember that each thing you do in your business will affect your image and that of your organization. Continuously seek opportunities to maintain your credibility. Thomas Alva Edison said, "Opportunity is missed by most because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work." You have to work hard to establish and maintain your credibility. So get those overalls on and get to work!

*You can download a reprint of this and other PE Tip Sheets from the FWEA web site at <http://fwea.cnsusa.com/cms/index.cfm?primarykeylist=,234,248,266,1669,1675>*