

How credible are your communications? The Thinkshift® Credibility Quotient™ gives you the score.

Credibility is key not only to communications success, but also to business success. And the bar is particularly high in clean tech and sustainability fields because target audiences are skeptical about green marketing claims or are analytically minded professionals who make decisions based on data. (Often they are both.)

Highly credible communications help you stand out from the crowd and stand up to third-party scrutiny; support sales efforts by answering customer questions up front; and provide a basis for accurate, positive media coverage. Communications that lack credibility fail to motivate customers or other target audiences because they're not persuasive; slow the sales process because potential customers have a lower level of comfort and understanding; and expose you to skeptical examination that can result in long-lasting harm to your reputation when reality doesn't match up to your claims.

Quantify your credibility

Credibility is too important to assess based on insider impressions, which inevitably are colored by partisan enthusiasm. The Thinkshift® Credibility Quotient™ gives you a way to measure credibility—and see how you stack up against competitors.

It rates the credibility of any type of communication (websites, reports, marketing collateral) on a weighted 100-point scale. The system considers 10 factors integral to credibility and scores for each, with the most important receiving the most weight.

Thinkshift can provide a Credibility Quotient for a single communications vehicle or an entire program, or benchmark your communications against others in your field. A detailed Credibility Quotient report reveals not only where your communications are falling short, but also missed opportunities to bolster your case. The report shows what's behind the numbers and gives guidance for improving communications in areas that will have the most impact. Comments address how the communication's goals relate to credibility factors, and context issues such as the competitive environment and public concerns.

Based on expertise and research

To develop the Credibility Quotient, Thinkshift principals drew on their decades of combined experience in journalism and as communications consultants for publications, businesses, nonprofits, and institutions.

They also took into account sustainability watchdogs' criteria, and research on ethical persuasion techniques, online communications, and marketing communications.*

For example, social psychology research has found that people are motivated to follow others' behavior. That makes testimonials, particularly from people much like the target audience, powerfully persuasive, so Credibility Quotient ratings take that into account in the Support for Claims factor. Ample research shows that people perceive companies that mention drawbacks or challenges to their service or product as more trustworthy. That finding is reflected in the Attention to Challenges factor. Research on website credibility in particular has found that unprofessional design and poor usability reduce perceived credibility; the Credibility Quotient accounts for that in the Presentation factor.

*You can find overviews of some of this research in *Yes! 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to be Persuasive*, by Noah J. Goldstein, Steve J. Martin, and Robert B. Cialdini, Free Press 2008; "Understanding Web Credibility: A Synthesis of the Research Literature," by Jonathan Lazar, Gabriele Meiselwitz, and Jinjuan Feng, *Foundations and Trends in Human Computer Interaction*, April 2007 v1 i2 p152(26); and "Crafting Key Messages and Talking Points—Or Grounding Them in What Research Tells Us," by Cornelius B. Pratt, *Public Relations Quarterly*, Fall 2004.

Thinkshift Credibility Quotient rating criteria

The Thinkshift Credibility Quotient rates communications on 10 factors integral to credibility.

For nine factors, we assign up to 100 points each based on how often or how thoroughly the communication achieves standards for that factor. For example, when rating Support for Claims, one factor considers whether data sources and testimony are trustworthy. We then assign a preset score based

on the answer. The total score for each factor is converted to a weighted score based on the factor's relative importance. For the tenth factor, Consistency with Actions, we assess a penalty if the standard isn't met.

The Credibility Quotient is the sum of the weighted scores, minus any penalty. The rating is roughly equivalent to a generous academic grade scale.

Factor	How does this affect credibility? What do we look for?	Weight
Provable claims	Credible claims are specific and verifiable. Grandiose claims ("world's best," etc.) and vague statements are not credible because they can't be proved. <i>What we look for:</i> Are claims made and are they provable?	Highest
Support for claims	Providing support for claims is the most important single contributor to credibility. Verification from trusted third parties is the strongest support, but any evidence from a trustworthy source will enhance credibility. <i>What we look for:</i> Are claims supported? Are data sources and testimony trustworthy? Are claims specific and detailed enough to be understandable?	Highest
Accuracy	Accuracy is fundamental to credibility. Even one or two innocuous slip-ups can cast doubt on everything you say. <i>What we look for:</i> Are factual statements correct? Is data presented with relevant context?	Highest
Adequate information	Communications that answer basic questions and provide relevant information inspire confidence. <i>What we look for:</i> Are the basic questions answered? Are relevant details provided? Is information consistent?	High
Attention to challenges	Acknowledging challenges (major technological, market, or organizational concerns) and describing how you address them enhances credibility—telling the truth makes you trustworthy. And it's essential if you're trying to increase transparency. Ignoring challenges can create the impression that you're hiding downsides—or that you don't know about them. <i>What we look for:</i> Are challenges acknowledged, and is an approach to addressing them described?	High
Market knowledge	Communications that demonstrate market knowledge show you understand your operating context and are aware of opportunities and challenges. <i>What we look for:</i> Is demand or need demonstrated? Is the product or service clearly explained?	Moderate
Relevance to audience	Any communication is more credible if you speak the target audience's language and address their concerns. Failure to do this can make the people you want to reach think that you're not addressing their problem and don't care about them. <i>What we look for:</i> Does the communication speak the target audience's language? Does it sound authentic? Does it address audience concerns?	Moderate
Currency	Communications that are out-of-date can make you seem overwhelmed or stalled, or deliver information that's no longer accurate. <i>What we look for:</i> Is the information current?	Moderate
Presentation	Well-organized communications that have a design appropriate to your industry and are in tune with your message support credibility because they make information easy to find and keep impressions consistent with facts. <i>What we look for:</i> Is the design professional? Is information accessible? Is copy free of typos?	Moderate
Consistency with actions	Saying one thing and doing another is a sure credibility killer. The Thinkshift Credibility Quotient subtracts points when communications don't match actions. <i>What we look for:</i> Does the organization do what they say they do? Are claims subject to credible challenges?	NA

Thinkshift Credibility Quotient: Sample Rating

Toyota Environment website section
(http://www.toyota.com/about/our_commitment/environment/)

Note: This is an abbreviated demonstration rating, done without Toyota's participation. A full Credibility Quotient rating includes detailed comments on each factor.

Credibility Factor	Raw Score (out of 100)	Weighted Score
Provable claims	100	15
Support for claims	90	22.5
Accuracy	75	15
Adequate information	50	6.25
Attention to challenges	0	0
Market knowledge	75	3.75
Relevance to audience	70	3.5
Currency	100	5
Presentation	75	3.75
Consistency with actions	NA	No penalty
Credibility Quotient		74.75

Executive Summary We expected much stronger content from Toyota, given its success with the Prius and prominence as a clean-vehicle technology innovator. Discussions of general business topics such as supply chain, manufacturing, and sourcing provide few specific claims. To get details, site visitors must turn to the environmental report or a section (Environmental Updates) that contains abbreviated press releases; this makes visitors work too hard to get information.

Support for claims on top pages for both vehicles and corporate action is vague; too bad, because we know the company is an achiever. For instance, the site says Toyota seeks to raise industry standards, but doesn't say what it's doing or where the bar is set. While it notes that Toyota's vehicles are "up to 70 percent cleaner than the average new vehicle in smog-forming emissions," it doesn't provide comparative data.

Site content does nothing to address known challenges, such as battery life/toxicity or vehicle performance. Overall, language tends to be bland and noncommittal. "It's just as important that our vehicles are attractive to the environment," for example, is vague and unexplained.

Thinkshift Credibility Quotient: Sample Rating

Canon Environmental Activities website section
(<http://www.canon.com/environment/>)

Note: This is an abbreviated demonstration rating, done without Canon's participation. A full Credibility Quotient rating includes detailed comments on each factor.

Credibility Factor	Raw Score (out of 100)	Weighted Score
Provable claims	100	15
Support for claims	50	12.5
Accuracy	75	15
Adequate information	50	6.25
Attention to challenges	50	3.75
Market knowledge	100	5
Relevance to audience	40	2
Currency	100	5
Presentation	75	3.75
Consistency with actions	NA	No penalty
Credibility Quotient		68.25

Executive Summary Canon has published a sustainability report since 2003, and before that an environment report since 1999, so it has a long history of addressing sustainability concerns. The company also has developed an internal benchmark (the environmental efficiency indicator), and aims to double its 2000 efficiency by 2010. In many cases, however, this site is missing information needed to make its claims verifiable or relevant.

There is no third-party support for claims, beyond an award for recycling from a Japanese organization. The best examples are buried, and numbers are usually disconnected from overall goals. For example, the company has been recycling toner cartridges for 17 years, but doesn't give the percentage recycled.

Canon implicitly recognizes challenges by discussing recycling, reducing emissions in the supply chain, and reducing toxics, but the site doesn't directly address challenges.

Relevance to the audience also is an issue. The site vacillates between extremely vague content on top-level pages and a lot of technical detail on subpages; it needs a middle ground to speak persuasively to a general audience.

Thinkshift Credibility Quotient: Sample Rating

First Solar website
(<http://www.firstsolar.com/>)

Note: This is an abbreviated demonstration rating, done without First Solar's participation. A full Credibility Quotient rating includes detailed comments on each factor.

Credibility Factor	Raw Score (out of 100)	Weighted Score
Provable claims	100	15
Support for claims	90	22.5
Accuracy	100	20
Adequate information	75	9.38
Attention to challenges	75	5.63
Market knowledge	100	5
Relevance to audience	85	4.25
Currency	75	3.75
Presentation	100	5
Consistency with actions	NA	No penalty
Credibility Quotient		90.5

Executive Summary This is a highly credible site overall. While First Solar makes some dramatic claims, it also provides more third-party verification than its competitors (many of which provide none).

First Solar addresses potential problems better than others as well, and provides ample information on its full product-cycle sustainability program.

The company could do better in a couple of areas: It doesn't address predictions that one of its major product elements—cadmium telluride—probably is not abundant enough to use for really mass production. And the website lacks information on First Solar's thin-film panels in use. Although the company is not a direct provider (they don't install the panels), we'd like to see some case studies on the panels' performance.