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Credibility Killers—

And How to Avoid Them

A communications guide for architecture
& engineering firms

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Why 7 Credibility Killers?

Credibility is key not only to communications success, but also to business success. And in the architecture and engineering fields—where clients increasingly want sustainability and green building, but aren't sure who's qualified to deliver—the bar for achieving it is particularly high.

Credibility requires clarity, completeness, and well-supported arguments. Communications that have it can make potential clients, partners, and others more open to programming and design that challenge the status quo, and help people sort out conflicting claims or distinguish facts from hearsay. Communications that lack credibility can be worse than no communications—if people don't believe your claims, your firm comes off as overly optimistic at best, misleading at worst. Either way, you'll seem untrustworthy.

That makes credibility assurance an essential part of any firm's communications effort. The following credibility killers are common. Eliminate them and people will feel more comfortable hiring you, working with you, and writing about you.

The Thinkshift team

1. Segregating sustainability

Symptoms Sustainability and green building practices are treated as a side issue, not woven throughout communications materials; you don't show how you incorporate sustainability into your practice.

Example Your website features a page on sustainability, but it's never or rarely mentioned elsewhere, such as in your portfolio, project profiles, or descriptions of programming and planning.

Why it kills

- Sustainability efforts seem like an afterthought, rather than an approach that's embedded in your firm's practice, raising doubts that you're truly committed.
- You miss the chance to show how you achieve sustainability throughout the design process or demonstrate how your sustainability approach benefits clients.
- People generally are not careful readers—they may not get your sustainability messages if they're only in one place.

Credibility cure Address sustainability throughout your website, brochure, and other communications, showing how it influences your practice, why it creates better buildings, and how it delivers on client goals.

2. Failure to address client concerns

Symptoms Your communications never mention practical challenges (for instance, uncertainty about standards or higher costs) or options for dealing with them, and don't show that you understand the sustainability issues particular to projects in your area of expertise.

Example You promote LEED certification for buildings, but don't explain costs, what's involved in the process, or alternatives.

Why it kills

- Potential clients may think your knowledge is superficial.
- People may worry that you lack sensitivity to costs and individual client needs.
- You may seem like you don't understand your target audience.

Credibility cure Be direct about the kinds of challenges projects present and how you've dealt with them, options for meeting sustainability goals, and your areas of expertise. This honesty engenders confidence in you, or lets people move on without wasting their time (or yours).

3. Lack of clarity

Symptoms Use of jargon and technical terms without explaining them; failure to show benefits and results; overabundance of technical detail up front.

Examples You say a sustainable approach delivers an “integrated response to a variety of issues,” but you don’t say what the issues are or describe the response; project profiles gloss over client benefits.

Why it kills

- If you can’t explain what you do clearly and concisely, it may send the message you aren’t quite up to the task of execution.
- If you don’t show people how they will benefit and what results they’ll see, you give them no reason to engage you.
- When you hit people with technical details before you’ve sold them on benefits, many will give up and go away.

Credibility cure Explain terms and processes as simply and completely as possible, keeping audience needs in mind; provide technical details and specifications separately from core messages whenever possible; keep benefits and results front and center—particularly in project profiles—and don’t mistake what you provide (the building) with what it gives clients and end-users (the benefits).

4. Unsupported and vague claims

Symptoms Unprovable, sweeping declarations (“more experience than any other X”); absence of supporting detail; meaningless comparisons (“we design better buildings”); vague “high concept” statements.

Example Stating that “sustainable practices are embedded in everything we do” without describing how those practices are manifested in your work.

Why it kills

- Just because you say it doesn’t mean people will believe it.
- Lack of detail makes project, planning, and programming descriptions feel insubstantial, and makes you sound like everyone else.
- Failure to back up claims raises suspicions of empty boasting.

Credibility cure Saying you achieve high standards of sustainability? Back it up with supporting data on completed projects. Saying you bring in projects on time and on budget? Prove it. Saying you’re better or more efficient? Be prepared to answer the question, “Than what?”

5. Lack of specificity

Symptoms General, unvalidated statements about your approach or philosophy; firm descriptions and staff bios that don't highlight unique strengths and awards.

Examples Saying “we're dedicated to the highest quality” or “we believe in sustainability” without providing the detail that proves it; relying exclusively on portfolio photos to differentiate your work.

Why it kills

- If you're not clear about core strengths and specialties, people are likely to wonder if you can deliver what they need.
- Without specifics, your approach sounds generic and may fail to grab potential clients.
- Relying exclusively on general statements creates the impression that you're just talking the talk, not walking the walk.

Credibility cure Don't be shy—cite core strengths and specialties on top web pages and prominently in collateral, and highlight staff expertise in “about” copy as well as in bios. Saying your process always delivers? Back up your claim, with examples of how it plays out. Got kudos? Mention awards in appropriate points in text, even if you list them separately elsewhere.

6. Inaccessible presentation

Symptoms Your communications are organized according to internal categories or make it difficult to find essential information.

Example Your website favors beauty over functionality, with mysterious site navigation that forces users to hunt around for what they want.

Why it kills

- People are impatient—if it's hard for them to figure out how you can help them, they'll assume you can't.
- Disorganized communications create the impression of a disorganized company—if your communications are impenetrable, what might your service be like?
- You may be hiding what your audience considers your strongest selling point.

Credibility cure Test your website with people who fit your audience profile to avoid organization that makes sense to internal stakeholders but mystifies outsiders. Provide the information your audience wants—which isn't always what insiders want to say.

7. Old or missing information

Symptoms You don't update your website and other marketing materials regularly; you get lots of questions about the basics that could be answered by those materials; people have misperceptions about your offerings.

Example The latest company news on your website is seven months old; your portfolio doesn't reflect your practice's current focus or show sustainability successes.

Why it kills

- If old information is now incorrect, you'll look careless.
- It creates confusion by inviting people to fill in the gaps.
- Potential clients may conclude you're not ready for prime time, or are glossing over holes in your capabilities.

Credibility cure Make sure your communications keep pace with the market and reflect the current status of your firm. Answer all the basic questions—the questions potential clients always ask and the ones they *should* be asking—on your website and in other marketing materials.