

7 Credibility Killers— And How to Avoid Them

A communications guide
for the energy efficiency industry & related fields

think<shift
COMMUNICATIONS

1325 Third Avenue #5
San Francisco, CA 94122
415.848.9181 phone
415.593.7560 fax
www.thinkshiftcom.com

© 2008 Thinkshift

Why 7 Credibility Killers?

Credibility is key not only to communications success, but also to business success. And in the energy and systems management field—where many customers feel like they’re taking an expensive risk; standards, technology, and policy are continually evolving; and the pressure to deliver the ideal solution is relentless—the bar for achieving credibility is particularly high.

Credibility requires clarity, completeness, and well-supported arguments. Communications that have it can make potential customers more open to brand-new processes and products, assuage fears that your company won’t last or your technology won’t pan out, and help people assess conflicting claims and distinguish facts from hearsay. Communications that don’t have credibility can be worse than no communications at all—if people don’t believe your claims, your company comes off as overly optimistic at best, intentionally misleading at worst. Either way, you appear untrustworthy.

That makes credibility assurance an essential part of communications efforts by any enterprise bringing energy efficiency technology and services to market. The following credibility killers are common. Hunt them down, and people will feel more comfortable investing in you, buying from you, and writing about you.

The Thinkshift team

1. Lack of market analysis

Symptoms You don't define the market for your technology or services; you don't make a business case for the demand, including both policy and market imperatives.

Example You boast about the practicality of your technology but don't provide information about market potential, who's already using it, ease of implementation, relative costs, or other key data.

Why it kills

- It creates skepticism about your ability to grow and thrive.
- It raises doubts about the practicality of your technology.
- You miss the chance to explain the value of key niche markets and demonstrate your understanding of policy drivers.

Credibility cure Show that you're doing more than proving a concept—clearly define your customers, share key data on the market (such as size, economics, and needs), and play up partnerships or other market-building initiatives.

2. Lack of clarity

Symptoms Overabundance of technical detail up front, inadequate explanations of complex technology and processes, failure to show benefits and results.

Example You say your “technology-enabled demand response and energy management solutions help optimize the balance of electric supply and demand” without expanding that description to say what the technology is, how it works, or how you define optimization.

Why it kills

- When you hit people with technical details before you’ve sold them on benefits, many will give up and go away.
- 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 with you.

Credibility cure Explain your solution and technology as simply 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—and don’t mistake what you provide (the solution) for what it gives customers (the benefits).

3. Unsupported & vague claims

Symptoms Unprovable statements (“the only company that can do X,” “more experience than any other X”), absence of detail and backup data, meaningless comparisons, claims that your solution is the one true path to energy conservation.

Example You say you empower utilities to optimize grid management, increase grid reliability, and fuel adoption of renewables, but you don’t back up those statements with in-the-field customer data.

Why it kills

- Just because you say it doesn’t mean people will believe it.
- Lack of data raises suspicions of empty boasting.
- We’ve heard these claims before from others whose solutions didn’t pan out (or haven’t yet).
- Lack of detail makes product and service descriptions feel insubstantial, and you sound like everyone else.

Credibility cure Saying your load-management solution delivers superior performance? Prove it with third-party verification, monitoring data, or customer testimony. Claiming your technology is smarter, more flexible, more efficient? Make sure you answer the question, “Than what?” Saying your energy management solution drives adoption of renewables? Provide a case study or market analysis that backs up your claim.

4. Silence on challenges

Symptoms Your communications never mention major barriers for your technology (for instance, infrastructure challenges or uncertainty about standards) or steps you need to complete before your technology gains wide acceptance.

Example Initial customers report that your control systems aren't as responsive as they should be under extreme climate conditions, but your materials don't address this issue in any way.

Why it kills

- People who understand the challenges may assume you don't have a plan for overcoming them.
- People who don't understand the problem may develop false expectations, and feel misled when they learn the full story.
- Your silence leaves skeptics free to exaggerate the problem.

Credibility cure Follow the debating rule: bring up known negatives yourself, so that you can talk about why they don't apply or describe your plan for overcoming them. In case studies and project profiles, address rough spots and how you met those challenges. This honesty engenders confidence in you.

5. Failure to speak to the audience

Symptoms Neglecting to address the target market's practical concerns, providing inadequate technical detail for those who need it (such as utilities and architects), lack of data in media kits and press releases, content that's not relevant to target audiences.

Example Your residential/small-business energy management solution is being marketed to end consumers via utilities, but your website gives the impression that you sell directly to homeowners and doesn't make a business case to utilities.

Why it kills

- When you don't sound like you know your audience, you undermine your business case.
- It makes it hard for people to understand your value.
- Your target market may wonder if you're for them.

Credibility cure Maintain a rigorous focus on your audiences' core concerns and don't let internal interests drive external communications. Provide case studies if you can—they help potential customers see how your technology works and how they can benefit. And don't try to speak to everyone—you'll wind up reaching no one.

6. Old or missing information

Symptoms You don't update your website and other marketing materials regularly; you get lots of questions about basic information that could be answered by those materials; people often have misperceptions about your service or product; you intentionally left information gaps to get potential buyers to call you.

Examples The latest company news on your website is seven months old; consulting engineers and architects are always calling you to ask if your technology is intended to work in their type of project.

Why it kills

- If outdated information is now incorrect, you'll look deceptive or careless.
- It invites skepticism—people may think you're hiding something.
- It creates confusion by inviting people to fill in the gaps.
- Potential buyers or investors may conclude you're not ready for prime time.

Credibility cure Make sure communications keep pace with the market. Answer all the basic questions—the ones potential customers always ask and the ones they should be asking—on your website and in other marketing materials. Be on the lookout for new questions that come up. And avoid jargon—it impedes understanding.

7. Inaccessible presentation

Symptoms Your communications look chaotic, exhibit lots of redundancy, or are organized according to internal categories.

Example Your home page doesn't inform users about what you do, and forces them to dig for substantive product information.

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. If your web pages repeat the same thing over and over, cut back and refocus to avoid hiding your core messages.