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Credibility Killers—

And How to Avoid Them

A communications guide
for the clean transportation industry

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COMMUNICATIONS

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Why 7 Credibility Killers?

Credibility is key not only to communications success, but also to business success. And in the clean transportation field—where doubters are loud and legion, many customers feel like they're taking an expensive risk, and the road is littered with silver bullets that didn't hit their target—the bar for achieving it is particularly high.

Credibility requires clarity, completeness, and well-supported arguments. Communications that have it can make potential customers and others more open to technology and fuels that challenge the status quo, assuage fears that your company or technology won't last, and help people sort out conflicting claims or distinguish facts from hearsay. Communications that don't have credibility are worse than nothing—if people don't believe your claims, your company comes off as overly optimistic at best, intentionally misleading at worst. Either way, you're untrustworthy.

That makes credibility assurance an essential part of any clean transportation enterprise's communications effort. 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. Unsupported & ‘silver bullet’ 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 clean transportation salvation.

Example “X vehicles are the most effective way to end our addiction to oil,” but you don’t provide a factual comparison with other options.

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 boasts before from others whose solutions didn’t pan out (or haven’t yet).
- Lack of detail makes claims and descriptions feel insubstantial.

Credibility cure Saying your engine technology delivers superior performance? Prove it with third-party verification, monitoring data, or customer testimony. Claiming that your technology is “the one” that will meet all our needs? Even if it is, you can’t prove it—make a more focused claim that you can support. Saying your technology is cleaner, more powerful, or more advanced? Make sure you answer the question, “Than what?”

2. Lack of market analysis

Symptoms You don't define the market for your technology or fuel; you don't make a business case for why there's demand or how you will develop it.

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.

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, needs), and play up partnerships or other market-building initiatives.

3. Overstatement

Symptoms Presenting goals as fact, stating best-case scenarios without qualification, hyperbole and exaggeration (“best,” “cleanest,” “most advanced”), unrealistic timelines.

Example You say your product will be on the market by the end of 2008 and meet 2010 emissions standards, but you know that’s an ambitious timeline you may not meet and you’re not 100 percent sure of your certification data.

Why it kills

- It triggers BS detectors, subjecting you to extra scrutiny.
- When people realize the statement is not quite true, they doubt everything else you say.
- It sets you up for failure if you can’t deliver the best case.
- If you miss publicly stated delivery dates, you’ll look unreliable or troubled.

Credibility cure Make the strongest claim that you can support. Don’t say you’ll have product on the road next year unless you absolutely know you will—give a conservative target date, and explain (briefly) what needs to happen for you to meet it. And don’t say your technology delivers the “world’s lowest emissions” or some such unless you’re prepared to back it up with an honest comparison of your performance with everyone else’s.

4. 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 news on your website is from 2007; fleet managers are always calling you to ask if your technology works in the application they need.

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.

5. Silence on challenges

Symptoms Your communications never mention major barriers for your technology (for instance, infrastructure or market challenges), steps you need to complete before your technology hits the road, or environmental impacts (and what you're doing to mitigate them).

Example Initial customers report that your engine system doesn't equal the performance of conventional options, 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, describe your plan for overcoming them, or show how the positives outweigh the negatives. This honesty engenders confidence in you.

6. 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 heavy-duty engine users), lack of data in media kits and press releases, content that's not relevant to target audiences.

Example You're selling an alternative fuel vehicle that appeals primarily to commuters, but you don't detail refueling (or recharging) processes and infrastructure or discuss HOV lane access.

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 run the language by a few trusted testers before going public. 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.

7. Inappropriate attire

Symptoms Your communications look chaotic, old-fashioned, low-budget, or unappealing to your target audiences.

Example Your website is rich with clip art (it may even be animated), or it forces users to dig for substantive product information.

Why it kills

- Looks matter—an inappropriate design can undermine a great business case.
- People think of clean transportation as advanced technology—if your look is unprofessional, it may communicate that your technology isn't up to par.
- People are hesitant about making high-ticket purchases from companies that look unsophisticated (or cheap).

Credibility cure The look of your communications should match the sophistication of your product. You don't have to break the bank, but professional, contemporary design is essential. And it should be based on communicating your brand and delivering information to your target audience, amplifying your content rather than overpowering it.