Building Trust in Online Shopping

By Jens Riegelsberger

One of the reasons cited for slower-than-expected adoption in the early days of e-commerce was lack of trust from potential customers. Today, a majority of consumers have tried online shopping and “lack of trust” is no longer a barrier to transacting online. Trust, however, matters now more than ever.

While acceptance of the Internet as a marketplace has increased, surveys show that trust in individual brands is decreasing. There are also many new threats that jeopardize trust online, including privacy invasion, identity theft, spam and phishing. So, trust still plays a major role across digital channels, but rather than being a barrier to use, it has now become a key differentiator.

There are many studies and design guidelines that outline how interface design supposedly increases trust. However, they appear to be of limited use: trust cues vary over time, by industry and by technology platform, and they relate to specific risks and specific transactions. Furthermore, how do you measure “trust?” It is partially built on immediate affective reactions that people find hard to describe in interviews, so asking them about designs and their impressions of trust tells only a part of the story. Finally, some “trust builders” that work for one brand may be off message for another, even to the point of being damaging. For example, a photograph of a smiling customer service agent may build trust on some sites, but may conflict with a brand or seem unprofessional on others.

So, rather than relying on a list of elements that have been reported in other contexts as “trust builders”, online marketers should create specific trust-building strategies for their digital channels by analyzing their brands and services.

A first step is to understand why trust matters online and how people form their perceptions of trust. Analyzing specific risks that a customer may face in a particular online transaction is a key to doing this. Risks can range from the direct, such as cost and fraud, to the indirect, such as loss of privacy, wasted time and potential embarrassment. Perceptions of trustworthiness are formed from different kinds of cues. On digital channels, many of these cues are transmitted by the user interface of a service. Cues external to those channels, such as a friend’s recommendations or evidence from other media, are also critical to creating a feeling of trust in a Web property.

When considering trust cues, we must distinguish between “symbols” and “symptoms.” Symbols are learned signifiers of trustworthiness such as seals, rating and mission statements. They are created with the intent to communicate trustworthiness. Symptoms, on the other hand, are by-products of trustworthiness, such as a large number of customer reviews that indicates a large and loyal customer base. Moving transactions and communications online frequently changes symptoms into symbols. For example, interacting with a friendly sales assistant is symptomatic of a well-run business, but a simple photograph of a smiling assistant is only a symbol of trustworthiness.

Online vendors must identify symptoms, rather than symbols, of trustworthiness and build on those. Traditionally, marketers see trust as one contributing factor to brand equity. Several overviews of the constructs contributing to such intrinsic trust exist. At a very high level they can be categorized as: ability and professionalism (a brand is capable of delivering as promised) and benevolence and integrity (a brand cares about delivering as promised).

Rather than focusing just on specific cues and intrinsic trust factors, marketers would do well also to drawn on research in sociology. Researchers in this field use the concept of "embedding" to capture the contextual factors that contribute to trust and trustworthy behavior. In summary, this concept holds that actors are perceived as more trustworthy when they are embedded in the social fabric through expectations of future encounters (temporal), through shared reputation (social), or through the influence of control agencies (institutional). Below are some examples of how to build on these forces in digital channels:

Temporal embedding
The "shadow of the future"—that is, a clear desire to build an ongoing relationship with a customer—is a strong signal for trustworthiness. Temporal embedding can also be demonstrated by showing that a company has been in business for a long time, or that it is linked to a long-standing brand, or even by making clear that considerable investment has been made in its platform or brand. Interest in a continued relationship can be indicated by giving first-time purchase price incentives, eliciting customer feedback or offering loyalty schemes.

Social embedding
People listen to recommendations from their friends and families when deciding to buy online, so a positive reputation helps greatly. Another effect of social embedding is that a brand with a strong reputation risks tarnishing it by not keeping promises. This is a real risk in a situation where people are empowered by feedback forums and systems for sharing reputation; actively confronting that risk can be a strong building block for trust.

By creating and sustaining transparent, honest and open customer communities, brands can further harness their reputations and respond directly to criticism, thereby increasing brand trust and equity. Amazon's affiliate program is an example of using the Internet to communicate reputation information. An individual brand can also display social embedding through endorsements from, for example, well-known experts.

Institutional embedding
Institutional embedding is probably the most established form of ensuring trustworthiness and communicating trust. Regulatory programs, industry associations and (in the digital domain) trust seal programs are examples of institutional embedding. However, as the

Web undermines the power of institutions, and as online communities facilitate social embedding, this classic approach of building trust cannot be relied on in isolation.

By analyzing intrinsic and contextual brand trust factors, by differentiating trust symptoms from trust symbols, and by considering the specific user risks involved in their online transactions, marketers can define the trust cues that are relevant to their brands, industries and applications.

Creating "trust builders" for digital channels is becoming a "must do" for brands. As people do more online, their expectations continue to increase. Trust is an important part of these expectations, and those brands that do not tackle the issue now will find themselves seriously disadvantaged compared to competitors who grasp the nettle.

Jens Riegelsberger, PhD, is a user experience architect at Framfab UK and guest professor at the University the Arts in Berlin. He was awarded the British Human Computer Interaction Prize (BCS) in 2005 for his research.