



Ready to do business

# What It Takes To Build Brand Trust Today

## Introduction

# The growth opportunity in trust

Every time a brand asks its customers to do or try something new, it's asking for their trust. And for this reason, brand trust has never been more of a priority for marketers. Your return to growth strategy might involve persuading people to revert to ways of behaving that they've spent the last year viewing as risky. It might involve asking them to adopt new products or new ways of doing things altogether. Either way, you'll need trust on your side.

Trust's growing importance to marketers comes at a time when trust as a whole is on the slide. [The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer](#) found that trust in all institutions declined between May 2020 and January 2021. However, Business remains the only institution which is trusted overall — unlike Government, the Media and NGOs. This is creating an opportunity for marketers to build the brand trust that their strategies will depend on.

**Trust in all institutions declined**  
between May 2020 and  
January 2021.



Taking this opportunity involves understanding what we ask when we ask our audiences to trust our brands. Trust is often confused with transparency. However, if customers only trust what you're able to show them, they don't really trust you at all. As Rachel Botsman, Oxford University Trust fellow and author of "Who Do You Trust?" explains, trust isn't about accountability for when things go wrong — it's about a confident relationship with the unknown; about people trusting your business to protect their interests and come through for them, without the need for guarantees.

Trust isn't a governance issue. It's a marketing issue. It's an asset that brands invest in through what they do, what they say and where and how they say it. That's why we've created this guide: to help unlock the potential of brand trust for your business, your customers and your future growth.

### The numbers



Business is more trusted than government in

**18 out of 27**

countries worldwide





Greater transparency does not equal greater trust. It takes away the need for trust, and that can be a dangerous strategy for a brand to follow. Real trust is a confident relationship with the unknown.



**Rachel Botsman**

Oxford University Trust fellow, author of “Who Do You Trust?”



# 01

## What is brand trust?

Marketers tend to talk about brand trust as if it's a simple, single metric that can be quantified and tracked — like brand awareness or brand loyalty. The reality is more complicated. Trust isn't a general emotion — it's a contextual one. When we feel trust towards other people, it's trust that they will do or not do something specific. We might trust a climbing buddy to keep a good hold on our rope — but that doesn't necessarily mean we'd trust that same person with a closely guarded secret. They could be a great climber and really safety conscious — but just an incurable gossip.

We need to consider what we're asking people to trust our brand with — or trust our brand to do.

Trust in brands works the same way. Rather than trying to define and measure general brand trust, we need to consider what we're asking people to trust our brand with — or trust our brand to do. Starting from here, we can start to establish what levels and types of brand trust we need.

Rachel Botsman describes trust as stemming from two distinct brand traits: capability and character. Different brands often place more emphasis on one of these traits at different points in their growth, when they're seeking to persuade buyers to try something new, aiming to build loyalty and drive repeat purchases, or responding to challenges that threaten to undermine trust.



**Character Trust derives from people's perceptions of a brand's empathy and integrity,** whether they feel that the brand understands and cares about them, and whether the brand's interests and intentions align with their own.

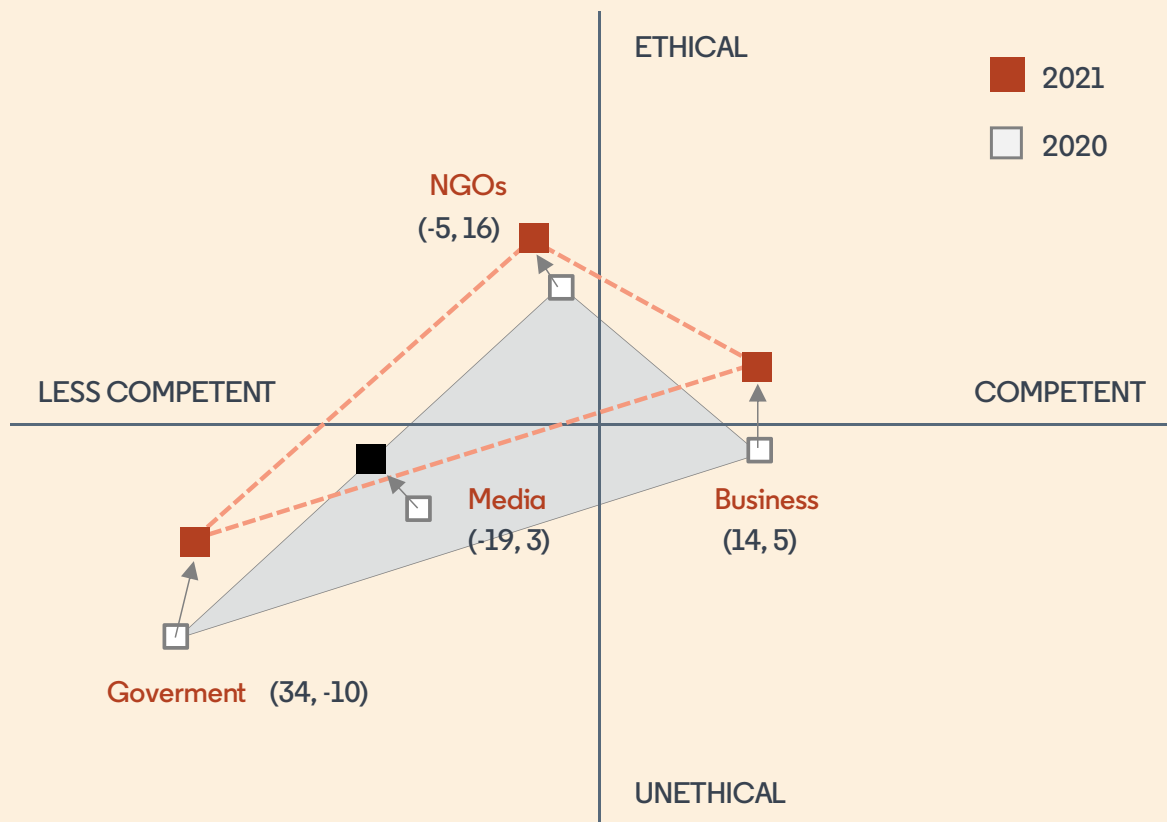


**Capability Trust derives from perceptions of a brand's competence and reliability,** whether it has the knowledge and resources to do what it says it will do — and whether it consistently comes through when needed.

In its Trust Barometer, Edelman takes a similar approach, measuring trust in institutions and leaders on the basis of both ethics and competence. Business is the most trusted institution in the latest Trust Barometer, because it's the only one to generate positive ratings for being both ethical and compliant.

## Business is now the only institution seen as both competent and ethical.

Broken down in this way, trust ceases to be an abstract concept and becomes something more tangible that marketers can address and build their plans around. A brand trust strategy starts with understanding the levels and types of trust that your audience currently have — and comparing this to the levels and types of trust that your strategy needs them to have. Because trust relates to definite perceptions about your brand, its constituent parts can be measured and tracked — and gaps in trust can be closed.



# 02

## Demonstrate empathy and integrity to build character trust

Character often feels like the most accessible aspect of trust for marketers, because we can attempt to define and demonstrate it through communications. Advertising campaigns focused on values and purpose are able to make the case that the interests of a business align with the interests of its customers. We can also design the tone of voice and style of communications to send signals about character as well: everything from using straightforward and active language to brand colour schemes, mascots and other fluent devices.

Many start-ups and challenger brands lean on marketing that sends signals about their character in the early stages of their growth. At this stage, they have little track record to be judged on — and they are asking customers to trust based on their intentions.

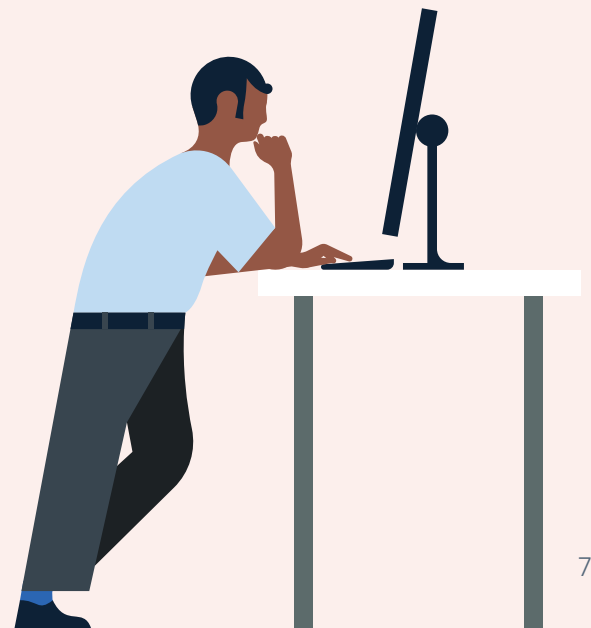
However, character can't be demonstrated through communications alone. Both integrity and empathy, the two key components of character according to Rachel Botsman, demand more:



**Perceptions of empathy depend on whether a brand listens to and understands its customers** — not just that it says the right things to them. At a time when customer needs and priorities can rapidly change, this becomes particularly important.



**Integrity comes down to how well a brand's statements about character are substantiated through consistent behaviour.** It's not just what a brand says that counts, but also what it does over time. their own.



## Brand character in action

Nike's [Colin Kaepernick campaign of 2018](#), which supported the NFL quarterback taking a knee in protest at police brutality and racial discrimination, showed that the most effective demonstrations of character often involve taking sides on divisive issues. Nike knew that taking a stand would cost it in some regards. Incensed consumers who interpreted Kaepernick's protest as unpatriotic and an insult to military veterans took to burning Nike products on social media. However, for the larger proportion of its customers who agreed with its stand, Nike built trust through empathy on the issues that mattered — and integrity in following through on them.

Many challenger brands start out strong on character trust, only to fall down when good intentions aren't backed up. Character is most powerful when it's combined with capability — and when the two complement one another rather than conflicting. The quality of Ben and Jerry's ice cream backing up the business's values and brand personality, while Patagonia's commitment to the circular economy has consistently translated into quality outdoor clothing that lasts.

After the campaign, Nike saw:

\$6.38B

increase in sales

6.25%

rise in stock value





## The expert view



The North Star question for brands is whether their interests and intentions align with the best interests of their customers. If there's misalignment there, what aspects of product, service and pricing can they change to pull them closer together?



**Rachel Botsman**

Oxford University Trust fellow, author of "Who Do You Trust?"

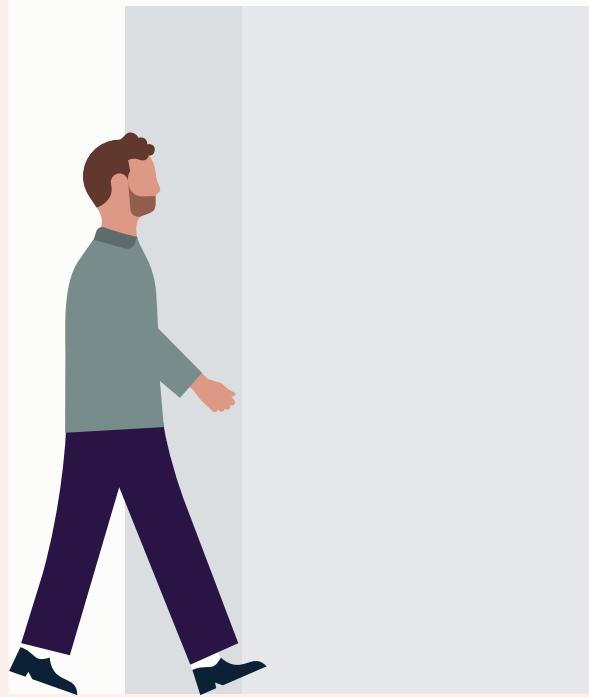
## The numbers

Business expected to fill void left by government.

68%

say that CEOs should step in when the government fails to fix societal problems.

Source: [Edelman Trust Barometer 2021](#)



# The brand character playbook



## Be willing to take a stand on issues that matter to your audience.

In an increasingly tribal world, brands have to accept that demonstrating their intentions align with one audience might involve demonstrating that they don't align with another. This increases the importance of empathy — understanding what matters to your community and why it matters. It also feeds into how brands assess the impact of their marketing. As in Nike's case, a strongly negative reaction from some might indicate that the campaign is doing its job in demonstrating integrity to others.



## Enlist employees as advocates.

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2021, people attach greatest trust to those closest to them. They trust the CEO of their employer more than they trust the CEOs of other companies — and they trust members of their local community and people like themselves more than they trust leaders in general. These two trends come together to make employee advocacy a powerful channel for building trust by demonstrating brand character. Diverse businesses that represent the communities they serve have a range of relevant spokespeople that audiences are prepared to listen to. For their part, employees are able to testify to the character of their business with integrity.



## Mobilise executive thought leaders.

Business leaders have a mandate to demonstrate character and a growing expectation that they should do so. This makes executive thought leadership an important element in marketing strategies. In the Edelman Trust Barometer for 2021,

68% say that CEOs should step in when the government fails to fix societal problems — and 65% say CEOs should hold themselves accountable to the public.

Audiences want to see corporate leadership on the impact of the pandemic, but also on broader societal issues such as racism and gender equality, the impact of automation and local community needs. In total, 86% expect CEOs to speak out publicly on one or more of these issues.



## Link character traits to capability traits.

For all its responsiveness to marketing, character trust can easily be undermined when it's not backed up by capability. In order to demonstrate integrity over time, brands need to define a character that aligns with their business model, and which enables them to consistently come through for customers while consistently coming through on the issues they care about. To build enduring trust, character has to be more than just a communications device.

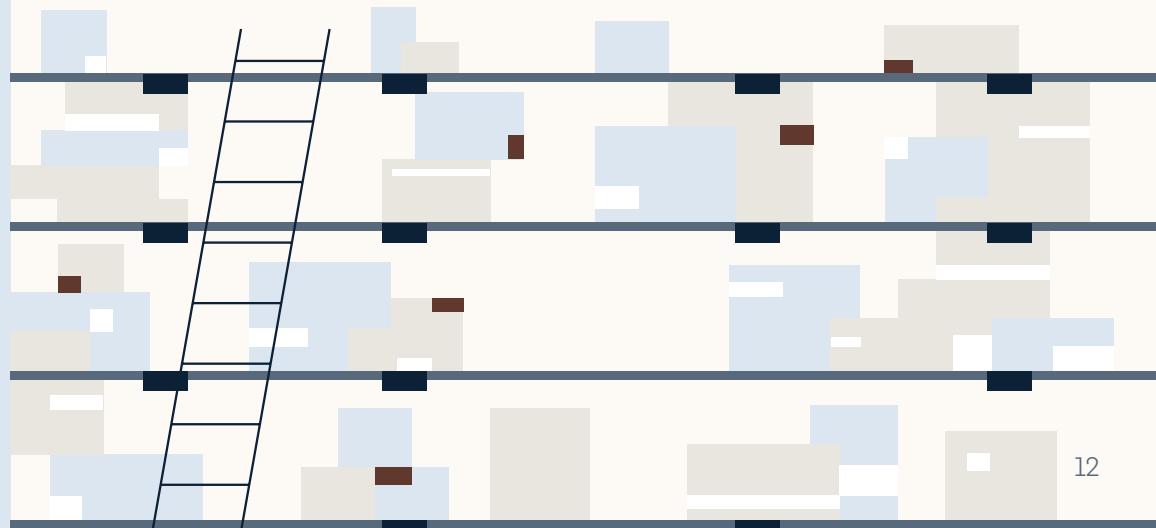
## 03

# Invest in consistency to build capability trust

Convincing audiences of a brand's capability takes time. This trust stems from perceptions of competence and reliability — this can't be achieved by only delivering once. It's all about consistency. People trust Amazon to deliver the right package on time, not because they understand Amazon's infrastructure, algorithms, or warehousing — but because that's what consistently happens every time that they order.

Capability trust is hugely influenced by customers' individual experiences. However, it can also be shaped by brand marketing over time. Why do people trust Volkswagen or Toyota vehicles to be well-engineered and reliable, or Volvo's family cars to be safe? It may be that they've driven these vehicles themselves — but it's also shaped by decades of advertising that has established them as highly salient auto brands whenever people think about these capability traits. Reputation counts when it comes to capability — and reputation is a product of consistent investment in advertising, third party reviews, and more.

Perceived knowledge and expertise also have a vital role to play — and this gives a crucially important role to thought leadership content. Capability-driven trust is definitely in the hands of marketers — but it's achieved by building brands over the long-term rather than ephemeral communications or positioning.



“

If we like a brand, we will tend to hold positive beliefs about its benefits. So advertising that successfully makes a buyer like a B2B brand more and is also likely to improve their assessment of its products or services.

**Les Binet and Peter Field**

Authors of “[The Five Principles of Growth in B2B Marketing](#)”

Source: Edelman and LinkedIn, [2020 B2B Thought Leadership Impact Study](#)

89%

of B2B decision-makers say that high-quality thought leadership elevates their perception of an organisation’s capability — as well as their trust in that organisation.

59%

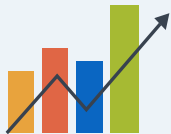
of B2B decision-makers say that thought leadership is a more trustworthy way to assess capability than other marketing materials.

# The brand capability playbook



## Take ownership of customer experience.

Consistency of customer experience generates deep-rooted trust that endures over time and can act as a vital support when other aspects of trust come under threat. The importance of brand trust is an invitation for marketers to take greater ownership of customer experience, working with other functions to ensure consistency across touchpoints, and finding ways to track whether customers have an easy, frictionless journey to finding value.



## Invest in building brand salience over time.

Trust isn't just a product of customer experience, though. It's also a result of wider reputation. We're more likely to choose to trust brands that spring readily to mind when we have a decision to make. In "[The Five Principles of Growth in B2B Marketing](#)," published by The B2B Institute, researchers Les Binet and Peter Field demonstrate that businesses achieve greater short and long-term growth when they invest in mental availability. They argue that B2B businesses should aim to devote 50% of their budgets to building brands.



## Appeal to emotion and intuition.

Perceptions of capability aren't just shaped by our own experiences. Intuition and emotion have a key role to play in where we place our trust. Binet and Field argue that we are far more willing to believe technical claims made by a brand that we already like than we are claims from one we either don't like or don't know. This is why brand marketing strategies built on emotion are 7x more effective at driving significant business impacts than those that are purely rational.



## Close the thought leadership investment gap.

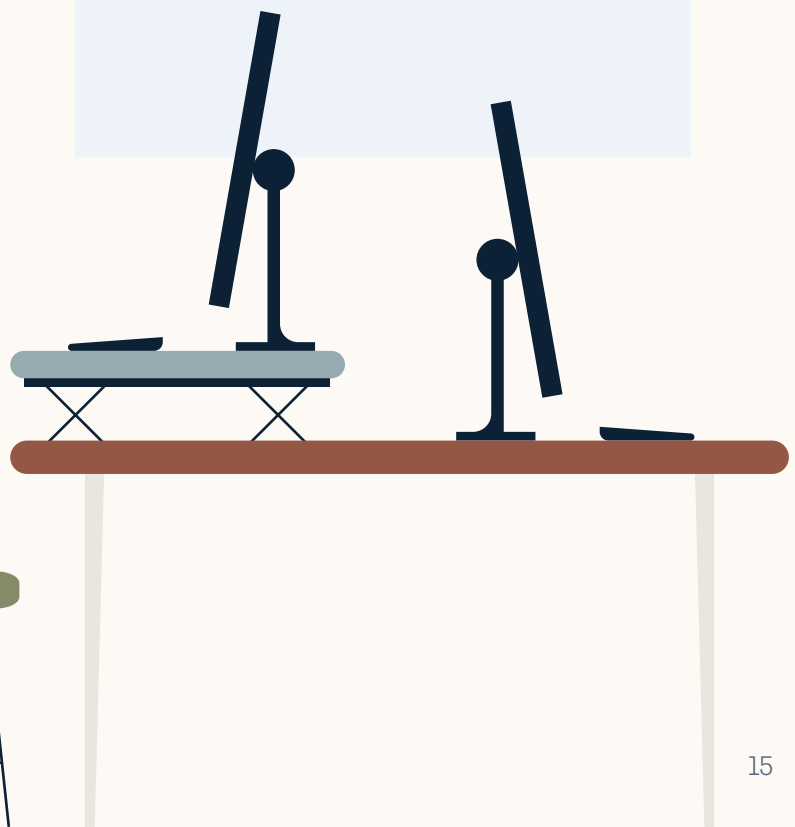
The [2020 B2B Thought Leadership Impact Study](#) from LinkedIn and Edelman shows that a significant majority of B2B decision-makers use thought leadership content as their main tool for assessing a business's capability. Despite this thought, many businesses continue to under-invest in the quality of their thought leadership content, and undermine trust as a result. Only 15% decision-makers rate the quality of thought leadership they consume as very good or excellent, and only 29% say they reliably get value from it. Closing this gap has a key role to play in building capability trust: 64% of those producing high-quality thought leadership say that it builds trust for their brand, compared to only 46% of those producing low-quality thought leadership.

15%

of decision-makers rate the quality of thought leadership they consume as "very good" or "excellent."

64%

of B2B marketers producing high-quality thought leadership say that their content builds trust for their brand.



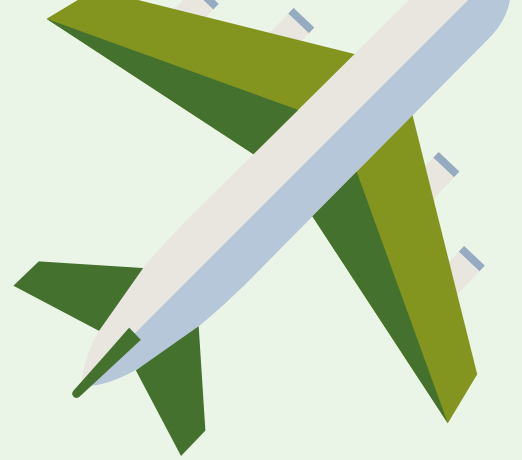
# 04

## Be ready to respond

Managing brand trust as a marketer isn't just about building trust over time. It also comes down to an ability to respond quickly when trust is called into question, knowing how to act and which messages to prioritise in a moment of crisis.

When a business suffers a breakdown or sudden shortfall in trust, internal discussions tend to focus on capability. From inside the business, it's easy to believe that repairing trust depends on reassuring audiences that you have what it takes technically, or that you've fixed the problem in question.

In fact, audiences understand that behind any piece of programming or engineering are people — and that means that behind any question of capability is a question of character. In a crunch moment for trust, it's usually character that brands need to demonstrate first — and urgently. It's only through doing so that they can show that their perception of a problem matches that of their audience, and that they can therefore be trusted to address the interests of customers rather than just the interests of the company.



## How to respond to a trust breach

After he was appointed in the middle of the biggest trust crisis in the brand's history, Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun acted quickly. He changed the conversation from a technical one about fixing capability problems and the question of when Boeing could get its troubled 737 Max flying again, to a [conversation about culture](#) — addressing where the company had fallen short and why the tragedies involving the plane had occurred. Trust in the business has started to recover as a result.

After its new Note 7 handsets started catching fire in 2016, Samsung moved quickly to demonstrate character by [going to great lengths to get every phone back](#) — even setting up trade-in booths at major airports and developing software to make the phones unusable so that people wouldn't be tempted to keep hold of them. The brand then kept its Note 7 customers in the loop on capability, with 10,000 signing up for email updates on upcoming models to replace the faulty handsets. By October the following year, Samsung's reputation score was higher than Apple's.



# An action plan for a trust crisis

Recognise the character failings behind capability failings

Act quickly to re-iterate values and priorities and, if necessary, demonstrate how you are re-aligning with customers' best interests

Manage expectations with realistic targets and timeframes — avoid making ambitious recovery claims that risk further undermining trust if they're not realised

Provide open channels of communications — and apply insights to demonstrate empathy

Share information relating to capability when you can — and be open about what you don't know



# 05

## Align with trusted media environments

As we've explained in this guide, the contextual nature of trust has to influence what your brand says. It also needs to influence where it says it. It's very difficult to build brand trust if your strategy is playing out in environments where audiences treat what they hear with suspicion. If your brand is choosing to share a platform with voices your audience doesn't trust, then what does that say about it?

On the other hand, when you reach audiences through a platform that they actively trust, you align with their worldview and sense of identity — and predispose them to engage actively with what you have to say.



The Edelman Trust Barometer identifies a growing trust gap between an informed public, who are significantly engaged with public policy and business news, and the population as a whole. The more engaged and informed people are, the more willing they are to trust. The most powerful vehicle for building brand trust is one where you can reach these natural brand advocates in a mindset where they are actively engaged.

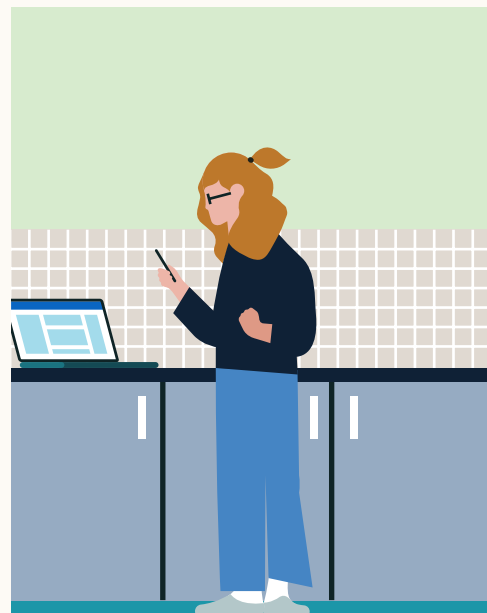
LinkedIn is that platform. LinkedIn is the environment that audiences continue to trust — and the environment on which brands can execute on all aspects of their brand trust strategy.

LinkedIn has been ranked as **the most trusted social media platform** for the fourth year in a row.

LinkedIn members trust LinkedIn to protect their privacy and data, to protect their interests, and to keep them safe against dangerous content that's deceptive, fake, or clickbait.

Source:

["Business Insider and eMarketer's Digital Trust Report,"](#) 2020



## Summary

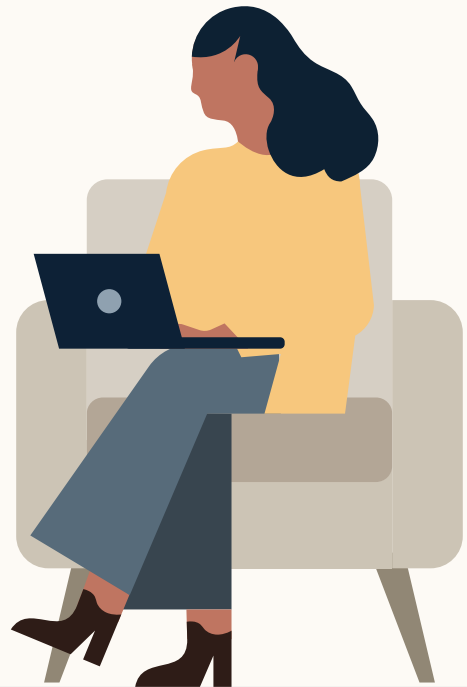
# Growth through brand trust: the 7-step plan

- 1** Check brand perceptions around character and capability, the key drivers of trust.
- 2** Identify the levels of trust that your growth strategy requires — and where there are trust gaps that you need to close.
- 3** Aim for consistency in brand character by aligning purpose with capability and the issues that your customers care about.
- 4** Activate executive leaders as spokespeople on your priority issues, and support this with wider employee advocacy and sharing.
- 5** Invest in long-term brand building to build mental availability, likeability, and trust.
- 6** Close the thought-leadership investment gap — prioritising quality and audience value.
- 7** Execute your strategy on trusted media platforms where informed audiences are open to engaging with brands.

Ready to do business

# What It Takes To Build Brand Trust Today

Get started



## About LinkedIn Marketing Solutions

LinkedIn operates the world's largest professional network on the Internet with more than 740 million members in over 200 countries and regions. As today's connected professionals seek out ideas and insights from the people and brands they trust, marketers use LinkedIn to target advertising and publish relevant content — all in a professional context.