Online Credibility & Trust



About the course

In times of **information pollution and fake news**, it is crucial to establish a credible web appearance so **your company won't lose users online** by **unintentionally sending the wrong signs**. This course gives an introduction to web credibility and provides various **practical**, **up-to-date examples**.

What will you learn in this course?

- What are the signs of a credible, trustworthy business web appearance?
- How can you actively establish a credible, trustworthy presence for your company online?

In this course, you have the chance to **rethink and further elaborate your company's methods and strategy** to establish online credibility and trust. This course will also allow you to **discuss**, **interact** and **collaborate** in an interactive way.

How long will it take you to complete the course?

We estimate approximately **two hours** of learning time, depending on how much you want to engage. The course can be interrupted at any time and resumed later.

About the authors

This course was designed for the <u>DigiCulTS project</u> by <u>Isabell Grundschober</u>, a researcher and instructional designer at the <u>University for Continuing Education Krems</u>. The project is co-funded by the <u>Erasmus Plus program</u> of the European Union.

But now, let's get started with the first chapter of this course:

- 1) Information Pollution and Fake News
- 2) Understand Online Trust and Credibility
- 3) Establish Credibility Online: Transparency
- 4) Establish Credibility Online: Design & Content

1) Information Pollution and Fake News



Sharing information with masses of people has **never been faster and easier**, but there are negative side effects: "With the development of contemporary social technology, we are witnessing a new phenomenon: **information pollution on a global scale**." (Council of Europe, 2017)

As a consequence, **fake news** has become a popular phenomenon within the last decade. It is difficult for users to judge if a source online is reliable or not:

"Faced with an overwhelming volume of information, the public has the **almost impossible task of determining what to believe**."

(UNDP, 2020)

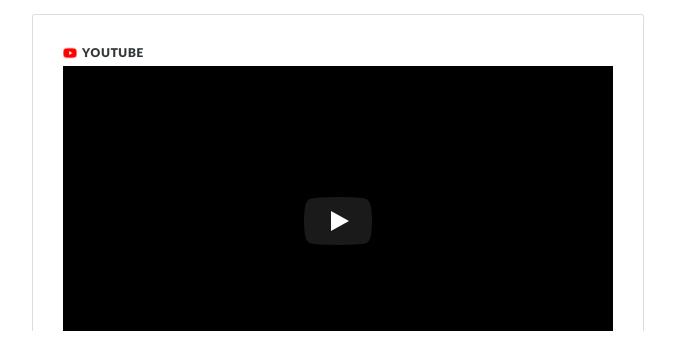
What is information pollution?

Information pollution, on the one hand, means that there is a **lot of information** out there on the world wide web. On the other hand, it also means that some users **intentionally or unintentionally share false**, **harmful information**.

What types of fake news are there?

Everyone can post anything online and there is **a lot of information** out there on the world wide web. Among them is also **fake news**. "Fake news" does not have a fixed definition and could mean **various types of false information**.

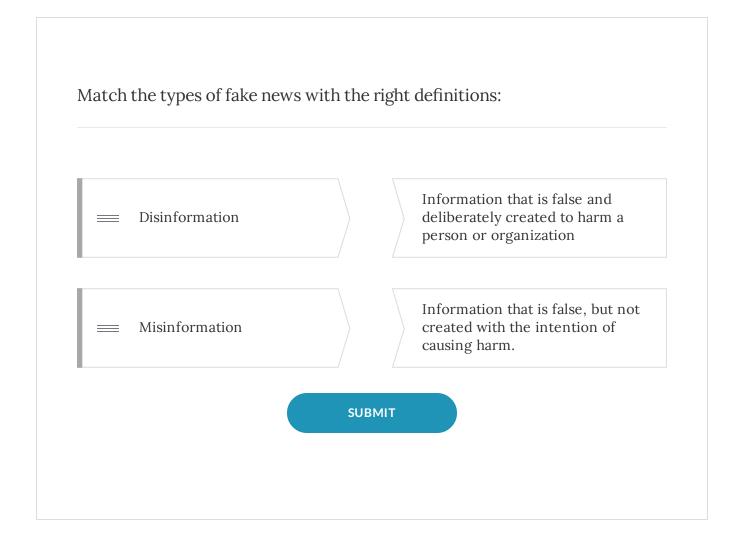
If you want to **learn more** about information pollution and **types of fake news**, watch the video below:



CIVIX Explains: Information Pollution

When anyone can post anything online, the result is a lot of information. To understand the problem of false and misleading information, it helps to define a...

VIEW ON YOUTUBE >



By the way, there is a current example of information pollution, which we all witnessed: The information pollution during the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative consequences. (UNDP, 2020)



Among all this information pollution, how can you ensure that **your company's online presence** is evoking feelings of **trust and credibility** in your future customers?

Not an easy task, but crucial for the success of your company's online communication and online marketing strategy to establish brand trust. And brand trust is required in order to **make sales. High trust and credibility of your company lead to**:

- More purchases (71%)
- Customers make recommendations to friends (61%)
- Customers join a loyalty program (41%)
- Customers give positive reviews or comments on social media (40%)

(See also Adobe, 2021)

What happens if you fail to gain trust and credibility?

Research conducted in the UK found that businesses face losing a large portion of their customer base if they don't prioritize trust: 71% of UK consumers say they will stop purchasing from a company if their trust is broken. (Adobe, 2021)

To prevent customers to walk away and take their money with them and to benefit from all advantages of trust and online credibility in customer relationships, we try to answer the following question in this course:

"How to develop credibility and social trust online?"



Information disorder and freedom of expression

Learn more about information disorder online on the website of the Council of Europe.

Responding to COVID-19 information pollution

The UNDP guidance note gives insights into information pollution during Covid19 including suggestions on how to take action.

READ MORE

Adobe's "Future of Marketing" research

Learn more about the newest research results on consumer trust and retail by Adobe.

READ MORE



What lessons have you learned from this chapter?

Lessons learned

This first chapter introduced **the notion of "information pollution".** The rise of information pollution makes it necessary for users to **evaluate the credibility of digital information.** Developing a **trustworthy online** presence is absolutely necessary for small and medium-sized enterprises to **support the development of relationships** with their customers.

Now that we've clarified the current context of information pollution and the challenges for building trust and credibility online, we'll have a **closer look at what web credibility actually is** and how we could **support its development**.

Larn more about signs of a trustworthy online presence

2) Understand Online Trust and Credibility



Many things happen quite fast online. Users judge the visual appeal of your company's website at a glance. It only takes 50 milliseconds. (Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek & Brown, 2011)

Judging the trustworthiness of a website takes a bit longer usually, but we should not underestimate the power of the first glance online.

In an online world of **information pollution**, there are several signs of **trustworthiness**, which could be detected rather fast, but all in all, **it takes time** to build trust in your company and your company's services and/or products online.

Credibility is like respect: it has to be earned

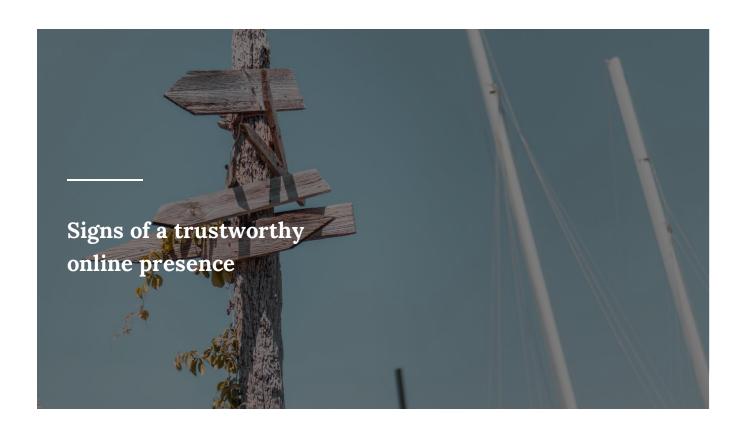
You need to **consistently show** your customers **you can be trusted**, and that they can rely on the quality of your information, products and/or services.

This can take a lot of time and effort:

"It takes time to lay the foundation for trust, and consistency to grow it into a solid reputation based on credibility."

(Gregory, 2019)

It's all worth it: Trust and credibility are key when you want to build a relationship with customers, a backbone to support making sales.



Do you want to show your customers you can be trusted?

Do you want to build a trustworthy online presence for your SME?

If your answer is **YES**, we suggest following the <u>ten guidelines for web credibility</u> developed by Stanford University. The guidelines give advice on how **to build a web presence that visitors implicitly trust**.

10 guidelines of web credibility

You can build website credibility by providing third-party validation (citations, references, source	ce
material) for the information you present, especially if you link to this evidence. Even if people	
don't follow these links, you've shown confidence in your material.	

1) Make it easy to verify the accuracy of the information on your site.

2) Show that there's a real organization behind your site.

Showing that your website is for a **legitimate organization** will boost the site's credibility. The easiest way to do this is by listing a physical address. Other features can also help, such as posting a photo of your offices or listing a membership with the chamber of commerce.

3) Highlight the expertise in your organization.

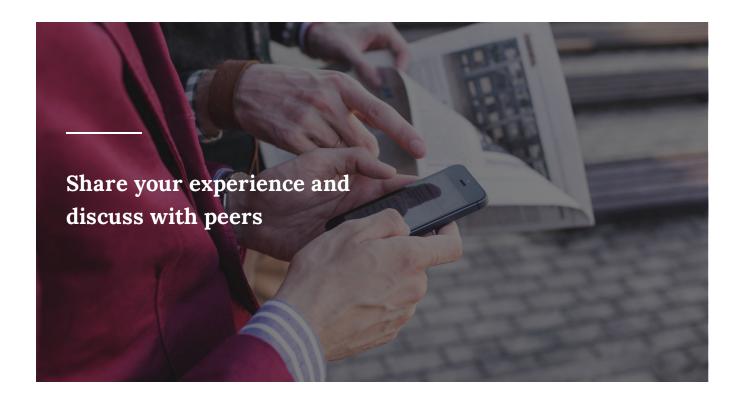
Do you have experts on your team? Are your contributors or service providers authorities? Be sure to **give their credentials**. Are you affiliated with a respected organization? Make that clear.

Conversely, don't link to outside sites that are not credible. Your site becomes less credible by association.
4) Show that honest and trustworthy people stand behind your site
Show that there are real people behind the site and in the organization. Find a way to convey their trustworthiness through images , videos , or text .
5) Make it easy to contact you
It is crucial to share your company's contact details : Physical address, phone number, and e-mail address on your website.
6) Design your site so it looks professional.
We find that people quickly evaluate a site by visual design alone. When designing your site, pay attention to layout, typography, images, consistency issues, and more. The visual design should match the site's purpose.
7) Make your site easy to use—and useful
Our research shows that sites win credibility points by being both easy to use and useful . Some site operators forget about users when they cater to their own company's ego or try to show the dazzling things they can do with web technology

8) Update and review your site's content often. People assign more credibility to sites that show they have been recently updated or reviewed.
9) Use restraint with any (external) promotional content.
If possible, avoid having ads on your site . if you must have ads, clearly distinguish the sponsored content from your own. Avoid pop-up ads, unless you don't mind annoying users and losing credibility.
10) Avoid errors of all types, no matter how small they seem.
Typographical errors and broken links hurt a site's credibility more than most people imagine. It's also important to keep your site up and running.

Stanford Persuasive Technology <u>published the ten guidelines</u> listed above in 2002 and they have held true since then. Still, some things have changed. Therefore, we **updated** the guidelines on web credibility by using **up-to-date examples** and added an **extra guideline** "Show that you protect your users' data".

In the following chapters, we will analyze the listed guidelines in detail.



We have created an **online discussion board** for you using <u>Padlet</u> so that you can share your reflections and experiences with peers. **We look forward to discussing the following topics with you:**

- What are typical signs online that a company IS NOT trustworthy? How do you identify them as a customer? What are your personal experiences?
- What makes a company's web presence credible for you as a customer? What are your personal experiences?

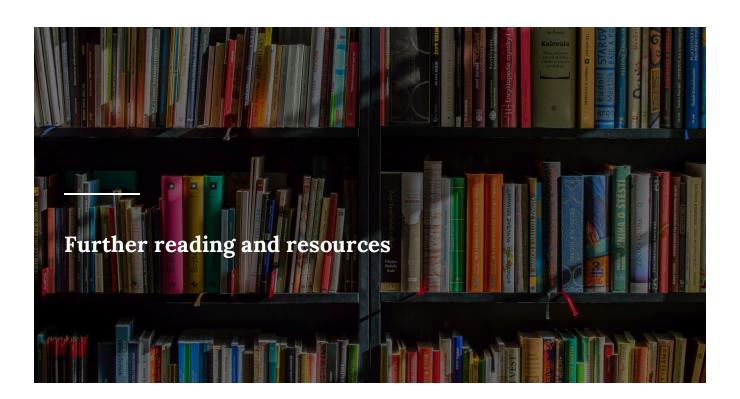
Add your answers to the questions on our **online discussion** board below. All you have to do is click the button with the "**plus**" **sign** to add your comment:





You can open Padlet in a separate browser tab <u>here</u>.

You haven't used Padlet yet? It is a digital brainstorming and discussion space, where you can write posts, comment, or like other postings. It is pretty user-friendly and intuitive. You don't need to sign in to use it. If you would like to learn more about how to use it, here is a brief YouTube-tutorial.



"Credibility: A Multidisciplinary Framework"

Read on by Rieh & Danielson (2007) to learn more about the credibility and trust research conducted by Standford University.

READ MORE

"Online Consumer Trust: Trends in Research"

This article by Baumann & Bachmann (2017) describes the results of a literature review on more recent research on the topic of **online consumer trust**.

READ MORE



What are your takeaways from this chapter?

Lessons learned

In this second chapter, you took a close look at **signs of credibility on the worldwide web**.

You learned about the **Standard University guidelines on web credibility** and know the fundamentals of web credibility to earn your customer's trust through your company's online presence.

The next steps to take.

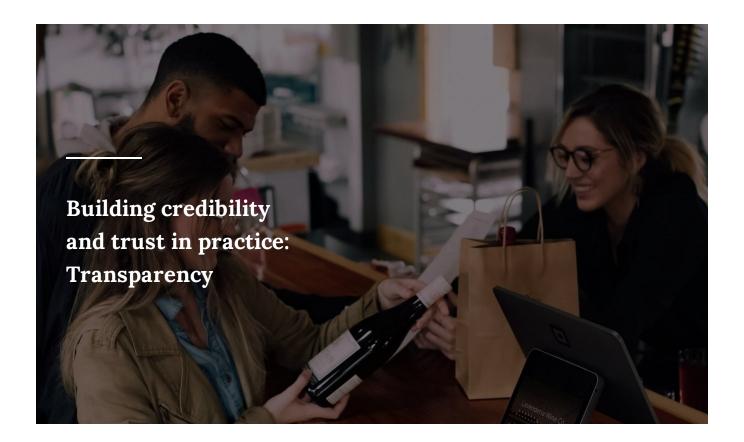
These 10 guidelines seem quite logical, but there are still challenges:

- How can small and medium-sized companies **implement** these guidelines?
- How to implement these guidelines with current technology and media?

We will give you some **practical advice** in the next chapters on **how to implement** the guidelines in the daily business of your business to strengthen customer relationships, support innovation, and sensing capabilities as well as make sales.

Practical implementation of the guidlines on web credibility

3) Establish Credibility Online: Transparency



We will now take a closer look at the **practical implementation** of the Standford University guidelines on web credibility No. 1-5, which are **supporting transparency** for customers and therefore building trust and credibility.

In this chapter, we will give answers to the following questions:

1. How can you ensure that your **customers can verify the accuracy** of the information given in the various online presences of your business? (Guideline 1)

- 2. How can customers understand that there is a **real**, **competent**, **and trustworthy team** behind your company? (Guidelines 2,3,4)
- 3. How can you make it **easy for customers to contact and/or interact with you** online? (Guideline 5)

1) Make it easy to verify the accuracy of the information on your site

How you can verify the accuracy of the information you provide to users online?

You could claim a lot about your products, services, or company values, but where is the proof?



Reviews, ratings and testimonials are powerful tools to promote trust in your company, products and/or services.

Third-party validation

Your small or medium-sized business can benefit from **well-known third parties** with a **good reputation** to gain the trust of users online:

"Third-party validation [...] provides '**social proof**' that we are not only relevant but also experts in what we claim to do for our target markets." (Swift, 2017)

Not only well-known third parties but **also less-known third parties support the credibility** of your business. Here are three practical examples of third-party validation for small and medium-sized enterprises:

3 practical examples of third party validation

- **SSL certificate:** "A website needs an SSL certificate in order to keep user data secure, verify ownership of the website, prevent attackers from creating a fake version of the site, and gain user trust."

 (Cloudflare)
- A trust badge for security and privacy control: They can verify that your site is authentic and trustworthy. Examples are badges from McAfee, VeriSign, or PayPal. It makes sense to investigate which seals or badges are most important to your audience. Seals are of special importance in e-commerce or membership platforms.
- Reviews & Testimonials: Word-of-mouth counts a lot, also online. Encourage your customers to leave product or service reviews online and display product or service reviews with pride on your website and on social media. Don't forget to make use of the google review system and various review systems on social media.



"Insist on SSL when setting up your website! It is not only considered standard nowadays and technically easy to implement, but also Google's



algorithm rewards websites with SSL with higher rankings in the search index."

- Sabine Melnicki, Austrian web consultant at WebAhoi

2) Show that there's a real organization behind your site

Let your customers know that you are a legitimate organization. List the following information on your website:

- · Physical address
- Phone number
- · Email address

Even if your business is only providing online transactions - this kind of information helps your customers **feel more confident** that a **legitimate company** exists behind the website. People want to know they **can contact a business in the event of any problems.**

Furthermore, you need to consider that providing information about your company on your company's website is **obligatory by law** to provide transparency to your customers:



Legal notice

When writing the **legal notice** for your company's website you need to consider various laws and regulations:

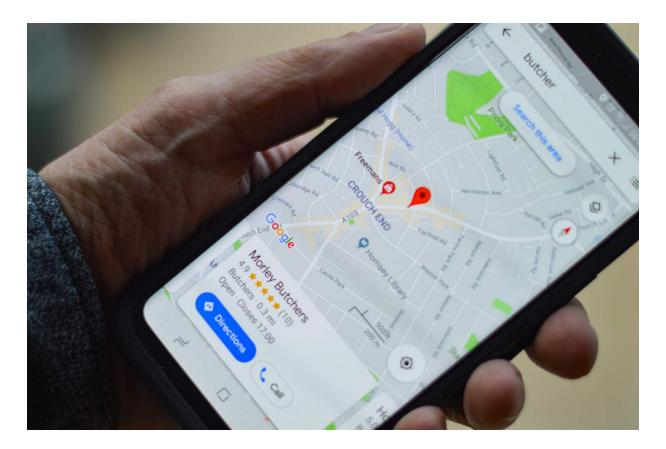
- The laws and regulations of the country where your company operates from
- when **selling internationally**: the laws and regulations of your customers' countries

Use Google to succeed

Google looks for information to verify your business as legitimate.

It makes sense to **check the already existing information** of your business **available on**

Google and to **manage a Google business profile** with recent information about your business. It supports your website's **search engine ranking** and helps users to build trust in your company.



Google provides various information about enterprises: Location, business hours, website, pictures of the physical store of products, and reviews. Don't miss the chance to use Google to build your web credibility.

3) Highlight the expertise in your organization and in the content and services you provide.



Feature your team and partners online and **share how they contribute to the business** with their expertise and competence.

Let people know that you have **experts on your team** and that you are working with **highly competent partners**. Are you affiliated with a respected organization? Make that clear to your users.

In the daily business of small and medium-sized enterprises, this guideline is actually **closely connected to guideline 4**:

4) Show that honest and trustworthy people stand behind your site.

Show your future customers that there are real people behind the site and your company. Use employee bios and use storytelling to make your employees relatable and credible. A "meet-the-

team"-page on your website is pretty valuable and powerful. The "meet the team"-page can serve as a vehicle to communicate the **expertise of team members** as well as a **look "behind the scenes"**.

5 characteristics of a successful "meet the team"-page (Sukhraj, 2019)

- 1 Make sure your team members are **portrayed in a human and relatable way**.
- Show who the people in your team are and **how they contribute to the company**. Make sure customers understand the competence, expertise, and value of the employees to the company, its products and/or services.
- Make your team accessible and provide email addresses or social media profiles to open the lines of communication to customers as well as potential customers.
- 4 Use real team photos.
- 5 Use **storytelling** but keep it short and interesting.

Read the blog post below to **get inspiration from practice** on how to create your "meet the team"-page on your company's website:

■ IMPACTPLUS



Best Team Pages: Check Out These 11 Examples (& Why They Work)

Your mom? Dad? Pet corgis, Django and Diego? All of them are deserving, but when people are racing against the clock to wrap up their speeches, it always makes me happy to hear them thank the team behind the scenes.

READ MORE IMPACTPLUS >

5) Make it easy to contact you.

Like already mentioned in guideline No. 2 "Show that there's a real organization behind your site", it is crucial to share your company's physical address, phone number, and e-mail address on your website, so (potential) customers can easily contact you.

But there is another hint for you, how to compel your customers to contact you:



Call-to-action (CTA) buttons are usually very compelling – make use of it to support contact and interaction with custeromers.

Call-to-action button (CTA)

"Traditionally, effective call-to-action buttons are easy to notice, even more, designers intentionally create them that way so that people couldn't resist clicking." (<u>Design4Users</u>)

Make use of CTAs to **engage your customers to contact you, to interact**, and ultimately **to make a purchase!**



"A CTA can be much more than an opportunity for potential customers to contact your company. I have a list of examples of CTA buttons relevant to



small and medium-sized enterprises. Consider what works best for your company."

- Sabine Melnicki, Austrian web consultant at <u>WebAhoi</u>

Sabine's list of useful CTA buttons for small and medium-sized enterprises

Tick off all those examples of CTS buttons, which might be relevant for your business to support the interaction with customers online:

Download a PDF
Sign up for a newsletter
Register for an event
Make an appointment
Fill out a test form
Configure your own product
Request a trial version
Request a call back
Visit a physical store
Order a test product
Register a user account

Install an app
Compare products

Learn more about different kinds of CTA buttons

This blog post gives some good practices examples of CTAs on business websites.

READ MORE

Add-on guideline: Show that you protect your users' data

Some things have changed since 2002 when the Standford University guidelines were published. We suggest an additional guideline:

Protecting our users' data and showing our users that we are **respecting their privacy** is an important factor of web credibility nowadays.

Data protection is not only a necessity by law but also a **sign of respect** and appreciation towards your users and customers. This **supports our mission to build trust** and **credibility** online - by making clear that you are respecting your users' data.

In the EU, there are strict regulations on data protection: The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)



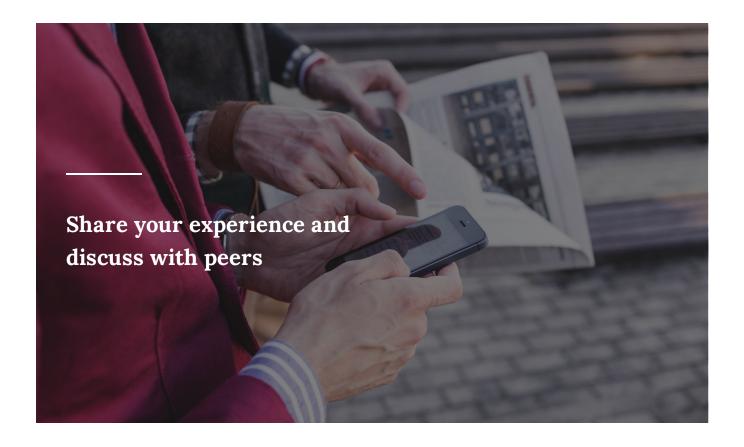
The GDPR checklist

The <u>GDPR checklist</u> provided <u>gdpr.eu</u> can help you secure your organization, protect your customers' data, and avoid costly fines for non-compliance. The GDPR checklist cannot substitute legal advice by a specialized GDPR attorney, but it might give an idea of what aspects to consider when it comes to data protection.

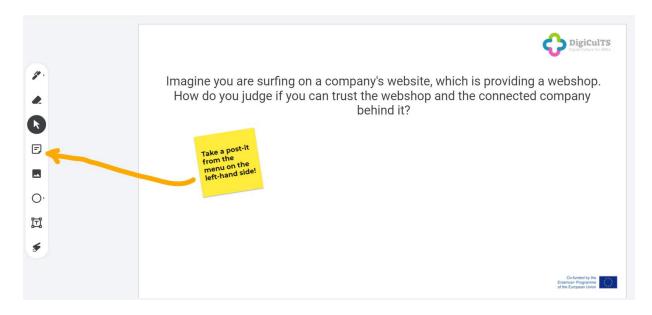
Deal Breaker: Creepy companies.

In Adobe's recent study (2021), 49% of consumers indicated that the following behaviour is most likely to break their trust: The company tracks me online/on my mobile devices without my permission, send emails/other communications, but I do not remember giving the company my information.

Therefore, make sure that you communicate that your company is respecting data privacy and data transparency!



We have opened a room for online brainstorming via <u>Google Jamboard</u>, where you can share your reflections and experiences. It's a **digital brainstorming space**, where you can add your ideas using **virtual post-its**.



Let's brainstorm!

Take a post-it and share your experiences!

Imagine you are surfing on a company's website, which is providing a webshop. How do you judge if you can trust the webshop and the connected company behind it? Which indicators of trustworthiness are most important for you?

Open the <u>Jamboard link</u>, take pick a post-it on the **menu from the left-hand side** and contribute by sharing your answer to the question.

You haven't used Google Jamboard before? It's pretty user-friendly and intuitive. You don't need to sign in to use it. If you would like to learn more about how to use it, here is a brief YouTube tutorial.



What are your takeaways from this chapter?

Lessons learned

There are some basic rules to follow when establishing web credibility in order to strengthen customer relationships.

After this chapter, you know which actions to take to **promote transparency on your website or your web presence on social media**. This not only includes providing verified and verifiable information about your company, but also clear information about the protection of your users' data.

You learned that it is important to **provide contact information** about your company. You know about various ways to **let users know that there is a real, competent, and trustworthy team** behind the company and its online presence.

The internet is not a one-way street. CTA buttons are a great way to compel users to get in contact and/or to interact with you. In the next chapter, we'll have a closer look into the Standford University guidelines no. 6-10, with a focus on the design and content of your website or your web presence on social media.

Learn more about guidelines no. 6-10

4) Establish Credibility Online: Design & Content



In the last chapter, the first 5 out of 10 guidelines on web credibility were introduced. Now we follow up with examples of **how to implement guidelines 6-10**, which are dedicated to the **design and content** of your website or your web presence (e.g. on social media).

We will answer the following questions:

- What to consider when **designing a credible online presence**? (Guidelines 6 and 7)
- What to consider when **publishing content and information online**? (Guidelines 8, 9, and 10)

6) Design your site so it looks professional (or is appropriate for your purpose)

We find that people quickly evaluate a site by visual design alone. When designing your site, pay attention to **layout**, **typography**, **images**, **consistency issues**, and more. The visual design should match the site's purpose.



"Know the rules before you break them. What web design conventions are common in your industry? What colors, menu navigation, look & feel are commonly used to convey what emotions? Show that you belong to the industry and where you differ - also through your design."

- Sabine Melnicki, Austrian web consultant at WebAhoi

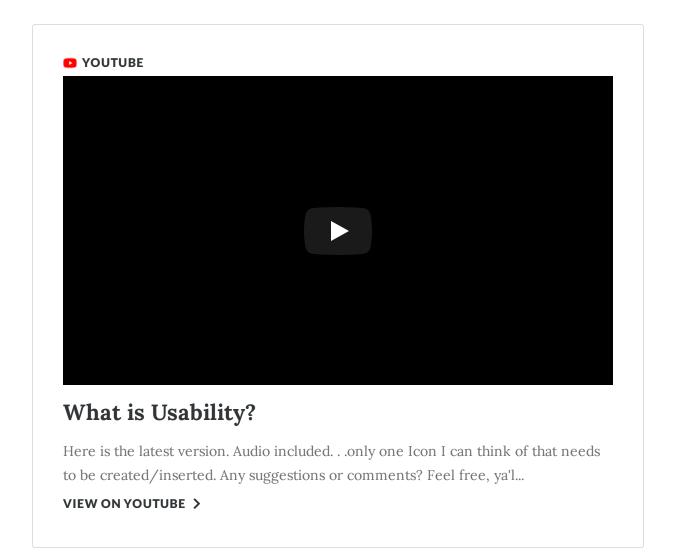
7) Make your site easy to use—and useful.

Research shows that sites win credibility points by being both **easy to use** and **useful**. These are two main core areas of the user experience online:

• **Usability:** "A design is not usable or unusable per se; its features, together with the user, what the user wants to do with it, and the user's environment in performing tasks, determine its level of usability." Therefore, usability is a measure of a user's **ability to arrive on a site, use it easily**, and **complete the desired task**.

Useful content: "The website should include enough information in an easily digestible format that users can make informed decisions. Keep <u>Hick's Law in mind here</u>: streamline your design to be simple. Use restraint."

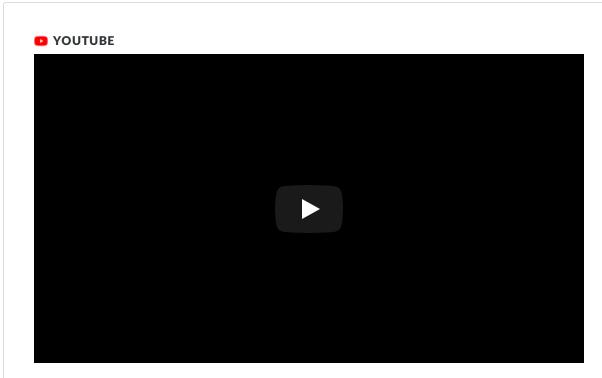
An introduction: What is usability?



Differences between the physical world and the WWW

In the DigiCulTS course "Promoting digital transformation" we took a closer look at the differences between communicating in the physical world (with familiar media) and communication online.

Here is a follow-up with a focus on usability and how it differs in the physical world compared to the www:



Usability in the Physical World vs. on the Web

In the real world, you can get away with causing customers a small amount of difficulty, but on a website, visitors will leave at the smallest obstacle.#UX #...

VIEW ON YOUTUBE >

In the video above the user experiences of physical selling spaces and online websites of companies are compared. Which statements are correct?

If the website is too complicated or hard to understand, you will immediately lose customers.

Websites need to be like a riddle for customers, so they stay longer on the website.
In a physical selling space, customers are more likely to "suffer" a bit more than in the online world.
A physical selling space might have a bad usability and might be complicated (e.g. Starbucks coffeeshops), but still be successful.
SUBMIT

When we show up to the present moment with all of our senses, we invite the world to fill us with joy. The pains of the past are behind us. The future has yet to unfold. But the now is full of beauty simply waiting for our attention.

8) Update your site's content often (at least show it's been reviewed recently).

People assign more credibility to sites that show they have been **recently updated**. This does not only apply to your company's website. Make sure that your company's information is up-to-date and consistent **on all online platforms your company is presented on**, e.g. Google Maps, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, or TikTok.

Considering your company's website: Let your users know when you last updated the pages of your website.



"There are different kinds of content. Some content types need frequent updating, other content types are pretty static. Take some time for reflection: For which content types is it important to provide frequent updates? When is it enough to make sure the information is still correct? What decision criteria do you follow for this?"

- Sabine Melnicki, Austrian web consultant at WebAhoi

9) Use restraint with any promotional content (e.g., ads, offers)

Avoid having third-party ads and pop-up ads on your site, unless you don't mind annoying users and losing credibility.



This is an example of third-party ads on websites. The screenshot is <u>provided by WikiHow</u>, licensed under <u>Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0)</u>.

No good impression on your future customers: Invasive ads

Any of the following types of ads should be avoided:

- Ads that take up the whole page
- Ads that require you to take a survey (or complete some other action) before continuing
- Ads that redirect you to another page
- Explicit or suggestive ads (see also WikiHow, 2021)

10) Avoid errors of all types, no matter how small they seem

Typographical errors or broken links are hurting your website's credibility. **Professional proofreading and regular checks** of all paths on your website are necessary to improve the user experience and to win the user's trust.



This is an example of bad spelling on websites. The screenshot is <u>provided by WikiHow</u>, licensed under <u>Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0)</u>.

Bad spelling? Sings of a poor source.

You should avoid a large number of poorly-spelled (or missing) words, generally bad grammar, or awkward phrasing.

How to solve the problem?

You don't need to be a spelling bee to have an online presence **without typographical errors**.

There are technological solutions available, like the free AI-powered writing assistant <u>Grammarly</u> or the multilingual grammar, style, and spell checker <u>languagetool.org</u>.



WikiHow: Find if a website is legitimate

WikiHow published guidelines for users on how to tell if a website is legitimate. Also good advice for your and your website.

READ MORE

Enhancing usability by using interface design patterns

These user interface design patterns are recurring solutions that solve common design problems - resulting in "good" web design and high usability.

EXPLORE PATTERNS



What are your takeaways from this chapter?

Lessons learned

This chapter focused on giving **up-to-date examples of how to implement** the Standford University guidelines on web credibility, no. 6-10 to support your mission of **gaining your** (potential) customers' trust online.

There are **basic rules** to follow regarding the design and the content of your website: Professional design with high usability, relevant and updated content, no external ads to other companies, and

avoiding typos at any cost.

We hope you enjoyed this introduction to establishing trust and credibility online!

We highly appreciate **your feedback**, so **please leave a comment** about this course <u>in our feedback</u> <u>padlet</u>. **Thank you!**



Thank you for checking out the DigiCulTS course. I hope you found some useful takeaways for your professional practice.

Contact information

This course was designed for the <u>DigiCulTS project</u> by <u>Isabell Grundschober</u>, a researcher at <u>the University for Continuing Education Krems</u>. Feel free to connect with Isabell on social media to share your experiences about this course or discuss the course topics:

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- Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/isabellgru/
- LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/isabellgru/
- Isabell's Blog: https://isabellgru.eu/