

YOU CAN RELY ON ME

TRUST AND STEREOTYPES

In the late 1990's, another ardent campaigner and I, dressed in black leggings and sweat shirts, climbed up Butt Bridge close to the Department of the Environment in Dublin and tied a banner onto the iron girding. We thought our action was fairly tame - we did it in the hope of getting some media interest for the launch of a new campaign highlighting concerns over GMOs. Within minutes the commuter train whose tracks ran over the bridge had been stopped and all hell broke loose. The police and fire brigade arrived and after some fairly provocative haranguing we were escorted down the firemen's ladder and whisked off in a paddy wagon. The swift reaction surprised us, as on Greenpeace actions in the past the guards had treated us with kid gloves, allowing us to conduct our protest and rarely making arrests. When we met the arresting officer a few days later in court, I asked him why the rough approach? He answered that they didn't know who we were, *"You could have been anyone"*.

From this I concluded that if we had been wearing our Greenpeace t-shirts they would have been secure in the knowledge that we weren't going to blow up the trainline. They could trust Greenpeace but not two scruffy looking women crawling under a bridge.

Whether we like it or not appearances and reputation do matter, especially if we are communicating messages that no-one wants to hear.

TRUST

A little girl and her father were crossing a bridge.

The father was kind of scared so he asked his little daughter:

" Sweetheart, please hold my hand so that you don't fall into the river." The little girl said:

" No, Dad. You hold my hand."

" What's the difference?" Asked the puzzled father.

" There's a big difference," replied the little girl.

" If I hold your hand and something happens to me, chances are that I may let your hand go. But if you hold my hand, I know for sure that no matter what happens, you will never let my hand go"¹

Trust is a reliance on the integrity, strength, ability and surety of a person or thing.

¹ <http://boardofwisdom.com/?viewid=1005&listname=trust>

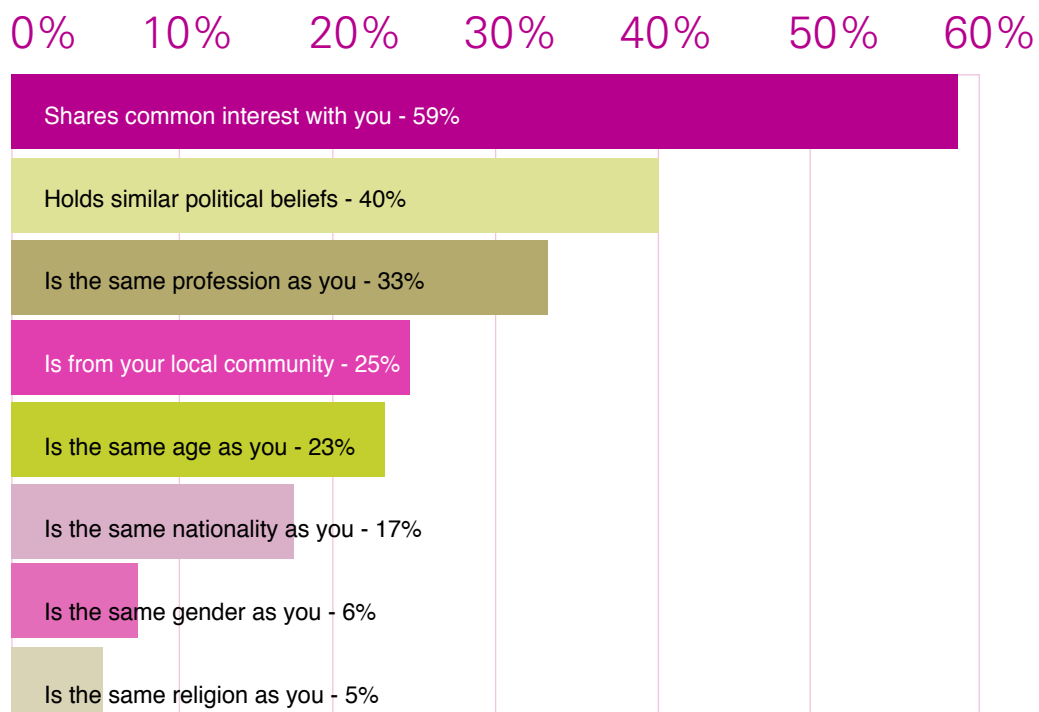
The whole world runs on trust. We trust that other drivers on the road won't hit us, we trust that the people we pass on the street won't rob us, that the bank where we deposited our savings will give them back to us, that the farmer who produces our food won't poison us, that the courts will punish the guilty and free the innocent. At times, our faith can be tested – Here in Ireland banks, politicians and even food producers (horse meat, anyone?) have all failed us in the not too distant past. However, for our society to function we have to pick ourselves up, give out viscerally, fight for better standards and then get on with the business of trusting again.

It is in our collective interest to trust, and to try to be trustworthy and cooperative.

According to Dan Gardner,² researchers have found that when the people or institutions handling a risk are trusted, public concern declines. It matters a great deal whether the person telling you not to worry is your family doctor or a tobacco company spokesperson. Trust is difficult to build and easily lost. In most modern countries, political scientists have found a long-term decline in public trust of various authorities (especially politicians). Gardner says that the danger here is that we will *"collectively cross the line separating scepticism from cynicism"*.

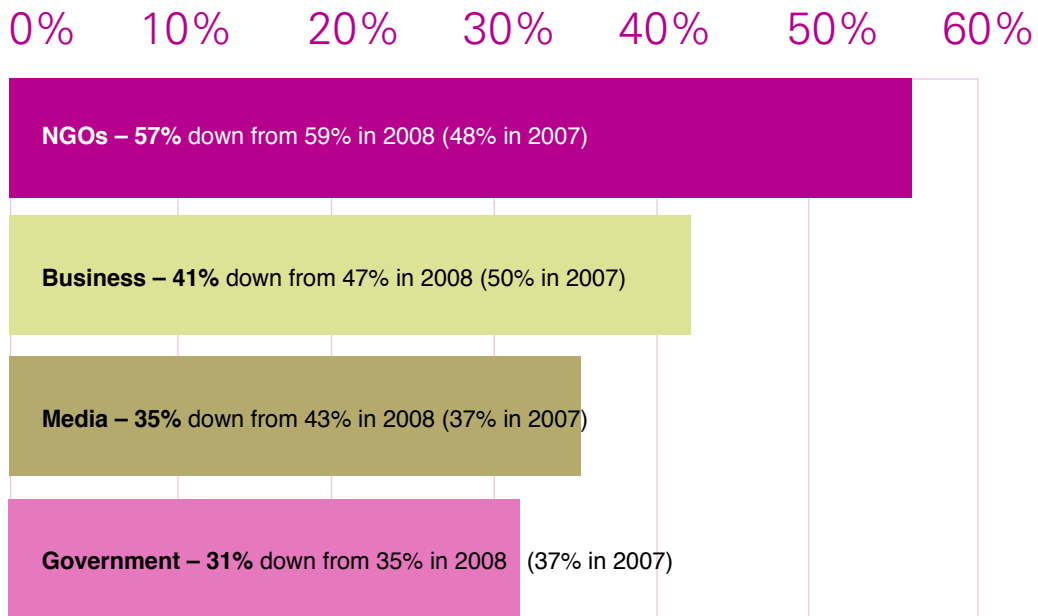
The Edelman Trust Barometer is an annual survey carried out in 20 countries amongst college educated people in the top 25% income bracket. In a cursory search of the web I came across the following interesting statistics:

The 2008 Irish Edelman Trust Barometer ranked the characteristics increasing trust in someone sharing information about a company as follows:

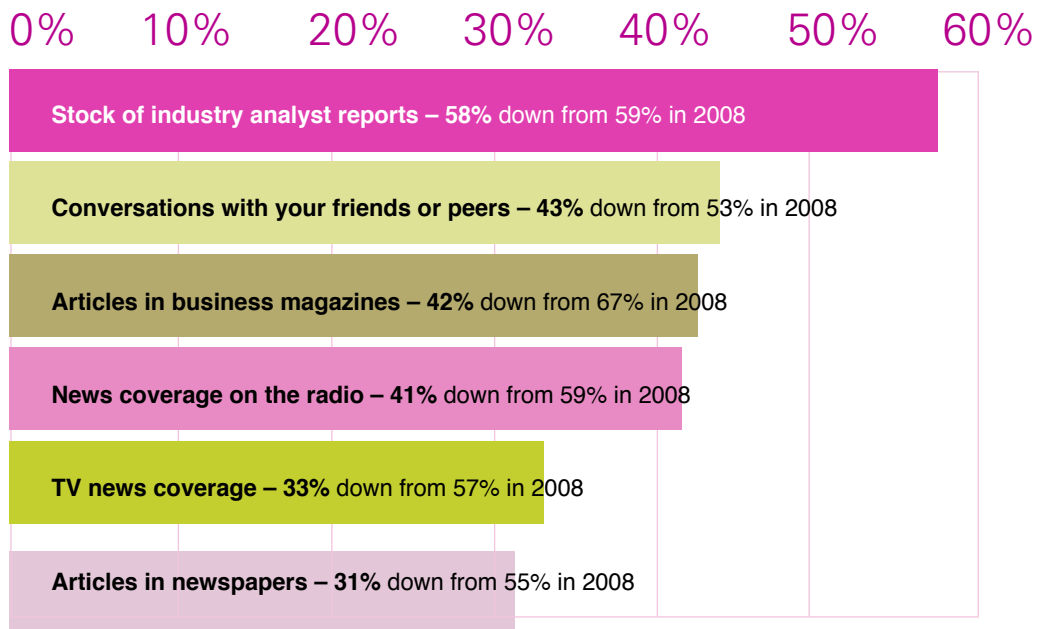


² D. Gardner (2008) *Risk*; p.109/10

Using a 9-point scale, interviewees were asked to rate how much they trusted each of four institutions. The 2009 Irish results were as follows:



Our trust in traditional information sources had waned:

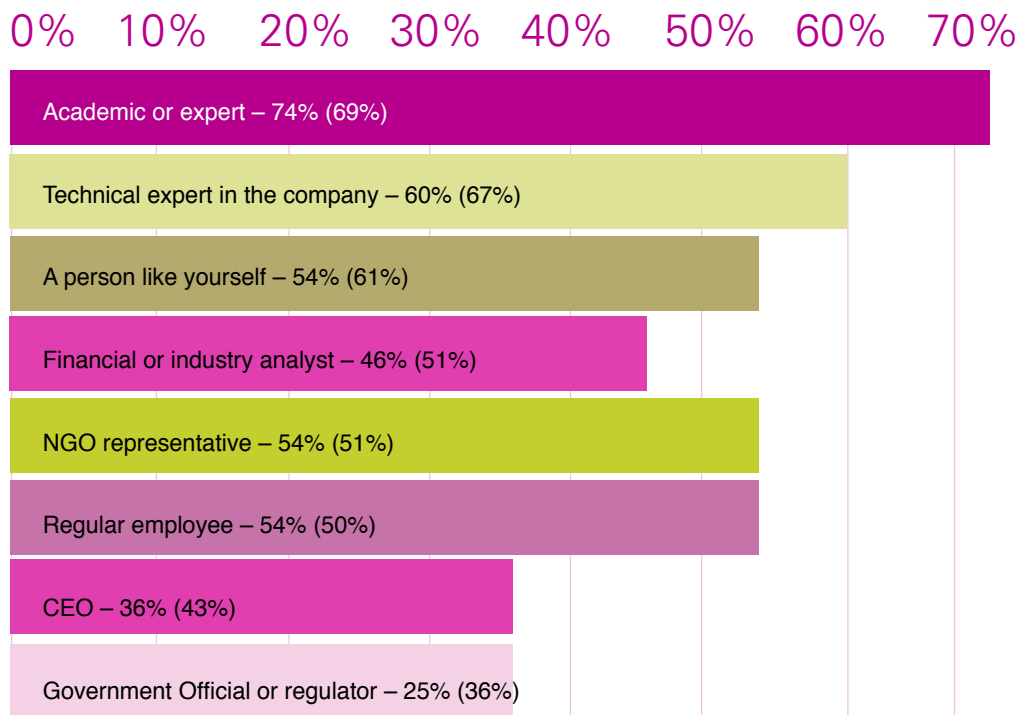


46% of respondents said that they held government most responsible for solving global warming; 6% said NGO's and 5% said business

NGO's remained the world's most trusted institution.

In the Edelman Trust Barometer released in January 2013,³ we Irish have ranked experts and our peers as being the most trustworthy sources and spokespeople.

The full list is as follows (in brackets are the global averages):



From the above, we can deduce that more than half of the Irish population trusts the word of people like themselves, which presumably includes their friends and others within their social group. Interestingly, it does not necessarily include the people within their community, maybe that's because communities are so fluid and mixed these days, or it could be because communities are not the safe havens we think they are.

So, bearing this in mind, who should be telling more than 50% of Irish people about climate change? Probably not us environmentalists, most of whom are blow-ins, if West Cork is anything to go by, who hang around with each other (and I do realize that West Cork may not be a template for the rest of the country, but you get my drift).

According to Susan Moser and Lisa Dilling, new information, however credible, does not easily persuade individuals to act in new ways unless it comes from a trusted source. Generally, personally familiar sources are more trusted than more distant and less familiar sources and those coming from similar circumstances are believed to understand one's situation better than those coming from very different backgrounds. Often, it takes observing the actions by a neighbour, a friend, or a competing firm to spur action.⁴

³ <http://www.edelman.ie/index.php/insights/trust-barometer/>

⁴ S. Moser & L. Dilling (Eds.) (2007) *Creating a Climate for Change*; p. 13

CAN PEOPLE TRUST ENVIRONMENTALISTS?

Environmentalists usually think and live outside of the box. In fact we are quite proud of the fact that we don't follow the herd, that we're free-thinkers. We are often fiercely independent, opinionated and strong-willed. When we have something to say we like to think we are the centre of attention, but are we? Our pioneering, egalitarian mindsets set us apart from others, and being independent thinkers, we often look different too. Some of us wear our identities like a badge. We're not exactly your average role model.

Our son came home from school recently with the question, "What's a hippie?" It struck me, by the way he asked, that the question did not come from an uninformed or non-judgemental place, so what could I say except "It's a thing a leggie hangs off".

We owe a debt of gratitude to hippies. They were involved in the early days of the environmental, anti-war, women's rights, and anti-racist movements. On the environmental front, hippies established and supported such organizations as Greenpeace, Earth First!, Friends of the Earth and were at the forefront of the anti-nuclear lobby.

And this historical link with the hippie movement of the 1960s has never quite gone away. While many of us have since cleaned up our act and can scrub up well if required, deep down there's still a bit of the free-living, free-wheeling radical in most of us. And we still display the link. While I never saw *myself* as a hippie, in my Greenpeace days and beyond, I did have five small plaits at the side of my hair, I drove a Volkswagen Beetle, then a little beat-up Mini and I've always had a penchant for wearing bright leggings.

Ben Elton⁵ introduces us to a great character - the Norwegian Green God, Jurgen Thor, who comes to save the world. "Jurgen Thor was almost too good to be true. From his great mane of shaggy golden hair to his enormous sixteen-hole, tan leathered Timberland workboots he was more god than man. His gimlet-sharp clear grey eyes could puncture a politician across a hundred-metre conference room.....Jurgen was huge. It was as if when the Almighty was making him He (or She) had always intended to make two, perhaps even three, environmental activists, but had decided to save time by making one big one. Muscles coiled like serpents about his colossal frame. His chest was a giant's chest, the nipples were in different time zones: this was a chest that exerted its own gravitational pull."

From my time in Greenpeace, I can appreciate the description.

However, in relation to our effectiveness as message bearers, the stereotypical link between environmentalist and wild, rugged vagabond isn't exactly helpful. Whether consciously or not, many people still associate us with pot smoking freeloaders trying to save the world; feckless, dirty, long-haired rockers; flower-power dreamers in Jesus sandals; communal living idealists espousing peace and love; back to the landers living up mountains (that's me) and/or granola eating vegetarians. We have quite an image problem.

Early in January 2013, a caller to RTE Radio's Liveline programme was describing her approach to rubbish; "I recycle my stuff - we're not eco-green or anything - you know, we're just a normal family."

STEREOTYPES

Professor of psychology and behavioural economics at Duke University and author, Dan Ariely,⁶ says that a stereotype is a way of categorising information in the hope of predicting experiences. That way the brain doesn't have to start from scratch. It must build on what it has seen before. While stereotypes are not necessarily malicious, by giving us specific expectations about members of a group, they can unfavourably

⁵ Ben Elton (1993); *This Other Eden*; p. 77/8

⁶ Dan Ariely (2008/9) *Predictably Irrational-The hidden forces that shape our decisions*; p 168-171

influence both our perceptions and our behaviour. Research on stereotypes shows not only that we react differently when we have a stereotype of someone, but also that stereotyped people themselves react differently when they are aware of the label others put on them.

Ariely refers to research carried out in 1997 by Margaret Shih, Todd Pittinsky and Nalini Ambady, which focused on the stereotype that Asian-Americans are especially gifted in maths and science, and the stereotypes that females are weak in mathematics. A number of Asian-American female undergraduates were given questionnaires to fill out – one half were primed with questions about their gender (relating to things like co-ed dorms), while the others were asked questions about their race (referring to the languages they knew, their family's history in the US, etc). They were then all asked to take an objective maths test. The performance of the two groups differed in a way that matched the stereotypes of both women and Asian-Americans. Those who had been reminded that they were women performed worse than those who had been reminded that they were Asian-American!

But while we ponder whether or not our image is causing us problems, the marketing industry may just be one step ahead of us - using the trust factor to their own advantage.

In October 2011, Martin Lindstrom and his team,⁷ inspired by the 2010 Hollywood movie *The Joneses*, (a family who move into a high income suburb to secretly and successfully promote products to their neighbours) conducted a similar real life social experiment with the help of a successful, well heeled, good looking Californian family. The Morgensons - Eric, a successful compassionate, funny, sports obsessed Dad; Gina, a sophisticated trend setter, politically and environmentally aware, charming and popular Mum and their three sporty handsome teenage boys - were carefully selected by professional Hollywood casting directors. Hidden cameras and microphones were installed throughout their house and each family member was asked to recommend certain products to their friends. And it didn't take much persuasion;

Gina took her friends shoe shopping. Two hours later, she has subtly managed to convince five of her friends to buy multiple pairs of boots, heels and flats in her "*favourite*" shoe shop. On another occasion, she held a champagne brunch for a dozen or so of her friends, and served a branded sparkling wine from Australia "*Isn't it yummy?*" she asked, repeatedly dropping the brand name into the conversation. Before long, her friends were all talking about how yummy it was and chalking it up as a to-buy item. She showed people the beautiful brand jewelry she was wearing and explained how the company had created one of the charms in honour of Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Three of her friends turned up at a beach party two weeks later wearing the coveted trinkets. Next Gina sang the praises of her new brand of natural beauty products and gave a sample gift bag to each of her friends. She then popped open a few bottles of a special branded Californian wine, from a Napa winery "*known for their fantastic reds*". And along the way she showed them her exquisite new bag. Before long, a number of her friends went out and bought the same bag, and some switched to her recommended natural cosmetics. Some even bought the wine in bulk.

Gina's success rate and the power of her word of mouth recommendations surprised even Lindstrom and his team. However, it appears that such guerilla marketing works better with women than men. The brand preferences of her husband, Eric, were not taken quite so seriously by his male friends. Their reactions were more skeptical and challenging. *What makes you the expert?*, one of his mates visibly bristled when Eric suggested he should use a certain brand of barbecue marinade! Lindstrom concluded

⁷ Martin Lindstrom (2012) *Brandwashed-tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy*; p.229-246

that many men experience these kinds of suggestions as an assault on their authority - as if Eric was implying he knew better. However, Eric had more success when he was recommending a product that was aspirational and that signaled money, power and success, like a new car or state of the art grill or an expensive bottle of wine. But such a word of mouth recommendation could only come from another male whose opinion the other guys respected. The guys also seemed to be more influenced by their friend's food and dietary choices than the women.

The teens, who exuded an aura of confidence, were seriously influential, even across age and gender differences. One of the tasks Lindstrom gave to the family was to increase awareness within their circle of friends of the crucial importance of going green, and to try and persuade them to buy more environmentally friendly products. After the boys brought their new GreenSmart bags and lunch boxes made from recycled materials to school, a number of their classmates were impressed enough to get their own.

In the 60 days following the Morgenson's ecological mission, research showed that the number of green activities their friends were involved in increased by 31%. And the influence seemed to stick.

Lindstrom believes that peer pressure is the only way to make people go green and maybe he's right. But the message must come from people we admire and respect, people we aspire to be like and therefore who we trust.

When the experiment was revealed to the Morgenson's neighbours and friends, all of them were astonished as none of them had suspected it was a set up. They had respected and trusted this family so much that they adopted their recommendations without doubting their motives. For some it was even subconscious, they didn't even remember being encouraged to make the switch. Surprisingly, none of them felt duped or questioned where the reality show was unethical or wrong. And as far as we know their friendships with the Morgenson's haven't been affected.

According to Martin Lindstrom, companies will soon be employing their own stealth marketers working from within households, possibly in a neighbourhood near you, so beware!

For more see: <http://www.martinlindstrom.com/brandwashed/video-morgensons.php>

