

Chapter 12  
Understanding Speaker Image

from  
PUBLIC SPEAKING: AN IDEA PERSPECTIVE  
W. Clifton Adams  
© 2012

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

**General Educational Objectives:** This chapter helps you to:

1. appreciate how image differs from reality.
2. determine better your speaking image.
3. understand factors of speaker image

**Specific Testable Objectives:** As a result of studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. explain methods of determining one's speaker image.
2. define, identify and provide examples of key speaker-image factors.

“As a reporter having covered him for eight years in the White House,  
I am sure the press could have done a better job if  
we had known the real Ronald Reagan.”  
Helen Thomas

A major portion of our cognitions involve beliefs and attitudes about people. In our “global village” that number is growing. Fortunately, our concern here is with only one part of those beliefs and attitude, those about the speaker. The term most often used for this set of cognitions is source credibility. However, I prefer the term speaker image for three reasons. First, the word, credibility, is too often used to speak to the believability of the message. Believability is only one of several dimensions that define the set of beliefs of relevance to this chapter. Second, source credibility is too often used as if the phenomenon is something that resides in the source. We hope with the word image, we can keep the focus on an area within the cognitive systems of the audience. Third, the word speaker narrows the focus more appropriately to our concern with public speaking.

Even with the intended narrowing to speaker image, the issue extends beyond the scope of an introductory course. Again, I'd encourage you to continuing studying the topic beyond this course.

### Inset 12-1

#### A Pause to Consider

When two people talk, it's as if six people are talking: There is person A speaking to person B. There is the person that A thinks she is speaking to whom she thinks B is; and, there is the person B thinks he is talking with the person he perceives A to be.

We know from both empirical studies and philosophical reflection that the cognitions we call speaker image are comprised of many factors. Based on quantitative studies, the first two of these factors seem to be independent of each other. That is to say, they function differently within our thought processes; we may deem a person worthy on one dimension while negatively on the other. The remaining factors may depend on the first two, or vice versa. In this chapter we will consider these factors from the viewpoint of an audience listening to a speaker.

As you read a description of each factor, a fair question to ask is, "How would I ever know how an audience felt about me in this regard?" My stock answer is, "Ask and listen." You may have to use judgment in how you ask the questions and to whom. You may also have to listen with your eyes as well as your ears. In situations where you know many individuals comprising a future or reoccurring audience, it's usually best to ask a friend what others are saying about you. In situations where you don't know the audience, you can be sure that they do have an idea of who you are. In those cases, you should ask the person issuing the invitation or the contact person for any insights she/he might have. Given sufficient advance time, you might even ask that person to conduct a survey in your behave. In any event, indirect questions tend to yield more truthful responses. Figure 14-1 shows an example of a semantic-differential scale often used by professionals to gauge speaker image. The method asks individuals to make judgments about sets of bi-polar adjectives. The respondent marks each scale to indicate how they judge a concept in terms of the two adjectives. The concept in this case is the speaker or something associated with the speaker. The method can be used informally by simply asking which of the two adjectives best describe the concept.

In all regards, audience analysis is something that you do in preparation to give the speech, not as you are giving the speech. This principle is particularly true in the case of assessing how the audience may view you. Even under the best conditions, using the best interviewing techniques, image is difficult to assess. Advice to watch the audience as you speak only applies when you have a fair baseline already established.

Table 14-1  
Semantic Differential Type Scales

Women in Politics

GOOD \_\_\_\_\_ BAD  
UNPLEASANT \_\_\_\_\_ PLEASANT  
UNDESIREABLE \_\_\_\_\_ DESIREABLE

Hillary Clinton

PLEASANT \_\_\_\_\_ UNPLEASANT  
BAD \_\_\_\_\_ GOOD  
UNDESIREABLE \_\_\_\_\_ DESIREABLE

Inset 12-2

HELPFUL INFORMATION IN TERMS OF ASSESSING  
REACTIONS DURING THE SPEECH

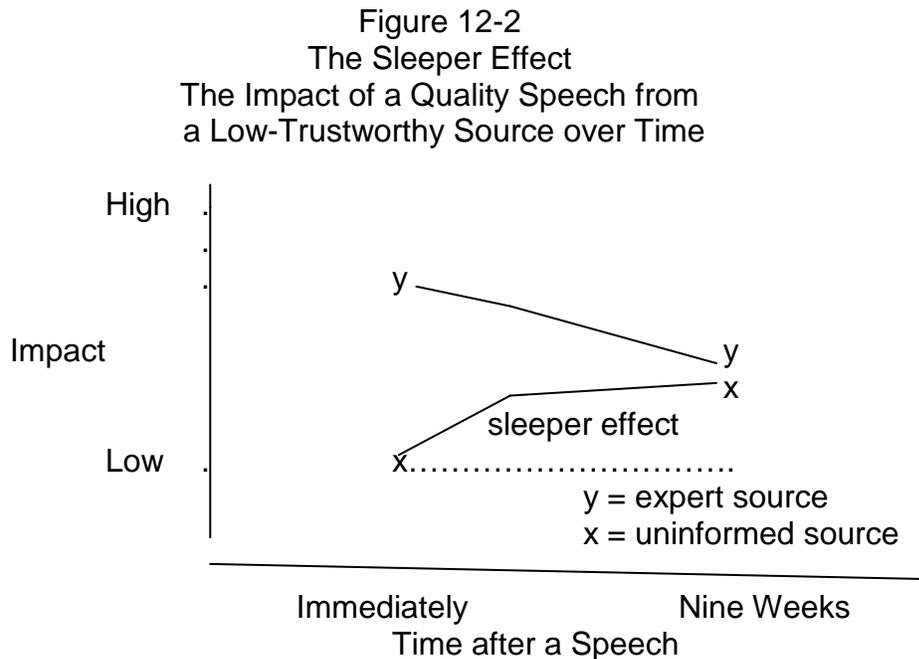
1. Culture impacts greatly on how an audience will respond. If the culture is different than yours, you need a good knowledge of the culture before feeling confident in your interpretation of their reaction.
2. Individuals differ in how they respond. The better you know the people in your audience, the more confidence you can have in gauging their response.
3. Context is essential in understanding any message, especially feedback from an audience. Since there is usually no spoken response to contribute to your understanding, you should be slow to reach any conclusions in terms of the thinking of the audience before you have spoken or written confirmation.

## Speaker-Image Factors

**Perceived Trust** is the degree to which the audience thinks that the speaker is honest and will not misrepresent information. Stated in a different way, perhaps, it reflects the degree to which the listeners think that the speaker has their best interest in mind. Perceived trustworthiness only becomes a real issue when it drops below some threshold. Individuals typically grant a sufficient believability. As long as it is at least moderate, the speaker simply needs to project sincerity in his or her delivery.

However, once perceived trustworthiness drops to a moderate level, the audience does begin to discount the value of the information. They may want to see physical evidence, or at least to be provided documentation sufficient for them to know where to find verification. Without something to offset the distrust, the discounting of the information is likely to continue at least until the audience forgets the source of the information (see Figure 12-2). They will definitely monitor the speaker's sincerity.

Then, if the distrust is high, the audience isn't likely to be satisfied short of the speaker addressing the reasons for the distrust directly. They will need to be convinced either that a misunderstanding prompted their perception or that the speaker has truly changed. They will also be judging closely the sincerity of the speaker.



In the long run, audience tends to forget the source and quality information has equal impact. Thus, it's termed the sleeper effect.

**Perceived Expertise** is the extent to which the audience believes that the speaker is well informed and insightful on the topic under discussion. With few exceptions, the more perceived expertise the speaker has, the more successful she or he is. When the audience perceives the speaker to be an expert, they expect her to use supporting material drawn from her personal experience. They don't see a need for her to document the source of the information. They also tend to accept any opinions expressed as authoritative.

When perceived authority is moderate to low, the audience wants to hear a variety of supporting material. They don't expect the speaker to give specific documentation as to where they can find the information, but they expect most of the sources of the information to be clearly beyond the speaker's direct experience.

When perceived authority is low, the audience will not accept ideas from the speaker unless the ideas have a variety of support. Then, the listeners will want clear references to the sources of the information.

**Perceived Friendship** is the extent to which a person feels that there is an established relationship or association with the speaker. This relationship need not be direct, but may be through mutual acquaintances or memberships.

The relationship may be positive or negative. If the relationship is perceived to be strongly positive, the audience is open to considering the granting of favors and even expects a degree of social pressure to be exerted on them to grant favors.

As long as the relationship is not perceived as very negative, the audience is probably willing to respond positively to warmth in the speaker's tone of voice and gestures. However, if the audience perceives the speaker as an enemy, they won't be willing to consider positively any message except a discussion of their relationship. They may well expect an apology or at least an explanation designed to reduce the animosity.

**Perceived Common Ground** speaks to similarities and areas of interest which the audience members think they share with the speaker. Common ground tends to predispose the audience favorably to the speaker and his message. Common ground can often compensate for weakness in other image factors. When the links are strong, the audience tends to expect some reference to them in the introduction, or use of them in the body of the speech. Where the links aren't as obvious, the audience will be impressed if they are identified by the speaker and they will feel a stronger rapport with the speaker.

**Motivational expectancy** covers the extent to which the audience thinks the speaker will attempt to persuade them and the goal of this persuasion. If the listeners believe that the speaker will attempt to persuade them to do something they do not want to do, they will may be strengthening they resolve to resist. However, if there is any predisposition to respond positively, the expectation may well prompt them to be even more favorable to the speaker's arguments.

Furthermore, if the audience expects to support the speaker's position, they will be disappointed if the speaker doesn't ask enough of them.

**Ability expectancy** is the skills which the audience believes the speaker has or should have. This category includes the view the audience has of the person as a communicator, both good and not so good. Certainly, a minimum skill in articulation of a viewpoint is expected in most situations where the audience chooses to listen, but the listeners will tolerate, and may well adore, some poor delivery traits. When the expectation is strong, the audience will be disappointed if the presentation isn't excellent.

In demonstration speeches and/or other times where equipment is involved, the audience is going to expect at least the skill in using the tools necessary to complete the demonstration.

**Language expectancy** is how the audience thinks the speaker should/will use words in the speech. Audiences seem capable of recognizing various levels of language use and to categorize speakers according to how they select and arrange words. In general, audiences prefer a speaker who talks similarly or slightly more artistically than they do. A speaker who makes grammatical errors which the audience does not make seems to lose credibility in general and is likely to suffer in the perceived authority area as well. Even individuals who themselves misuse the language will find fault in a speaker's usage when other image factors are negative. Furthermore, audiences may fault a speaker for correctly using a construction that they normally misuse and have no problem with errors they commonly make. While the default is for audiences to prefer familiar wording, on special occasions, they do appreciate ornate language (see chapter 21).

**Sponsorship** covers the audience's perception of the agency that is organizing and funding the event. If the audience perceives the speaker as an agent of the sponsor, then both positive and negative associations with the agency impact the image of the speaker. If the audience supports the cause of the agency and do not see the speaker as its agent, they may be distrustful of the speaker. If they do not like the sponsor, they will be more predisposed to supporting a speaker not associated with the sponsorship.

**Position** refers to the role the audience perceives the speaker as playing in the relevant organization. Typically positions carry with them titles or job descriptions. Position is almost always associated, in the listeners' minds, with power or lack thereof. As we'll discuss in Chapter 15, the more organized the group the more power the audience gives to its leaders. In highly organized groups, the audience will generally expect individuals in power positions to suggest and even to direct their appropriate behavior and course of action. In less structured groups, position may contribute to all the other factors.

Inset 12-3

HELPFUL INFORMATION IN TERMS OF POSITION

Typical Ranks of Professions in Terms of Trust  
(from annual USA Today/Gallop Poll 12/8-10/06)

Rank	Profession
1	Nurse
2	Pharmacist
3	Veterinarian
4	Grade-School Teacher
5	Medical Doctor
6	Dentist
7	Clergy
8	Professor
9	Police Officer
10	Psychiatrist
11	Banker
12	Chiropractor
13	Automobile Mechanic
14	Nursing-Home Operator
15	Journalist
16	State Governor
17	Business Executive
18	Lawyer
19	Stockbroker
20	Senator
21	Congressman
22	HMO Provider
23	Advertising Executive
24	Car Dealer

**Attraction** is the extent to which members of the audience perceive the speaker as someone with whom they enjoy spending time. The audience will be attracted to the speaker based on looks, charm, similarity and a host of intangible factors. Similarly, one or more of these factors may repulse members of the audience. At the positive extreme, they may find the speaker charismatic. For the charismatic speaker, they may be prone to follow the speaker's suggestions simply due to the attraction. When they do act simply to gain favor of the speaker, the transaction extends beyond the scope of this text.

**Perceived involvement** reflects the audience's belief that the speaker is committed to the goals she or he is advocating. If they believe that the speaker is unconcerned, they will, at best, also become apathetic and, most likely will resent the speaker, reducing her or him in terms of other factors. If they see the speaker as concerned and even enthusiastic, they are likely to increase their regard for her or him in other regards.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I defined speaker image as beliefs the audience has about the speaker. From that perspective, we considered eleven image factors that may have impact within the speaking situation. In Chapter 16, we will discuss how you may consider many of these factors as you continue to build your image as a speaker.

### **Key Sources**

- Anderson, K. & Clevenger, T. (1963). A summary of experimental research in ethos. . *Communication Monographs*, 30, 59-78.
- Berlo, D. K., Lebert, J. B. & Mertz, R. J. (1970). Dimensions for evaluating the acceptability of message source. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 13, 563-576.
- Gillig, P. M. & Greenwald, A. G. (1974). Is it time to lay the sleeper effect to rest? *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 29, 132-139.
- Holtzman, P. D. (1970). *The psychology of speakers' audiences* Glenview, IL Scott, Foresman & Co., pp. 43-47.
- Hovland, C. I., Janis, I. L. & Kelley, H. A. (1953). *Communication and persuasion: Psychological studies in opinion change*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1968). *An introduction to rhetorical communication*. Englewood Cliffs. NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Osgood, C. E, Suci, G.J, & Tannenbaum, P. (1954). *The Measurement of Meaning*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.