



Generative Research
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White paper

Trust Infrastructure

A framework for machine-readable credibility signals

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Executive summary

People judge credibility using signals: a known publisher, a named author, a professional design, a list of citations. Each of these signals has become cheap to fake.

This paper proposes Trust Infrastructure, a four-layer framework for credibility signals that can be read and checked by software as well as people. The framework separates signals that are easy to imitate from those that are costly to fabricate, and recommends that platforms and readers weight them accordingly.

In a survey of 3,100 U.S. adults, respondents rated an organization with a professional website, a staff page, and published reports as credible 74 percent of the time, regardless of whether any of those elements could be independently confirmed.

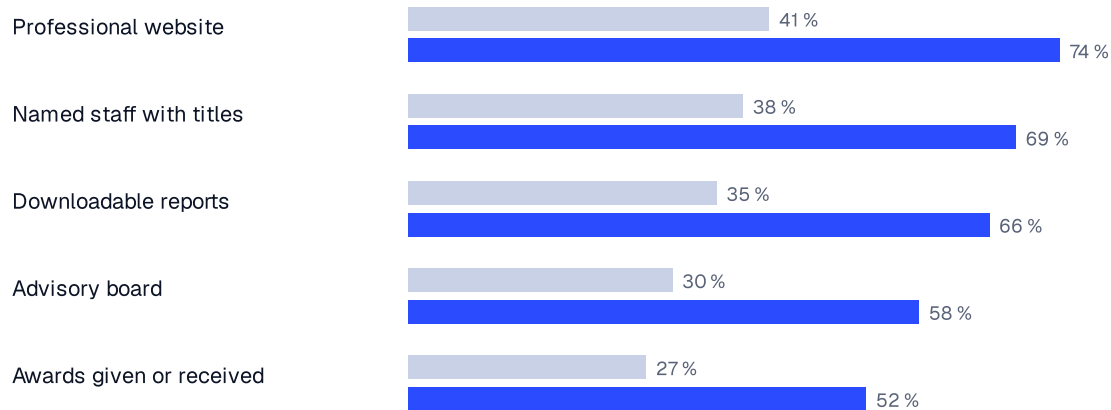
1. The problem with surface signals

Most credibility cues that audiences rely on are surface signals. They describe how a source looks. A polished website, an institutional name, a logo, a list of advisers, and a set of downloadable reports all suggest an established organization. None of them confirm one.

Surface signals were once reasonable proxies because they were expensive. Building a professional website, recruiting a staff, and producing original research took money and time. Today, all of these can be produced in an afternoon.

2. Survey findings

Figure 1. Share of respondents rating a source credible without (light) and with (blue) each signal present



n = 3,100 U.S. adults. Respondents viewed mock organizational profiles with signals randomly added or removed.

Each surface signal raised perceived credibility substantially. Awards had a measurable effect even when respondents were told the award was presented by the organization itself.

When we added a single costly signal, such as a verifiable nonprofit registration or independent press coverage, credibility ratings rose further. When respondents were shown how to check these signals, fewer than 9 percent did so.

3. The framework

Trust Infrastructure organizes credibility signals into four layers. Each layer answers a distinct question about a piece of content or the organization behind it.

Layer	Question it answers	Example signals
1. Origin	Who created this, and when?	Creator identity, creation timestamp, tool used
2. Custody	What happened to it after creation?	Edit history, republication chain, format changes
3. Corroboration	Do independent sources agree?	Matching primary documents, independent reporting
4. Accountability	Who stands behind it?	Named publisher, corrections policy, funding disclosure

Signals in the first two layers can be attached automatically at the point of creation. Signals in the third and fourth layers require outside parties and are therefore harder to fabricate. The framework recommends that interfaces surface layers three and four prominently, since those are the signals most resistant to imitation.

4. Implementation

For platforms

Display verifiable organizational information, such as registration status and domain age, alongside content from unfamiliar sources.

For publishers

Publish funding sources, corrections policies, and staff credentials in a standard, machine-readable format.

For readers

Check whether an organization exists outside its own website. Look for registration records, independent coverage, and a history older than the website itself.

5. Conclusion

The cost of appearing credible has fallen faster than the cost of being credible. Credibility systems should reward the signals that remain expensive to fake.

References

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