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UNH Research: No Second Chance to Make Trusting First Impression, or is There?

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DURHAM, N.H.— In business, as in life, it is important to make a good first impression and according to research at the University of New Hampshire a positive initial trust interaction can be helpful in building a lasting trust relationship. Researchers found that trusting a person early on can have benefits over the life of the relationship, even after a violation of that trust.

“It’s not just an old adage, first impressions really do matter especially when it comes to trust,” said Rachel Campagna, assistant professor of management. “During an initial interaction, one of the most important and immediate factors people consider about another person is trustworthiness. It can impact their willingness to accept risk and vulnerability and can help develop future perceptions and behaviors like cooperation, whether it be for work, negotiations or partnerships. Where it gets more complex is after a significant gap in time between interactions.”

In their paper (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00187267211002905>), recently published in the journal Human Relations, the researchers found that if trust is established in a first meeting but soon after someone violates that trust, people tend to be more forgiving because they automatically revert back to that initial impression. However, what they found equally interesting was that if people were not trusted during a first meeting, or they got off on the wrong foot, and had the opportunity to further violate that trust but did not, they were actually the most trusted when encountered again in the future.

“A good example is engaging in a negotiation with a salesperson and there is questionable trust on that first meeting,” says Campagna. “But when the two people meet again to finish the negotiation, like sign contracts, the customer learns that the salesperson did something to help them that wasn’t expected. That simple act is an opportunity to mend any negative first trust impression and may even strengthen it with actions like future referrals.”

There is much debate within trust literature about initial trustworthiness perceptions without any consistent answers. Some previous theories suggest that initial trust can be fleeting, lasting only for the first few moments of an interaction. Other research suggests it has more of a lasting influence. To help reconcile the spectrum of different findings, the researchers conducted three studies at different phases of a relationship - one field study that examined initial interactions and consequences between teams and then two follow up experimental studies after a two-week period that tested the impact of initial trust and perceptions following an exchange in which the trustworthiness of a counterpart plays a critical role.



“While we found that a good first trust impression is important it was interesting to see that even if someone has a bad day and gets off on a bad foot, there are opportunities to build and strengthen the trust, which can be important to both parties”, said Campagna.

Co-authors include Alexandra Mislin, associate professor of management at American University; Kurt Dirks, vice chancellor of international affairs and Hillary Anger Elfenbein, professor of organizational behavior both at Washington University in St. Louis.

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