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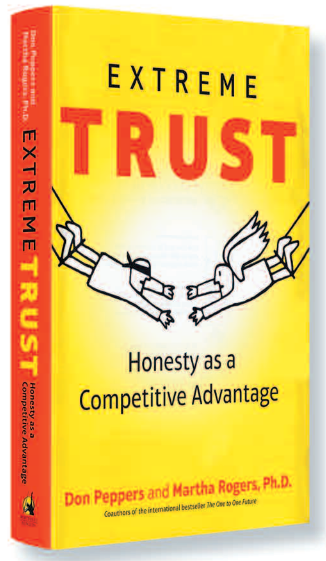
Management

Extreme Trust

Honesty as a Competitive Advantage



by Don Peppers
and Martha Rogers, Ph.D.

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

If you accidentally try to order the same song twice from iTunes, you'll be warned that you already own it. Not because it would be illegal or unethical for Apple to profit from your forgetfulness. There's a clear business reason: the leaders of iTunes realize there's no better way to make you trust them than to be totally honest when you least expect it.

In the age of the Web, every action an organization takes can be exposed and critiqued in real time. Don Peppers and Martha Rogers, Ph.D., the authors of *Extreme Trust*, argue that the only sane response to these rising levels of transparency is to protect the interests of customers proactively, before they have a chance to spread negative buzz — even if that requires spending extra money in the short run to preserve your reputation and customer relationships in the long run.

The companies that Peppers and Rogers call "trustable" remember what they learn from each interaction, and they use these insights to create better and better customer experiences. They focus on winning the long-term battle for trust and loyalty, even if the dollar value of that trust is hard to quantify.

With a wealth of fascinating research as well as practical applications, *Extreme Trust* will show you how to earn — and keep — the extreme trust of everyone with whom your company interacts.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why trustability creates a higher standard of expectations between organizations and their customers.
- The reason that trust is able to serve the interests of both customers and the bottom line.
- How to protect customer interests proactively.
- The difference between brand equity and trustworthiness.
- Why transparency is a good investment.

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: **EXTREME TRUST**

by Don Peppers and Martha Rogers, Ph.D.

The authors: Don Peppers and Martha Rogers, Ph.D., have coauthored eight books, including the global bestseller *The One to One Future*. They are the founders of the Peppers & Rogers Group, a global management consulting firm.

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Trust: Not Just a Good Idea. Inevitable.

Immediately after the first Gulf War in 1991, USAA — the insurance and banking company based in San Antonio, Texas — sent out refund checks to several thousand customers, called "members" by USAA. The idea was that since the men and women who had been serving at the front couldn't drive their cars back in the United States during the several months they were posted in the Middle East, USAA suspended charges for the premiums during the time the soldiers were overseas and sent out unsolicited refunds once the military personnel got home. The employee culture at USAA is based on a simple idea: treat the customer the way you'd want to be treated if you were the customer.

As for those refund checks? Nearly 2,500 of them were sent back to USAA by grateful customers who told USAA to keep the money and just be there "when we need you."

What's the difference between USAA and the other financial services companies we all know about? Many of those companies are not bad companies. And yet none of us — not even the executives of these well-run institutions — could imagine customers refusing to take refunds from those companies.

Most businesses today consider themselves to be trustworthy, and by yesterday's standards they are. But that's as far as most businesses go, and by tomorrow's standards it won't be nearly good enough. Not even close.

Technology has now changed the landscape of competition so much that a new, more extreme form of trustworthiness will be required in order to be successful. Simply doing what you say you're going to do and charging customers what you say you're going to charge them will no longer be sufficient. Instead, businesses will be expected to protect the interests of their customers proactively — to go out of their way, to commit resources, and to use their insights and expertise in such a way as to help customers avoid making mistakes or acting against their own interests simply through their own oversight.

We've coined the term "trustability" to encapsulate this new form of extreme trust, and what we mean by trustability is very simple: "proactive trustworthiness."

Most businesses and other organizations operating today think that they're already customer-centric and that they are basically trustworthy, even though their customers would disagree. Being "trustworthy" is certainly better than being untrustworthy, but soon even "trustworthiness" won't be sufficient. Instead, companies will have to be trustable.

But trustability is a higher standard still.

Rather than simply working to maintain honest prices and reasonable service, in the near future companies will have to go out of their way to protect each customer's interest proactively, taking extra steps when necessary to ensure that a customer doesn't make a mistake, overlook some benefit or service, or fail to do or not do something that would have been better for the customer.

As Interactions Multiply, Trust Becomes More Important

Trust has always been touted as important, certainly. But one of the most important implications of a more highly interconnected world is the increased level of trust and trustworthiness we expect from others. The fact is that trust is becoming a more essential attribute of

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human culture for several reasons as people connect with one another more efficiently. First, of course, is the simple fact of transparency. From WikiLeaks and the Arab Spring to a cable TV repairman asleep on your couch or an airline's luggage handlers mistreating bags, people will find things out. Transparency increases the cost of hiding the truth.

Serving the Interests of Customers, Profitably

One of the problems with the idea that trustability and selfishness don't mix, just in case you haven't already picked up on it, is that it calls into question the moral legitimacy of free-market economics itself, which is built on the principle that people acting in their own self-interest will, collectively, create a better standard of living for everybody. The "neoclassical" economic model assumes that people always act in their own self-interest and that these independent, self-interested actions collectively create substantial economic value. As Adam Smith famously suggested in *The Wealth of Nations*, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."

It turns out that neoclassical economics is flawed, however, in the way it defines human motives, because pure, absolute self-interest in any person is not the norm but an aberration. Very few people are ever completely self-oriented, never doing anything that might undermine their own interest. People like this are called psychopaths, and what makes them aberrations is that they're completely immune to the feelings of others. The rest of us have empathy. Concern for others' feelings is hardwired in our brains. You don't have to "learn" empathy. Newborn babies a few days old will cry when they hear other newborns cry. Toddlers unable to speak will try to help adults in accomplishing tasks. So while Adam Smith's description of the baker's motive may be generally correct, if one of the baker's close friends was starving, if the baker was contributing to a community dinner or if he was particularly proud of one of his confectionary creations, then he would not be likely to look solely to his own financial interest in selling his goods.

Psychopathic Capitalism

Human beings may seldom act out of purely "rational" self-interest, but what about companies? A corporation is legally chartered to create wealth for its owners, and failing to work on behalf of creating shareholder value would seem to be an abdication of management's fiduciary duties. However, in any modern economy a successful company is also a complex organization with multiple stakeholders, including not just shareholders but also employees, customers, and the communities in which it operates. From a practical standpoint, a company must be careful not to ignore the interests of its non-shareholder constituents precisely because doing so could threaten shareholder value. Abusing employees, the community, or the environment could easily lead to costly regulations or legal conflicts.

While there is no union movement or environmental group championing the rights of customers, the discipline of competition has always been considered a sufficient check. Fail to respect your customers' interests and you will be competed out of business, or so the argument goes.

A trustable firm will find empathy returned by the customers themselves. You don't have to count your change when you're dealing with a real friend. When an untrustable company pursues immediate economic gain to the exclusion of all other considerations, however, we could make a direct analogy with the human psychopath, oblivious to how his actions affect the feelings of those around him. And while only a few of us may ever have been victimized by a psychopathic person, all of us interact regularly with at least a few "psychopathic" companies and brands. We have become so accustomed to nonempathetic customer "service," in fact, that we do not even consider it abnormal. But as standards improve, nonempathetic companies will become rare, then rarer, then endangered, and eventually extinct.

Basic Principles of Trustability in a Business

- **Do things right.** Be competent. Manage the functions, processes, and details right in order to make it easy for customers to do business with you. And pay attention to the customer's experience, not just to the company's financial performance.
- **Do the right thing.** Ensure that the way your organization makes money aligns with the needs and best interests of your customers. You can't be trustable if you're entirely focused on the short term. Customer relationships link short-term actions to long-term value.
- **Be proactive.** Knowing that a customer's interest is not being well served and doing nothing about it is untrustable. Not knowing is incompetent.

Trustability: Capitalist Tool

The clash between trustability and a company's own short-term financial interest is real. It is a serious and continuing obstacle to be overcome, and we don't want to minimize it. Urging companies simply to "do the right thing" isn't likely to change how management sees the world. The profit motive does that.

Taking the Long-Term View

Today's most successful firms focus on the long-term value of their customers and the importance of maintaining their trust and confidence, despite the fact that sometimes the actual economic value can be difficult to quantify. In his portrait of one such forward-thinking firm, *Googled: The End of the World as We Know It*, Ken Auletta tells the story of how its founders approached their IPO (initial public offering):

Google's two 31-year-old founders were driving the company with a clarity of purpose that would be stunning if they were twice their age. Their core mantra, which was echoed again and again in their IPO letter, was that "We believe that our user focus is the foundation of our success to date. We also believe that this focus is critical for the creation of long-term value. We do not intend to compromise our user focus for short-term economic gain."

And Google has shown again and again that it remains focused on earning the trust of its users by acting in their best interests, no matter what the short-term attractiveness might be for doing otherwise. The company never accepts money for a search result or a higher search ranking, for instance. And rather than trying to "capture" users and keep them on the website, Google's philosophy is driven by the goal of setting its users free as soon as possible so they can quickly navigate to any of the search results shown. On search results pages the ads are ranked primarily in terms of the amount of clicks they generated from users. The more clicks, the more relevant or attractive an ad is to users, and so the more prominently it is displayed. No amount of money (short-term benefit) can generate a higher-than-justified prominence for an ad (long-term erosion of trust).

Trustability and Self-Interest: A Paradox

The fact that earning your customers' trust has economic benefits for your business sets up an interesting philosophical conundrum: if you "do the right thing" for customers because it benefits your business economically, aren't you really just being self-oriented?

Trust is as trust does. It doesn't matter at all to a customer whether his interests are being proactively looked after on account of the benevolence of a company's management or on account of their desire to benefit their own shareholders. Either way the customer gets better served. It is the firm's actions the customer can see, not what's in the company's heart.

However, motive does make a difference within the firm. That is, in order to have a company that seriously tries to earn its customers' trust, there must be some unifying message or sense of mission that drives employee behavior at all levels to do this in the thousand decisions they make every day. This is a tall order, because no business rule or line of software code will ever be sufficient to ensure that employees treat customers right. Your employees have to want to do that. To have this kind of an organization you have to focus carefully on the corporate culture and on the "unwritten rules" that govern how your employees approach their jobs.

Sharing: Not Just for Sunday School

Dan Ariely, Duke University's respected behavioral economist, suggests that "revenge, even at personal expense, plays a deep role in the social order of other primates and people." He describes an experiment involving two chimpanzees placed in neighboring cages with a single table of food just outside the cages but still within each chimp's reach. The food table is wheeled, and either chimp can reach out to pull it closer to its own cage (and therefore farther from the other's). However, a "revenge rope" leading out from each cage is rigged so that if either chimp pulls it the table will collapse and spill all the food onto the floor, out of reach of both of them. Use of the rope is carefully demonstrated to the chimps, so they each know that it destroys any possibility of either of them reaching the food. Researchers have found that if both chimps share the food, all goes well in this experiment. But if either chimp rolls the table too close to its own cage and the other can no longer reach it, then that other chimp will sometimes explode in a rage and yank the rope, collapsing the table for both of them.

Empathy and the urge to punish injustice are not the only ingredients in our complex social natures. But empathy's role should not be underestimated, and its connection to the enforcement of socially accepted norms is critical.

Death by Tweet

However we frame the issue, punishing unfair behavior is an essential part of being social. And there's a reason for the phrase "sweet revenge." Don't you feel a little tingle of satisfaction yourself when you learn about a heartless or cruel criminal getting a tough sentence?

Online technologies, of course, allow us to avenge wrongdoing in a highly social, highly interconnected way. Revenge has never been easier or more satisfying, and it can be far more long-lasting and punitive. Reminder: once an opinion about you hits the Internet, you may as well count it as immediate, ubiquitous, and permanent. As one advertising executive said, "You can't un-Google yourself."

Trust and the E-Social Ethos

In addition to reciprocity, empathy, and the desire to avenge injustice, our social interactions are subject to a whole set of customers and "unwritten rules" that have developed over untold generations of people conversing with each other. When you discuss something with a friend, colleague, loved one, or stranger, you adhere to these customs even without thinking. Don't interrupt. Listen first; show an interest. Respond to what others are saying.

But there are subtler principles as well. Suppose, for instance, a good friend were to ask your help in getting a job at the company where another friend of yours is a vice president. All he really wants is an introduction. He's your friend, and he would certainly do the same for you. But what if in asking for this favor your friend also offered you $100 to make the introduction? Or $500? Wouldn't you be totally put off by this? Maybe he's not really your friend after all, you might think, because this certainly isn't how friends deal with friends.

This conflict represents one of the most important differences between how we interact in a commercial setting versus in a social setting. The commercial economy is characterized by people freely exchanging money with other people. You buy from me, I sell to you, and if we do it right we both consider ourselves better off. Nor does this seem out of line to any of us.

With the rise of modern, free-market capitalism, these two domains of human activity — social and commercial — became quite distinct and separate, but technology seems to be smashing them together. Social production, for instance, combines features of both domains, being fueled by social interaction, trust and sharing, but generating real economic value as well. Whether the sharing involves someone's free time, honest opinion, computer coding, editing and curating, or computation cycles on their computer hard drive, the end result is genuine economic value, worth real money.

Over time, the e-social "ethos" that comes to govern our online interactions will develop as a set of purely informal and unwritten customs.

Regardless of the legal and regulatory protections or mandates eventually enacted, however, it is clear that trust will be a dominant guiding principle in the e-social ethos, because maintaining trust is essential for the smooth functioning of the overall system.

How Friends Treat Friends

The unfamiliar workings of the e-social ethos can easily trip a business up when it tries to deal with social media simply as a new channel for marketing or to generate positive word of mouth, because most marketing and business tactics that make sense in the commercial domain just don't apply in the social domain. Most people use social media to interact for the same reasons they attend parties or participate in casual conversations with friends — not for financial benefit or to accomplish some task but for the enjoyment and fulfillment they get from connecting with others or for the gossip, insight, and inside information they acquire. Mixing up these two domains can lead to real problems, because social influence can't be bought any more than friendship can.

In September 2006, a blog appeared entitled *Wal-Marting Across America*. It featured two intrepid RV owners, known only as Jim and Laura, who were driving from Walmart to Walmart across the United States, visiting stores along their way, and interviewing a whole stream of ever-upbeat Walmart employees. Other bloggers, however, suspected that Jim and Laura were fictitious, not real people driving their motor home around from store to store. And soon enough it was revealed that the two bloggers were actually paid contract writers for Walmart, hired by Edelman, the company's PR firm, to create a series of glowing articles. This ignited a firestorm of protest from others in the blogosphere, with people lashing out at both Walmart and Edelman. Walmart's initiative perfectly illustrates the single biggest error most companies commit when they try to operate in the social media space: rather than respecting the e-social ethos, they think they can treat social media just like any other marketing "channel," in this case using it to create a kind of advertising message.

What Walmart learned was that even though the social domain can serve as a marketing channel, the social ethos still has to be respected. You can advertise to viewers using a fictional story to entertain them on television, but you don't lie to your friends and call it "advertising."

Control is Not an Option

If a psychopath is someone who can't be trusted, then what do you call someone who can't trust? Control freak. Psychopaths and control freaks are flip sides of the same disorder. But e-social technologies raise the general standard of trustworthiness for all of us, no matter which side of the interaction we're on.

Extending trust to others is a particularly scary idea for executives and managers, stirring up nightmares of cheating, disengaged employees and litigious customers. You can't take the "manage" out of "manager" without creating a feeling of insecurity. But inevitably the power equation governing commercial transactions will be upended by this incoming tide. As transparency increases and customers know more and more, every advantage a business used to have as a result of one-sided information flow will evaporate. Companies can no longer control the knowledge that gets "out there."

Unarmed, Nestlé Fights a Battle of Wits with Greenpeace

Like a bad habit, the urge to control continues to plague many companies' efforts to participate in the increasingly robust network of e-social connections now available. Things seemed to be going smoothly for Nestlé and its Facebook fan page right up to early 2010, when a Greenpeace initiative turned Nestlé's own fans' conversation against the company. In a campaign to get Nestlé to stop using palm oil in its products, contending that it was damaging the environment, Greenpeace used Facebook to organize support. They rebranded the Nestlé Kit Kat bar with a faux "Killer" bar logo and posted a video on YouTube disparaging Nestlé's practices.

The first reaction on the part of Nestlé's public relations and marketing staff was to try to control this unruly and threatening discussion. The company contacted YouTube to have the video taken down on the grounds that the made-up logo violated Nestlé's trademark, but of course the video had already been widely circulated on the net, and people could still find it easily on other sites such as Vimeo.

For Nestlé, it all went predictably downhill from there. Some of the company's Facebook fans began posting comments promoting the Greenpeace video and urging others to get on board the campaign to pressure Nestlé to stop harvesting palm oil. Other fans designed their own unflattering modifications to Nestlé's logo. The hapless control freaks at Nestlé tried to stifle the discussion with an escalating series of actions that in retrospect appear naïve and petty. They deleted some critical comments posted by customers on their Facebook fan page (like maybe people wouldn't notice?), and they even began pointing out spelling and grammar errors in some of their critics' messages. This of course only stirred the embers of the smoldering Greenpeace issue into a roaring inferno, converting what might once have been a customer-engagement opportunity into a five-alarm PR disaster.

As the inferno blazed higher, it made the leap into mainstream media as well, and Nestlé's resistance to Greenpeace's demand was soon overwhelmed by public pressure. Within days, the company announced it would no longer use palm oil. But from Nestlé's actions it was obvious that the marketing types failed to realize until late in the episode that control was not an option.

What Could Nestlé Have Done Differently?

Nestlé's whole Kit Kat brouhaha took place on the company's own Facebook page, for heaven's sake — an online space specifically designed for the brand's best and most loyal customers.

Rather than trying to "control" the discussion to avert this nearly inevitable outcome, what if Nestlé had reached out to the ones most invested in the movement? Since the argument was lost anyway, there would have been little downside for Nestlé if it had announced a temporary moratorium on palm oil use, for instance. Coupled with an appropriate corporate acknowledgment and apology, this action might have been seen as a peace offering, taking much wind out of the other side's sails.

Build Your Trustability in Advance

It's a tough world out there. If you want to survive in this new world of transparent, always-on interactivity and rapid, unpredictable shifts in opinion, don't wait for the storm to hit. Get ready for it now.

But first, here's a self-assessment question that might indicate how well your company is prepared for trustability. Do you allow customers to make comments about your products and services on your own website for other customers and prospective customers to see?

We've asked this question of enough audiences around the world to know that the overwhelming majority of senior executives still tremble with fear at the very idea.

Customer Reviews Are Essential. And Anyway, They're Inevitable.

To be proactively trustworthy, a company *must* facilitate customers' sharing their honest opinions with other customers about the problems they are trying to solve or the needs they are meeting, and this honest sharing will include, of necessity, the role that the company's own products and services play.

Monologues are totally controlled by one party — the speaker. Mass media monologues are controlled by the marketer.

By definition, however, a dialogue cannot be totally controlled by either party — not by you and not by your customer. Instead, as a free exchange of thoughts or conversation, a dialogue will go in its own direction. You can push it and guide it, but you cannot control it.

Executives have lots of perfectly logical reasons to fear making their customers' actual opinions freely available. What if a customer has a complaint and goes public with it right on our own website? Or what if a customer just doesn't like the product? Or what if a competitor masquerades as a customer and runs our product down?

Listen up: get over it. If you abdicate your own role in the conversation, you are simply undermining your trustability. (Anyway, people will ask, What are you afraid of — the truth?)

The reality is that truth is more persuasive than spin, and this is one of the secret advantages of allowing customers to be honest in their opinions with other customers.

A bit of criticism from customers assures other customers that your online product reviews are authentic. They're genuine. You are trustable. When a company hosts this kind of information exchange, it is departing from the money-dominated commercial ethos of economic self-interest. Rather than unswerving (and psychopathic?) self-promotion, when you make it easy for customers to find out what other customers honestly think about your product or service, you are showing a human face and proving your trustability.

Honest Competence

Proficiency and competence are directly observable. And they are an important part of the "customer experience" — how it feels to be a company's customer. Customer experience is the reason you connect your siloed databases, send your people to seminars on mobile best practices and increase efficiency so you can save your customers time and help them find and get what they need at a fair price without any roadblocks.

To remain competitive today, a company needs to make and deliver a quality product or service, and it needs to understand and relate to the customer being sold to. We can call these two basic capabilities product competence and customer competence, and both are critical.

True Confessions: Domino's and the Transparent Pizza

Domino's had developed a reputation among pizza consumers as the "pizza of last resort," the kind of food delivery you might order if you didn't have enough money to get a good pizza or if there was no Pizza Hut or Godfather's near enough. So, to celebrate the chain's fiftieth anniversary the company rolled out a completely new and revamped product. More than that, however, to publicize the upgraded product they launched a television ad campaign frankly admitting to the error of their (past) ways. One of the new commercials, for instance, played clips from focus groups in which participants lambasted their product as "the worst excuse for pizza" they'd ever had, before cutting to CEO Patrick Doyle's confession that while his company's pizza had been below standard for years, Domino's was now determined to do better.

Six months later Domino's announced it would stop using retouched photos to promote its pizzas, relying instead on straight camera shots, honestly taken — and appealing to customers to send in their own photos for use in the ads.

The "Pizza Turnaround" campaign gave Domino's revenues and profitability a nice lift as well, with U.S. same-store sales increasing by nearly 10 percent in 2010, a phenomenal increase for the large chain. In fact, it was the first full year of positive growth since 2007, and for at least the first half of 2011 these higher levels of domestic same-store sales have been maintained or increased.

Today, however, the world has become so transparent that everybody will already know your product is "crappy," so refusing to admit it yourself is not just inauthentic but downright delusional. In the real world, fallibility is the most direct route to trustworthiness. Admitting one's own vulnerability is the first step in earning someone else's trust.

Trustable Information

Current estimates are that the volume of data available to the human race doubles roughly every two years, but now that technology is beginning to connect up highly efficient networks of people, as opposed to simply streamlining the storage and processing of data itself, the speed at which new data will be generated is likely to accelerate faster than Moore's law. From a mathematical perspective the messaging in a growing network increases at a "combinatorial" rate, faster than geometric growth, and some of the more breathless estimates are that within just a few years the volume of data and "technical information" may be doubling every few hours.

This is an almost unimaginable acceleration in information. It will test the limits of human understanding, requiring us to focus ever more carefully on accuracy, reliability, usefulness, objectivity, and consistency.

Managing for Transparency

We're headed for a world in which all our e-mails and phone calls will be as public as Facebook. In such a world, no matter what actions we ultimately agree to take and regardless of how we "position" ourselves in the media, our intentions are likely to become visible as well. This is the reality of transparency, and it is technologically inevitable.

In the e-social world, spin is out and customer experience is in. When one customer communicates with another, she doesn't share her impression of the brand's promise; she shares her experience.

Designing Trustability into a Business

Even though it might be highly disruptive as a competitive strategy, it isn't overly difficult to imagine how trustability would operate in any given business category. We only need to put ourselves in the customer's shoes. So let's just imagine how trustability would manifest itself in a few different kinds of businesses, starting with mobile phones.

Trustability in the Mobile Phone Category

Within an environment of smartphones and increasingly capable wireless services, the charges a mobile carrier assesses can be complex, and complexity presents a tempting opportunity to take advantage of customers.

A genuinely trustable telecom operator would automatically assign customers to the most economical call plans based on their calling, texting, and data usage.

While most mobile companies (and other subscription-based businesses) will make outbound calls to customers at bill-paying time to prompt payment, when appropriate, AT&T actually calls at least some of its customers before the due date by which a late fee would be assessed.

Trustability in Financial Services

While there is obviously no requirement for any financial institution to extend credit to a customer (or to cover an overdraft without charging a fee), a large proportion of "penalty" fees are incurred by customers who are in fact creditworthy. A genuinely trustable retail bank would use easily available information to assess customers automatically for their creditworthiness, eliminating many such charges and possibly offering an automatic e-transfer among accounts when such a transfer is available but just hasn't yet been elected by the customer. At present, most banks reserve this kind of service for high-balance customers only, but there's no business reason it couldn't be more generally available.

And any genuinely trustable financial institution would allow its customers to post their own reviews of its services and products (including comparisons with other companies' offerings) on the company's own website, making these reviews freely and impartially available to other customers.

In the final analysis, it is almost certain to be the new companies and the start-ups that employ these tactics to overturn the old way. They have less invested in the current paradigm and less to lose by destroying it. Gradually, they will use trustability to transform our entire economic system, in the same way that interactivity itself has so dramatically transformed our lives already. They will deploy honesty as a brutally efficient competitive weapon against the old guard.

Very soon, for competitive reasons, all businesses, old and new, will begin to respond to the increase in demand for trustability by taking actions that are more worthy of trust from the beginning — that is, actions that are more transparently honest, less self-interested, more competently executed, less controlling, and more responsive to others' inputs. More proactively trustworthy. Trustable.