



EMERGENCY



More Than a Feeling: Trust Is the Impact of Good Design

By June Isaacson Kailes

Trust-building is an often overlooked goal of communicating with the public during a disaster. Trust determines whether people act on alerts, maps, and updates. The best messages fail without it. However, trust is achieved by design rather than good intentions and by positive impacts of systems that consistently deliver what people need, in forms they can use, backed by evidence that the system works. Trust is not restored or strengthened by public engagement alone or by being “at the table.” It is strengthened when emergency leaders and advocates produce real-world solutions the public can see, verify, and use.

Public trust in government is down relative to historical baselines, and it has not eroded evenly across levels. Generally, people still view [local and state governments](#) more favorably than the federal government, even as overall confidence in government declines. In emergencies, the practical implication is this: local leaders may not control national trust trends, but they can control whether local messaging and systems earn confidence. When systems fail through false alerts, delayed warnings, inaccessible maps, and unclear zone boundaries, people turn to peers and social media for situational awareness. That shift is more than a communications problem. It is a life-safety problem, especially for people with disabilities and older adults.

OPERATIONALIZING TRUST

To move “trust” from aspirational to operational, start by checking the elements of emergency messaging and whether they earn confidence. Determine whether a message is relevant, actionable, and customizable, and whether it offers practical solutions related to the agency’s responsibilities, advocacy, and level of influence. Consider developing an assessment feedback method. Contact [the author](#) to request a sample “Trust in Emergency Management Quiz.”

Good messaging design starts with accessible communication across channels, in multiple languages and formats, accessible web, social media, alerts, documents, apps, forms, videos, kiosks, and other digital content, including captions, American Sign Language, and text descriptions of visuals and maps, all tested for reach and understanding. In messaging, applying the five lessons discussed below can increase trust. Words are most meaningful when they are paired with actions that match their intent.

LESSONS IN BUILDING TRUST THROUGH MESSAGING

Good emergency messaging produces meaningful results, such as changes in human behavior that enhance public safety. It depends on consistent, reliable sources of information

and messages that are easy to understand. Credibility also grows when officials acknowledge mistakes and demonstrate over time that they can build on prior lessons and maintain a capability for continued progress.

LESSON 1. MEASURE IMPACT – BECAUSE WHAT GETS MEASURED GETS ATTENTION (AND GETS BUDGETED)

Organizations must track whether messaging works. Routinely measuring inputs (“*Sent 12 alerts*”) and outputs (“*Posted 40 updates*”) misses what matters: Did people receive it, perceive it (notice it), understand it, believe it, act on it, and get help when they requested it? Metrics must be meaningful, such as delivery and confirmation rates and time-to-first-alert. The fix is to collect, track, and publish meaningful metrics. Build quick feedback into key messages (e.g., *Did you get this alert? If you called for help, did you get it? Were the maps and linked text descriptions helpful and usable?*). Use the results to improve reach and clarity. To strengthen trust, avoid simply saying, “Things are improving.” *Show* the improvement.

A note on maps: many people treat maps as trusted tools until they are glitchy, slow to load, do not work well on mobile devices, are not updated, or are inaccessible to people with low/no vision or people who simply are not “map people.” That is why plain-text boundary descriptions are critical and must be standardized by using terms like “north of,” “south of,” “east of,” or “west of,” including major streets and landmarks. They are a trusted feature.

LESSON 2. CREATE ONE CONSISTENT, AUTHORITATIVE LANDING SITE

People lose trust when they must search across, for example, five accounts, two maps, social media accounts, and a press conference to find reliable information. Messages that can easily be verified build trust, so create a place where the public can go for reliable information. Simplicity, however, is not simple to execute. One known, branded

landing site with a consistent message will reflect every time-stamped alert, social post, and press briefing. It will include the time for the next update (even if “no change”), a dedicated and updated “Rumor vs. Fact” section, and an American Sign Language video summary for major updates (not just captioned press conferences) and the same message should be published with the site linked in any alerts, social posts, and briefings. The [Los Angeles County recovery site](#) for the 2025 fires is an example of organized, one-stop recovery information, including right-of-entry tracking, debris removal status, and rebuilding resources.

LESSON 3. MAKE ALERTS RELIABLE, UNDERSTANDABLE, AND USABLE

When alerts fail, trust breaks. When trust breaks, compliance drops. When compliance drops, people die. Alert failure happens. In the [Marshall Fire](#) (Boulder County, Colorado, December 2021), for example, reporting based on county alert data found that as few as [1 in 5 recipients](#) confirmed receiving evacuation alerts. After a negative experience, people may no longer trust advice given by warnings, thus transferring their reliance to peers, social media, and mobile apps. App reliance was evident during the January 2025 [Eaton and Palisades](#) fires in Los Angeles, California. People used the [Watch Duty](#) app heavily because official alerts and information streams felt inconsistent, delayed, or hard to interpret. Watch Duty offered faster, clearer, map-based, continuously updated information.

The following suggestions can make official alerts more effective:

- Remove or clearly explain terms or jargon that are not clearly defined or may be misunderstood by the public. Shortcut terms work within a circle of colleagues, but outside that circle, they can be exclusionary and ineffective in communication.

- Write out and test plain-language templates among potential recipients in usable formats and multiple languages. Pretest template messages with diverse user groups such as community partners and advisory groups.
- First helpers on the scene are often neighbors, friends, and family rather than response officials. In emergency messaging, include a reminder to check whether neighbors received and understood alerts and whether they need help acting on the alert. This helps cover the response gap – that critical time between when people need help and when official responders arrive. But be cautious because help from neighbors cannot be a substitute for integrating access and functional needs into preparedness and response planning.
- Use two-way communication, such as a hotline that allows for quick questions and answers. Trust increases when the public can get quick answers. For example, when an alert disappears from someone's phone, or they do not understand an alert, they are able to reach a human by phone and not feel alone (“Are we in Zone X?” “Is Shelter Y wheelchair accessible?” “The alert disappeared from my phone”). A hotline can avoid long phone holds by offering callback options. This is an important service as people may be conserving their limited phone battery.
- Avoid silence, lack of messaging, and unpredictable notifications by providing regular updates – for example, every 30–60 minutes, even if there is no change or no new information. Be clear about timing – for example, “The text update will be at [time],” and “The next press conference will be at [date/time].”
- Build a trusted messenger network (community organizations and local partners) that can rapidly share verified updates using culturally responsive methods and the official link to reach people whom government channels may

miss. For example, some organizations that support people with intellectual disabilities are skilled at delivering and reinforcing clear, easy-to-understand messages with plain language, pictures, and repetition.

LESSON 4. OWN MISTAKES QUICKLY AND CORRECT THEM

Silence about false alerts or new information that is incomplete or lacks context can harm trust by appearing to be a cover-up. One reason for delayed corrections is that agencies lack a pre-planned method to quickly rescind a false message. The public may experience a basic design failure as an institutional failure. To preserve trust, a pre-written and practiced correction protocol should include language such as, “An error was made at: ____”; “Correct information is: ____”; “If you did X because of the error, do Y now”; or “Here is what is changing immediately: ____.” Adopt and integrate “confidence statements” as a standard to include “Confirmed: ____,” “Likely: ____,” and “Unconfirmed reports: ____ (this is being checked; next update at ____).” If unsure about a situation, explain what is being done to learn more and when to expect an update. People will tolerate uncertainty but not false certainty.

Local leaders do not need to be all-knowing, but clear and honest communication regarding what is known, what is not known, what is being done to learn more, and when an update will be available creates confidence in messaging.

Direct, official fatality counts after catastrophes do not provide the full story. When officials rely only on the initial confirmed numbers, later estimates that include additional or indirect deaths can appear to be deceptive, even when they reflect better data and analysis. Transparency about indirect deaths supports prevention by justifying targeted supports (evacuation assistance, clean-air spaces, medications and treatments, wellness checks, and power alternatives).

Also, translate after-action reports, which are often written for internal use and filled with jargon, for the public. Publish a plain-language improvement tracker that includes what worked, what failed, what is fixed now (with dates), what is next (with deadlines), and how success will be measured.

LESSON 5. MAKE TRUST DURABLE: PREVENT BACKSLIDING AND SYSTEM DECAY

Even after years of work to get it right, processes and policies degrade or disappear due to changes in administration, leadership, champions, and budgets. That backsliding can be frustrating, but it can also be lethal. Policy durability results from monitoring evaluations across consecutive reviews of plan updates, including supporting processes, procedures, protocols, policies, training, exercises, hotwashes, after-action reports, audits, dashboards, surveys, and interviews with government planners, responders, and recovery staff, as well as public feedback from social media and improvement plans. Sustaining includes adopting improvement plan practices, integrating them into funding, and submitting regular progress reports by assigned owners.

Durability also includes long-term lesson retention and the survival of meaningful public engagement and partnerships despite turnover. This is where many agencies unintentionally sabotage themselves. They treat public engagement as a time-defined campaign rather than a time-tested capability. But trust flows through relationships, especially for people with disabilities and other underserved communities. Treat building a trusted messenger network (including disability organizations, senior centers, faith organizations, tenant groups, neighborhood councils, and mutual aid) as core operational infrastructure.

CHOOSE A ROLE: TRUST BREAKERS OR TRUST MAKERS

Trust breakers do not speak up or challenge the government. Trust makers speak up, identify what needs work, follow up to ensure the work gets done, and monitor data to sustain it. For public-facing messaging, each communicator should focus on restoring and strengthening community relationships by examining their messaging through a trust lens.



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