

MESSAGE FOR TRUST

How federal agencies can increase
public confidence in government

The public has expressed a lack of trust in government, but often they have in mind Congress and the country's political divide. When the narrative turns to federal civil servants, trust levels increase, according to research by the Partnership for Public Service.

Our research indicates that only about one-third of Americans say they trust the federal government, yet nearly two-thirds have a favorable view of civil servants. Majorities also believe that civil servants are competent, hard workers who serve the public. And 12 out of 13 well-known agencies are viewed more favorably than unfavorably.

Our findings present an opportunity to shape how people view federal agencies and employees. Your agency can speak to “the movable middle,” an audience whose trust in government seems to improve after learning more about individual federal employees, what government does and who it serves. You can foster trust by talking about your agency and your employees’ important work to serve the public.

Here are eight ways to communicate more effectively to build greater trust in government.

1. **Highlight our government’s unique role in protecting democracy, health, safety, clean air and water, and national security, as well as the part your agency plays in supporting that mission.** Share anecdotes that illustrate your agency’s work, including compelling impact data.
2. **Humanize the federal government by showcasing personal stories about individuals who serve.** Did someone in your agency create a forecasting model that warns coastal residents of imminent storms? Did a scientist play a role in identifying the tainted food that got taken off grocery store shelves? Did your team thwart cyber criminals? Put a face on what many people view as a faceless bureaucracy. These civil servants are family members, friends and neighbors. Show people that federal workers care about the same essential things as the public does. Provide what could be lightbulb moments for people to rethink their preconceived notions of government.
3. **Share the positive experiences people have when they engage with your agency, whether by making a transaction, receiving a service or visiting an office.** Our research shows that Americans are mostly satisfied with their personal interactions with federal agencies for services such as filing taxes, applying for Medicare or Medicaid, voting in a federal election and applying for a passport. Strengthen that perception. Include storytellers who are relevant to different communities.

4. **Share why your employees chose to work in the federal government and highlight their empathy for the people they serve.** Most federal employees join public service because they want to serve their communities and make a difference. Tell compelling stories about why individuals in your agency serve and why they care deeply about their work. Share stories that show the thought and dedication that goes into serving the public.
5. **Consider working with other agencies to spotlight the many federal services people are eligible for across government.** Explain how you can help them access those services.
6. **Develop messaging that appeals to young people.** Individuals aged 18-34 appear to have a less favorable view of federal employees than people older than 65. What can you tell them that might change their perspective? What should they know about the work your agency does and how it benefits them?
7. **Use plain language on your website and in agency communications.** The public needs to easily understand what your agency provides and how to get services. Complicated and bureaucratic jargon interferes with that understanding and reinforces negative stereotypes about government.
8. **Broaden the concept of your customer base in your messaging.** Who is your agency serving? Can everyone in our diverse nation take advantage of what you provide? Who is not receiving those services but would benefit from them? Do they know what you provide? Do they know they are eligible? Could you improve how you communicate with the public and organizations on the ground that work in local communities to help people get services?