You're scrolling through your Facebook feed and spot a post from a former high-school classmate, sharing news about her recent service trip overseas. There's a picture of her smiling ear to ear while posing with children at a local orphanage. “So #blessed to be able to help others less fortunate than me—what an amazing, life-changing trip,” she writes in the caption.

If you're like us, you've probably encountered a post like this, in which someone goes out of their way to inform others of their good deeds. In the behavioral-science world, we call this **virtue signaling**.

Although people can virtue signal in a variety of ways, social media has evolved as an easy medium for people to signal their virtue, endorsing causes and issues that reflect positively on an individual and their social group. Facebook and Instagram are rife with expressions of people's social and political views, announcements about their donations of time and money, and, for those well-off enough to afford it, highlights from their recent adventures in **voluntourism**—traveling to far-flung places to build homes, offer medical care, and support local children.

**Virtue signaling is risky, because people loathe insincerity.**
Presumably, your globetrotting high-school friend wants the people who read her post to think that she’s a modern-day Mother Teresa. But does virtue signaling really work? In other words, are people viewed as more virtuous when they publicize their good deeds to others?

Like many questions in the behavioral sciences, the answer is *it depends*. Our research finds it only works if you and others learn something new and positive about her from that signaling. This is because publicizing your own good deeds has two opposing effects.

First, it gets the word out about your virtuous actions, which can have a positive effect on your reputation. After all, if no one knows about your virtuous deeds, you won’t get any credit. At the same time, it also can signal that your motives are not entirely pure. We tend to think that those who are purely virtuous do good deeds without wanting to receive credit. Being seen as someone who self-promotes can have a negative effect on your reputation. This is why those who engage in virtue signaling are often called out as phonies.

Ironically, this means that virtue signaling is a more successful strategy for those with less virtuous reputations—individuals who are not expected to do good deeds in the first place.

In one study, we examined how people responded to an investment banker and a social worker who discussed their volunteer work at a dinner party. As you might expect, the people in this experiment thought that investment bankers were less virtuous than social workers. However, we found that the investment banker’s reputation was significantly enhanced by advertising his volunteer work, whereas the social worker’s reputation was not. Since we already assume that the social worker is virtuous, boasting about it fails to tell us anything new. In some studies, we found that virtue signaling when people are already privy to your virtuosity harms your reputation.

Ironically, virtue signaling is a more successful strategy for those with less virtuous reputations.

Beyond investment bankers and social workers, our findings suggest that virtue signaling is risky because people loathe insincerity. How, then, can people credibly signal their virtue? First, if you’re going to advertise your good deeds, only advertise the big ones. *Cheap* acts of virtue, such as liking causes on Facebook, won’t have much of an effect because signals need to be costly. For instance, we tend to think more highly of people who make major donations of time or money or who take particularly effortful or painful actions—think about dumping a bucket of ice on your head!

Second, focus on promoting the cause rather than your own contributions to it. Consider which of the following sounds more sincere: 1) I just donated to the Red Cross or 2) Please donate to the Red Cross. From both statements, people will infer that you donated. However, the former is more self-focused, and it sounds more boastful. The latter statement highlights your desire to support the
cause and takes the focus off of yourself, thus signaling more genuine intentions.

Finally, if you really care about doing good (and care less about the potential results on your reputation), go ahead and virtue signal your heart out. Research on social influence finds that the more people think others are doing good deeds, the more likely they are to copy them. You may be considered a braggart, but if your motives are pure, you should be willing to sacrifice your image for the greater good.

Deborah Small
Deborah Small is the Laura and John J. Pomerantz Professor of Marketing and professor of psychology at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. She earned her Ph.D. in psychology and behavioral decision research from Carnegie Mellon University.

Jonathan Berman
Jonathan Berman is an assistant professor of marketing at the London Business School. He earned an M.Sc in decision sciences from the London School of Economics and his Ph.D. in marketing from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.

Emma Levine
Emma Levine is an assistant professor of behavioral science and a Charles E. Merrill Faculty Scholar at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. She earned a Ph.D. in decision processes from the University of Pennsylvania.

Alixandra Barasch
Alixandra Barasch is an assistant professor of marketing at the Stern School of Business, New York University. She earned Ph.D. in marketing from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.

Further Reading & Resources

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

**SOCIETY**
How the Possibility Grid Can Help You Evaluate Evidence Better
By Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris

**SOCIETY**
Give More Feedback—Others Want It More Than You Think
By Nicole Abi-Esber and Juliana Schroeder

**SOCIETY**
The Art and Science of Arguing: A Conversation with Mehdi Hasan
By Dave Nussbaum