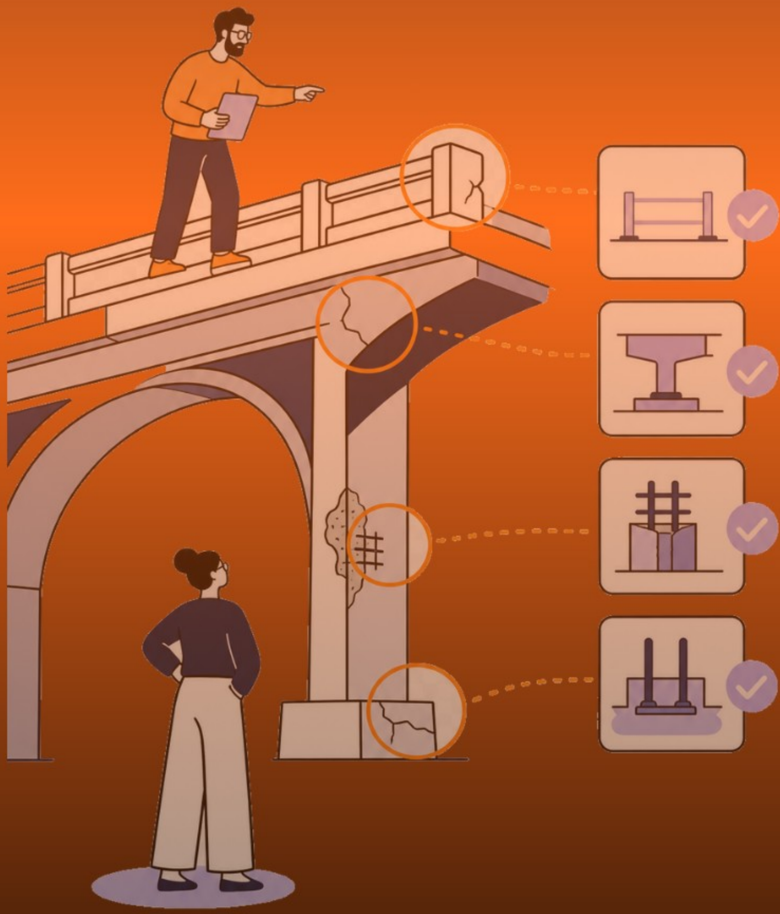
THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

Trust begins with what could go wrong

How to name what could go wrong



Why a record with no visible failure modes reads as marketing

How and Why to name what could go wrong

Why a record with no visible failure modes reads as marketing

Gates. Relevance: no. Credibility: secondary. Proof: secondary. **Safety: primary.** Access: no.

Publish the three ways work like yours most commonly goes wrong, each one carrying the firm's response in the same breath. A record where nothing ever went wrong reads as a record somebody curated.

The symptom

Every case study ends well.

The engagement ran smoothly. The scope held. The client was delighted and said so in a pull quote set in larger type than everything around it. Fifteen of these going back four years, and not one contains a week where anybody was worried.

Each of them is true. The client approved it, legal cleared it, and the numbers are the numbers. Any single piece reads as a credible account of a piece of work.

Read the whole library in one sitting and it turns into something else. Fifteen engagements, zero surprises, an unbroken record of things going to plan in an industry where they never do.

Nobody inside the firm has ever done that reading. Prospects do it all the time.

Why it keeps happening

Nobody sets out to hide the failures.

Every individual document gets written about a success, and there are two respectable reasons for that. A client will let you print a win. Legal will clear a win. The engagement where the first six weeks went sideways belongs to a client with no interest in appearing in anyone's marketing wearing that, and the version with the sideways part removed is the version that comes back signed.

So the distortion never happens in a document. It happens in aggregate, and aggregate is a view nobody at the firm ever occupies. These get produced one at a time, across years, under different partners, each honest on its own terms. The pattern only shows from outside, to someone reading fast and looking for the part that's missing.

We've spent three decades writing this material for professional-services firms and built more than one library where nothing went wrong, one honest document at a time, and only saw the shape of it years later. Not a lie in any of it. The whole still misleads.

What the buyer is doing at the Safety gate

Weighing exposure. Capability stopped being the live question a while ago.

A buyer who can't find the risk in a firm's material assumes it was hidden, and the hidden version is always worse than the named one, because the buyer gets to imagine how big it is. Firms answer the Safety gate by pretending it hasn't been asked.

A second reading works against the firm at the same time. A process description assembled entirely from success stories reads as retrospective narrative-fitting, the story arranged after the fact to make the outcome look inevitable. That triggers skepticism where the material was supposed to produce confidence.

Naming a failure mode does two things at once. It tells the buyer this firm has seen this go wrong, a competence claim nobody can fake without having been in the room. And it hands their internal advocate the sentence they'll need when somebody asks whether the risks were considered.

Where the risk sits for the person reading is worth being precise about. What could go wrong, for them, is that the choice doesn't read as serious to the people who are going to inspect it. A recommendation supported by fifteen documents in which nothing ever went wrong comes apart in one question.

The correction

Publish the three ways engagements of this type most commonly go wrong. Three named conditions that recur in this work, described the way you'd describe them to a colleague, each carrying the specific thing the firm does when it shows up. Keep the language clear of disclaimer, which reads as legal cover and buys nothing.

Then put it where a buyer hunting for it will find it. The FAQ, because that's where somebody goes when they're checking, and the proposal, where 32 covers the placement in detail. A blog post doesn't qualify. Nobody arrives at one while working out whether they can defend a firm.

One rule keeps the whole practice from turning on you: every named risk arrives with a response. A risk with no answer hands your champion a reason to lose their own argument, in a meeting you aren't in, against a colleague who was looking for one.

The machine layer rewards this and almost nobody has noticed. A record with named failure modes and named responses gives a summarising system something specific and unusual to carry. A wall of successful outcomes compresses to the same paragraph every competitor in the category produces.

Then the harder move, which most firms will read and skip.

Name the client you're wrong for. Specifically, by circumstance, and mean it. Skip the cosmetic version where the firm confesses it struggles with clients who don't value quality. Say the size, the structure, the timeline that makes this a bad engagement for both parties. A firm willing to lose work in writing is making the one credibility claim a competitor can't copy, because copying it would cost them revenue too.

Before and after

Before. *Our engagements are built on collaboration, transparency, and a methodology refined across hundreds of successful client partnerships.*

After. *Three things go wrong on work like this. The internal data is worse than anyone admitted at kickoff, which adds four to six weeks, so we audit it in week one and reprice before you commit. The sponsor changes and the replacement wasn't in the original conversations, so we keep a decision record they can inherit. And sometimes we're the wrong firm. If you need someone in your office five days a week, that isn't us, and you'll hear it in the first meeting.*

What backfires

A named risk with no response attached. Nobody reads that as candor. It's an unforced error, and it does its damage in a room nobody from the firm is sitting in.

The other failure is the risk that's a compliment in disguise. Firms admitting they set the bar too high, or hold clients to standards some find demanding. Buyers have read that paragraph before, and it confirms the library was curated, which is the suspicion the exercise was supposed to retire.

Run this on your own material

Take the last ten pieces the firm published. Case studies, project summaries, client stories on the site, whatever the library is.

Read all ten in one sitting. The sitting is the whole test, because that's the reading a prospect gives you and the one nobody inside the firm has ever performed.

Count the engagements that had a problem. A challenge gracefully overcome by the second paragraph doesn't count. Count what cost time, cost money, or forced somebody to reverse a decision partway through.

If the number is zero, that's what a prospect sees too, and they've already drawn a conclusion nobody reported back.

Do this before the next proposal leaves the building.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when a prospect raises one of your published failure modes by name and asks how it played out. When the questions move to what happens if, rather than whether the firm can. When your champion repeats your risk language in a meeting no one from the firm attended, which means it survived translation.

Hold when the material can't produce a single engagement where anybody had to correct course. Hold when every named risk turns out to be a compliment in working clothes. And hold when the sales team resists publishing the client you're wrong for, because that resistance is accurate about what the firm is willing to mean.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · *The Decision You Could Survive*, on a buyer weighing exposure rather than capability.

Research Library · Entry 21, identity, defensibility and social risk.

Next move · Go to *How to lead with risk instead of upside*, which is where this material belongs once it reaches a proposal.