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THE DECISION SEQUENCE
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

TRUST GOT REPRICED

Why the oldest asset in professional services finally made the marketing agenda.

By Joe Worden

IDEA IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM

Trust decides who gets hired, and for decades firms never had to market for it. Geography, referral networks, and familiar names earned it automatically, so the marketing agenda stayed busy elsewhere.

THE SHIFT

Buyers now decide in private, and a growing share of that deciding runs through AI models trained on who is credible. At the same time, generative tools made polish free and collapsed the quality floor that once separated serious firms.

WHAT FIRMS MUST DO

Treat trust as something earned in sequence. Audit each asset for what it assumes a stranger already believes, then earn those beliefs in the order buyers form them. Claiming trust convinces no one, human or machine.

> *“Hidden buyers actively discover, consume, and evaluate thought leadership just like target buyers.”*
>
> 2025 Edelman-LinkedIn B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report

01 Nobody talked about the water

For most of my thirty years working with client engagements, trust never made it onto the marketing agenda. It mattered too much to talk about. Trust was the water. Every firm swam in it, no one wrote about it, and the agenda stayed busy with the visible stuff: campaigns, refreshes, channels.

The silence made sense at the time because every firm was powered by an engine that ran without explanation: geography, network, track record, a name that didn't need an introduction. When trust arrives on its own, marketing gets to be about other things.

I spent a career selling against those engines, and I can tell you exactly how permanent they felt from the other side of the table. Then the geographic moat started to evaporate. Quietly, so quietly that plenty of firms still behave like it's there.

Here's a version I've watched more than once. A firm builds forty years on two founding names. The names retire. The building stays, the book stays, so does the letterhead. Five years later a prospect three miles away hires a competitor from a city they've never set foot in, because that competitor answered their questions online before anybody shook a hand. Nobody inside the firm watched a moat drain. They watched a couple of slow quarters and blamed the economy.

02 Trust still decides. It travels differently now.

So when trust suddenly shows up in every marketing conversation, the interesting question is what changed, because human nature is stubborn across centuries. Trust still decides. What changed is how trust travels.

Prospects research before they call. Referral sources vet before they recommend. The buyer decides in private before you hear a word. And a growing share of that private deciding is now moving through AI models. Models that are trained every day on who is credible, what they do, and why you can trust them. In Gartner's 2026 survey of B2B buyers, 45 percent reported using AI during a recent purchase. Expertise is inferred now from everything a firm publishes and everything it never got around to saying. A firm that reads as generic to a human reads as nothing at all to a machine.

At the same time, the tools collapsed the quality floor out from under everybody. The polished deck is now thirty minutes. The credible-sounding article, less. When everyone can sound like an expert on demand, polish differentiates no one.

03 The repricing

That's the repricing. Scarcity moved. Competence got cheap. Visibility got cheaper. And polish went from a design budget to a prompt. The one thing the tools can't manufacture is trust that was earned, and markets talk about whatever just became scarce.

The shift is still in play, which is why the conversation keeps getting louder. First the machines helped people talk to people. Now they talk to people directly. Next they'll talk to each other, models asking models which firms get the shortlist. Marketing used to influence people. A growing share of it now informs the machines that influence people, and those machines have no patience for a claim they can't verify.

> *Markets talk about whatever just became scarce.*

04 The nearest lever is the wrong one

Now the part that worries me. Firms hear that trust matters and they reach for the nearest lever, claiming it. Trusted advisors. Trusted partners. Trust works its way into the tagline, and nothing changes, because trust is earned in sequence, through what a buyer comes to believe and in what order. Claiming it works about as well as claiming a friendship.

The useful response is smaller than a rebrand. Grab one asset, the homepage, the proposal, the outreach note, and ask yourself what it assumes a stranger already believes. Everything that assumes belief it hasn't earned yet is out of sequence, and sequence is now the whole game, because the machines grade for it too.

Trust finally made it onto the agenda. The firms that win the moment will be the ones treating it as something earned in sequence. Sequence can be designed, and designing it is what the rest of this library is about.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Gartner, “Gartner Sales Survey Finds 67% of B2B Buyers Prefer a Rep-Free Experience.” Press release, March 9, 2026. Survey of 646 B2B buyers, conducted August through September 2025. Finds that 45% used AI during a recent purchase.

Edelman and LinkedIn, 2025 B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report: Invisible Influence. Edelman, 2025. Survey of nearly 2,000 global professionals. Documents the hidden buyer who discovers, consumes and evaluates thought leadership without ever identifying themselves to the firm.

FOUNDATIONS

The behavioral research underneath this argument is documented in the Decision Architecture Research Library.