

SECRET SAUCE SALES

Make Yes Less Dangerous

THE COMMERCIAL QUESTION

Why can a customer believe the idea is valuable and still rationally refuse to buy it?

THE ANSWER

Proof is not a pile of evidence. It is the removal of the doubt that matters.

What the evidence says

In industrial markets, proof has at least two jobs: establish expected value and reduce the risk of relying on the supplier. Research on business-service relationships finds that lower trust is associated with higher perceived risk, especially for buyers. Research on technological innovation adoption similarly treats buyer risk reduction as a central task in both initiation and implementation.

Customer references matter partly because they act as surrogate evidence when a prospective buyer has limited direct experience of a supplier. Research on industrial customer referencing describes references as mechanisms for reducing perceived risk and increasing supplier credibility. This is particularly relevant for young suppliers, where the buyer cannot rely on a long history.

But more proof is not automatically better proof. A famous logo can establish reputation without answering the customer's actual doubt. A pilot can demonstrate technical performance without establishing business impact. A spreadsheet can quantify a theoretical return without proving implementation capability. PROVE therefore needs to begin with the uncertainty that is actually blocking action.

EVIDENCE BASE

Direct B2B evidence supports the importance of trust, perceived risk, references and value assessment.

SECRET SAUCE INGREDIENT

The rule that proof should be matched to the customer's specific uncertainty is a Secret Sauce ingredient.

What this challenges

- Proof by volume. Ten case studies do not answer a doubt that none of them actually addresses.
- Logo collecting. A prestigious customer can lend credibility, but similarity and relevance may matter more than fame.
- ROI theatre. A large number in a spreadsheet is not evidence if the assumptions belong only to the seller.
- Treating risk as irrational resistance. Saying yes can expose a buyer to operational, financial, reputational and personal consequences.

What early-stage companies should do

Ask what still feels dangerous. Is the doubt about whether the problem matters, whether the solution works, whether your people can deliver, whether implementation will succeed, or whether the promised impact will materialise?

Match proof to doubt. Use references for execution credibility, demonstrations or trials for performance uncertainty, customer data for economic impact, and delivery plans for implementation risk. Do not ask one form of proof to do every job.

For early-stage companies, make scarce evidence work harder. A small number of highly relevant references, quantified outcomes and observable demonstrations can be more useful than pretending to possess the history of an established supplier.

The Secret Sauce

SECRET SAUCE INGREDIENT

Proof is not a pile of evidence. It is the removal of the doubt that matters.

Make saying yes less dangerous.

Academic sources

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