



MonteKристо

DISCOVERY, WORKED EXAMPLE

A WORKED EXAMPLE, FROM ONE CALL TO ONE OFFER

Anatomy of a Discovery Call

WHAT THE NOTES ACTUALLY LOOKED LIKE

One real engagement, followed end to end. Not a description of a method, but the **filled artifacts**: the fact table, the untouchables, the exception test, the gap list, the estimate, and the slice we carved out of it.

Forty minutes on a call we were not on · A transcript with no speaker labels

One finding, found on the third read, that changed the entire offer



A method, shown rather than described

And what has been changed to protect the client

Anybody can publish a framework. Very few people will show you what their actual discovery notes looked like, because the notes are where you can see whether the framework was really used or was written up afterwards to look tidy. This document is one engagement followed from the first call through to the offer, with the working artifacts reproduced as they stood at the time.

What you will see

- The fact table as it was built from the recording, including the rows where his numbers were his claim and nothing more.
 - The list of things that were working and could not be touched, one of which he had built himself.
 - A single narrated mess, turned into a written rule, which is the move that converts "constant chaos" into a finite specification.
 - The finding that arrived on the third read of the transcript and moved the offer from a tool into a defence.
 - The gap list exactly as it stood before anybody mentioned a price.
 - The estimate per component, the slice carved out of it, and an honest number on whether the job existed at all.
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What has been changed

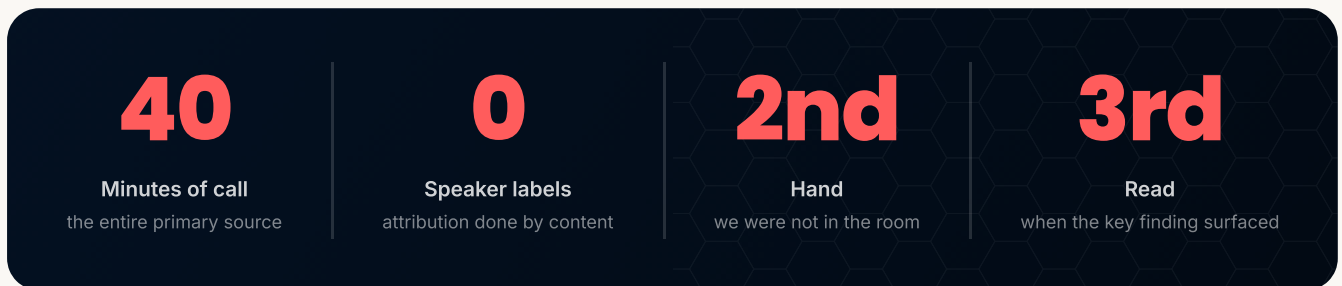
The company name, every personal name, every city and campus, and all dates are removed or altered. The business is described as a field marketing company that puts printed campaigns under doors in student housing across several states, which is close enough to follow and generic enough to protect. Figures that the founder asserted on the call and that nobody had verified are labelled as his claim, in the same way they were labelled in the original record. That labelling is not caution for its own sake. It is the discipline the whole method rests on.



A call we were not on, and a transcript with no names

Everything downstream was built from this

A partner agency ran the first call and sent us the recording. Forty minutes. The transcript was machine generated and not diarised, so the speakers were not labelled, and reading it in order made it look as though the two men were cold emailing each other. Before a single fact could be written down, the speakers had to be separated by content rather than by turn.



The business, in one paragraph

The founder puts printed flyers under doors in student housing. Only that, deliberately, in his words: nothing more, nothing less. The sales thesis is a lower cost per acquired customer than any other channel, and he sells it by asking the prospective client what their current numbers are and then comparing. He is honest about the status of the thesis on the call. His words: these are thesis, it is still not proven.

Why the second-hand starting position mattered

- Whatever the partner promised on that call was ours to build. He described his side as a full stack automation agency and mentioned his development team, which is us.
- He also quoted his own results as an illustration. Illustrations get heard as forecasts, and correcting that after a proposal has gone out is expensive.
- We had no relationship with the founder, no access to anything, and no ability to ask a follow-up question directly. Everything in the rest of this document came out of a recording.



The fact table, as it was built

Every row carries its source, and the unverified ones say so

This is the first thing produced after any call, from the recording, in about forty minutes. It is extraction, not summary. A summary reads better and quietly destroys the provenance of every number in it, which means that six weeks later nobody can tell which figures were measured and which were somebody being agreeable.

#	FACT	STATUS
1	In business roughly two and a half years, dozens of clients	His claim
2	Twenty six active campuses, eleven of them close to sold out	His claim
3	Over eighty thousand flyers committed in the next five weeks	His claim
4	Around sixty thousand in sales across the previous two months	His claim
5	Dozens of students working for him right now	His claim
6	Work is broken into units of a few thousand flyers. One student collects one unit and completes it	His description of the unit of work
7	At two to three thousand per unit, eighty thousand flyers is roughly twenty seven to forty jobs in five weeks	Our inference, not his figure
8	Raising a seed round, target roughly six months out	His claim
9	Working with some Fortune 500 companies	His claim, unverified
10	Sales runs on cold email plus a separate person doing enterprise outreach. He calls it self operating	His claim
11	He built his own operations app and has maintained it for about six months	Stated twice, with evident pride
12	Clients often build a dedicated funnel so the campaign can be tracked	His claim
13	For the first two years attribution was: if they reorder it worked, if not it did not	His words
14	He is the single point of failure. His words: I do not have any of me anymore	His words

Row seven is the one worth pausing on. It is a calculation, not something he said, so it is written into the table as an inference and labelled as one. An earlier version of that row assumed a thousand doors per job and produced roughly eighty jobs. His own sentence about units was more precise, so the number was corrected downward and the correction was recorded rather than quietly overwritten.



What was working, and what could not be touched

These are walls, not scope you have not sold yet

Three parts of his operation were working, and he said so clearly. Treating any of them as a future upsell would have cost the current deal. The partner running the call tried twice to steer back to a topic the founder had already declined, and was declined both times. A third attempt would have been expensive.

DO NOT TOUCH

- × His sales system. Self operating, and not this quarter's priority. Refused twice on the call.
- × His student recruitment funnel. Was hell for years, now has a system, and he said without it they would be dead in the water.
- × The operations app he built himself and has maintained for six months. The one thing in the whole operation he sounded proud of.

OPEN, AND WHERE HE LEANED IN

- ✓ Physical logistics of getting printed material to the right person in the right place.
- ✓ The decision load. Every exception routing through him personally.
- ✓ Proof that a job was actually delivered, and the number that rests on it.

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"I built a software using Claude and I've been upkeeping with it the past like six months or so. It's like we send jobs, it integrates with their sms, it lets them accept, receive, clock in."

The founder, on the app he built

Why this changes how the proposal is written

A proposal to replace that app reads as an attack on his work, whatever the app is actually like. The only workable framings were to extend it or to surround it: read from it, or receive from it. That single constraint shaped the architecture more than any technical consideration did, and it came out of one sentence and the tone he said it in.



What was burning, in his own words

Seven fires, all of them quoted rather than paraphrased

Collected verbatim, because his phrasing is sharper than any summary of it and because these are the lines you read back to him on the second call. The most useful nuance in the whole call is in the third one.

- **Physical logistics.** Printing is centralised, stock is dispersed, broken into units of a few thousand, shipped, collected by a student, delivered. Every campaign has its own exceptions.
- **One concrete example he volunteered.** A local client left roughly ten thousand flyers in a single enormous box at their own shop. Normally students collect small units from a depot. Now he had to choose between three bad options and then explain the choice to fifteen students across three campuses.
- **Volume, not size.** His words: the bottlenecks for fulfilment are just, it is not bottlenecks, there is challenges, there is like continuous. There is no single constriction to break. There is a constant inflow of small decisions.
- **People management.** Dozens of students, several campuses at once, campaigns starting in three states in one week. He wants a ladder: best students become managers, best manager goes higher.
- **Delivery verification.** Students photograph proof. The purpose is not marketing, it is counting, so the delivered number can be divided by the scans.
- **Attribution.** For two years there effectively was none. Now he is pushing scannable codes, promo codes and dedicated funnels, and expects to have supporting or disproving data this year.
- **He is the single point of failure.** His words: I used to have that sparkle about them too, and that is why I need somebody. Somebody who can sparkle about the problem.

“These are just like continuous problems. They're like a stupid one I just... got to solve right after this call.”

On the stranded ten thousand flyers



His diagnosis, and where it was only half right

Steelman it first, then find the level he stopped at

One sentence defined the call, and it is the sentence that would have ended the deal if it had been argued with directly.

“Most of the problems isn't a technology problem. It's not about having better software. It's like you just need humans to do this human thing.”

The founder

Asked what a magic wand would do, he answered: that would look like a full time expert who has management and human resources skills and solves problems. That is the answer to watch for. **When the wish is a person, you are looking at a coordination problem, not a labour problem.**

Where he is right

No software drives a box across a city or slides paper under a door. The physical work needs people, and selling him software as a replacement for an operations lead would have deserved to fail.

CONCEDE THIS FIRST, AND MEAN IT

Where he stopped short

What was eating him was not the physical work. It was that every decision had to reach him, because the state of the world existed only in his head and in scattered message threads.

COORDINATION, NOT LABOUR

What that changes

Software does not do the human job here. It makes the decision available to somebody who is not him, which is the thing he actually asked for when he said he needed a person.

SAME WISH, CHEAPER MECHANISM

The hiring argument

If he hires the operations lead he wants, that person joins a business with no written state and spends months building the picture we could hand over on day one. The system shortens time to productivity either way.

WORKS WHETHER OR NOT HE HIRES



One narrated mess, turned into a written rule

If an exception repeats, it is a rule, and a rule is buildable

He described the stranded ten thousand flyers as continuous chaos. It is not chaos. It is one of roughly ten scenarios that recur, and that distinction is the difference between an unquotable project and a finite specification. The test is a single question: **is this a new problem, or one of about ten that repeat?**

TODAY, PER OCCURRENCE

- × Every occurrence reaches the founder personally.
- × He weighs three bad options from memory, under time pressure.
- × He then explains the choice to fifteen people across three campuses, individually.
- × The reasoning is not written anywhere, so the next occurrence costs the same again.

ONCE THE RULE EXISTS

- ✓ The condition is detected when the job is created.
- ✓ The rule proposes the action, with the thresholds already set.
- ✓ A manager confirms it and the affected students are notified together.
- ✓ The founder does not see it at all, and the decision is now a record.

The rule, written out

If the stock is not at a depot, and more than a set number of people need to collect from it, then repack into standard units and dispatch them. Otherwise redirect collection to the nearest access point. Written once, in one sentence, it turns a recurring twenty minute problem plus fifteen conversations into a two minute confirmation by somebody who is not the founder.

WHAT THE TEST ESTABLISHES

ANSWER IN THIS CASE

Is the exception new, or a repeating shape?

Repeating. One of roughly ten.

Who decides today?

The founder, every time.

How long does the decision take today?

Minutes of thinking, then fifteen separate explanations.

Can the decision be written as a condition and an action?

Yes, in one sentence.

Therefore

Buildable, and it removes the founder from the loop.



The thing that moved the offer from a tool to a defence

It surfaced on the third read of the transcript, not on the call

The most valuable item in the entire engagement, and nobody noticed it live. It came out of reading the same forty minutes a third time.

“We tell a client, what's your CAC right now? What's your CPM like? And so then we get the exact flyers, we'd say we did 1000, 102, and we divide that by the scan so we get an exact number for the data purposes.”

The founder, describing his sales mathematics

Taken apart

Flyers divided by scans, multiplied by the price per flyer, gives a cost per scan. A scan is one person pointing a phone at a piece of paper. It is not an acquired customer. Compared against a client's cost per acquired customer, the comparison is structurally flattering by exactly the factor of the scan to customer conversion rate. If five customers come from a hundred scans, the real cost per customer is twenty times the number being presented.

3rd

Read of the
transcript
when it appeared

1

Claim the product rests
on
everything else follows it

~6mo

To his seed round
his claim

Both

Due diligence and enterprise
procurement
will look here



Why it matters in every reading of it

And the question it produces, which accuses nobody

There are three honest ways to read what he said, and the conclusion is the same in all three. That is what makes it worth acting on rather than worth arguing about.

- He may already know and may have simplified for the call, or he may be relying on the client's own funnel for the second step, which he did mention. It does not matter which. He is raising money and selling to large companies, and this is exactly what diligence finds. When they find it they do not find an arithmetic error, they find a reason to distrust every other number.
 - So the accuracy of delivery proof is not administrative hygiene. It is the load-bearing wall of his product.** If the delivered number is soft, the whole claim is soft.
 - That reframes what we sell. Not a dashboard, but the survival of his central sales claim under scrutiny. It is the one thing on the call that is urgent, expensive to get wrong, and impossible for him to do himself.
 - And it produces a question that can be asked without accusing anyone of anything: **when you give a client that number, is it a cost per scan or a cost per customer, and who does the second step?**
-



The gap list, before anybody mentioned price

The real deliverable of a first call

Not a to-do list. A permission check. While anything is flagged as blocking pricing, the full build cannot be quoted, and that is the entire function of the document.

WHAT WE STILL DID NOT KNOW

BLOCKS

When he quotes that number to a client, is it per scan or per customer, and who converts it?	Pricing
Does he control the print file, or does the printer? Codes have to be placed at print time.	Pricing
What is his own app built on, and can it be read from or receive events?	Pricing
Is there budget at a pre-seed company that already said it might touch base again in a few months?	Pricing
What proof do students capture today, in what form, and where does it land?	Build
What is the real unit size, and does it vary by campus?	Build
How many distinct exception types are there? We estimated about ten and never confirmed it.	Build
Which of the recurring scenarios happen most often, so the first rules are the right ones?	Build
Who other than him can approve a change to how a job is dispatched?	Build
What does a client report look like today, if one exists at all?	Useful later
What is the actual scan to customer rate, in any campaign he has ever run?	Useful later

Four items blocked pricing. That is why no full quote went out, and why what was offered instead was a small fixed slice whose own deliverable was the answer to some of them.



Systems and access, with owners

Nothing here was verified, and that is recorded as the finding it is

Because the call was second hand and there was no relationship yet, not one credential in this table had been used. The honest version of this artifact says so in a column rather than leaving it implied, since an unused credential does not exist.

SYSTEM	OWNED BY	WHAT WE NEEDED, AND STATUS
His own operations app	Him, personally	Stack unknown. Read or receive. Not verified
The print supplier	A third party	Whether variable data printing is possible at all. Not verified
Shipping and depot collection	A carrier	Event data at collection. Not verified
Student messaging	Inside his app	How jobs are accepted and clocked. Not verified
Client funnels and codes	Each client	Where scans currently land. Not verified
Anything analytics	Unknown	Never established that any existed

What the empty column was worth

Two of these six were rated as unknown risk in the estimate specifically because nobody had logged into anything. The integration with his own app could not be given a confidence figure at all, and saying so in writing was more useful than producing a number that would have been invented. The pilot was then designed to touch none of it.



From his pains to mechanisms, with confidence written first

Every component traces back to something he said

Built before any thought about architecture. If a row has no pain next to it, it does not belong in the proposal, however good the idea is. The confidence column is written before quoting, not after, and anything below high confidence either goes into the first slice to be tested or comes out.

HIS PAIN, HIS WORDS	WHAT REMOVES IT	CONFIDENCE
We divide flyers by scans to get an exact number	Codes unique per campus, placed at print, with bot filtering so a scan means something	~95%
It is so that we can verify it	Proof capture with location at the moment of capture, tied to the specific job	~85%
We would say we did a thousand	Reconciliation of three numbers, printed against delivered against scanned, with deviation flagged	~95%
If they reorder it means it worked	A client report with the method stated and honest intervals around the numbers	~90%
These are continuous problems	Exception rules with thresholds, decided by a manager rather than by him	~85%
I do not have any of me anymore	Written state of every job, so somebody who is not him can answer the question	~85%
It integrates with their sms, lets them accept, clock in	Read from or receive from his app. Never replace it	Unknown

The last row is the honest one. There was no information about his stack, so no figure was given. Writing unknown into a confidence column is uncomfortable and it is the only defensible entry when nobody has seen the system.



One campaign, end to end

The design artifact the second call is built on

Written as a story rather than a diagram, using one real campaign shape with his own numbers. Two things happen when you write this. You cannot finish it without finding every remaining hole, because a narrative will not let you skip a step the way a diagram will. And you end up holding the exact thing you are going to walk the client through on the second call.

Day 0

The campaign is sold

He does exactly what he does today, and asks the client for their current cost per customer. Today that number evaporates into a conversation or an email. From now it is written into one field with the date and the name of the person who said it. Fifteen seconds of work, and it is the entire basis of the closing report. A number without an origin is not data, and in six months nobody will remember where it came from.

Day 1

Codes are generated

One code per campus, not one for the campaign and not one per building. Each code is three things at once: a short link on his own domain, a scannable image, and a promo code. Per campus is the level at which the numbers are large enough to say anything and small enough to be useful.

Days 2 to 5

Print and dispatch

The codes go into the print file, which is the step that makes the printer a hard dependency rather than a detail. Stock is broken into standard units and shipped. Each unit carries its own identifier, which is what later makes the chain of custody provable rather than assumed.

Days 6 to 17

Students work

A student accepts a job, collects a unit, delivers it and captures proof with the location recorded at the moment of capture. The unit identifier ties the proof to a specific job rather than to a general claim that work happened.



One campaign, end to end

Where the numbers meet, and where the report comes from

**Days 6
onward**

Scans arrive

Redirects are logged as they happen, with bot traffic filtered so that a scan means a person. The filter cannot be calibrated without real traffic, which is one of the reasons the pilot exists at all.

Day 18

The campaign closes

Three numbers are reconciled: printed, delivered and scanned. Where they disagree, the disagreement is flagged rather than smoothed. This is the step that converts his claim into something that survives being asked about.

Report

The client sees it

Printed against delivered against scanned, per campus, with honest intervals around the rates and an appendix stating the method. Any figure that came from the client is attributed to the client. Nothing is claimed that the data does not carry.

After a few

The aggregate becomes the asset

Once several campaigns have closed the same way, he has something he has never had: a real distribution of results across campuses and campaign types. That is the material a seed round and an enterprise buyer actually ask for.

What this campaign does not solve, stated plainly

It does not prove that every individual flyer went under a door, and the report never claims that. It does not convert scans into customers, which remains the client's own funnel. And it does not remove the physical work, which was never the problem. Writing the limits into the design document is what stops them being discovered later as failures.



What we consciously did not build

Written as sentences with reasons, not as silence

This section had its own title in the design document, and that is deliberate. There is a large difference between not mentioning something and writing down that you are not doing it and why. The second removes a fear the client was never going to raise.

- 
No dashboard that requires somebody to look at it every day. He does not have a spare person, and a screen nobody opens is a cost pretending to be an asset.
- 
No replacement for the app he built. We read from it or receive from it. This is the wall from page five, written into the scope so it cannot be forgotten by whoever picks the project up later.
- 
Nothing on the sales side. Refused twice on the call. Recorded as refused rather than deferred.
- 
No tracking of an individual student outside the window of a job. That is surveillance rather than proof, and across dozens of students in several states it carries a risk that is not ours to take on his behalf.
- 
No claim that every flyer was verified. The data does not support it, so the product does not say it.
- 
Batch registry, exception queue, capacity board, student scoring, automatic assignment. All correct diagnoses and all the wrong moment. This is the "right diagnosis, wrong moment" cluster, and the condition is named: it becomes right when there is a second person in the company.

That last group is the one worth copying. Declining a good idea without a reason reads as though you missed it. Declining it with the condition that would make it correct reads as judgement, and it schedules the conversation instead of ending it.



The estimate, per component

A single figure cannot be corrected, so it is never given as one

Per component rather than in one lump, because a single figure cannot be argued with and therefore cannot be corrected. Development days only, excluding his time and any wait on the printer.

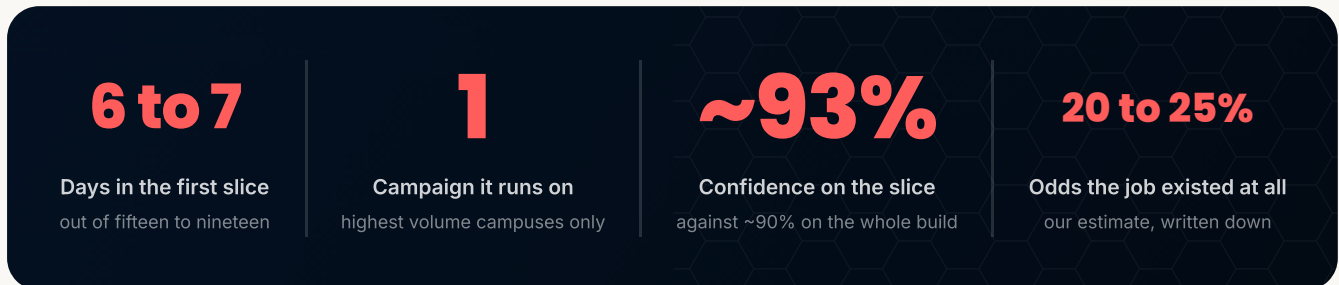
COMPONENT	DAYS
Schema, code generation, redirect layer, event capture	2 to 3
Bot filtering and the qualified-scan beacon	1
Proof capture, location at time of capture, tied to the job	2
Reconciling the three numbers and flagging deviation	1 to 2
Client report: template, queries, interval calculation	2
Admin: campaign, code generation, closing, reconciliation review	3 to 4
Automation chains and sending	1
Validation against one real campaign	1 to 2
Unit codes, identified scan, chain of custody	1.5 to 2
Total	15 to 19



The slice carved out of it, and why that one

Test the riskiest assumption, not the most visible feature

Nothing close to the full build was quoted, because four items on the gap list still blocked pricing. What went out instead was a fixed slice sized so that being wrong about it was survivable for both sides.



The slice is the code backbone, filtering, chain of custody on units, and one semi-manual report, on a single campaign. Its only job is to prove the data actually arrives. Everything else waits on that answer, because if it does not arrive then the remaining twelve days would have gone into elaborate reporting built on a number that does not exist. It also touches nothing of his, which is why its confidence is higher than the build as a whole.

The last figure is the uncomfortable one and it belongs in the document. Writing it down forces the next decision: the components were designed to be generic, so the code has value even if this buyer never signs. That is the only reason a twenty percent number is not a reason to walk away.

The sentence that goes with the price

Exclusions get read out loud, with reasons, while everyone is still in the room. It feels counterintuitive and it is the part that makes the number legible. One line does most of the work, and it converts every later "could you just" into a scheduled conversation rather than an argument.

“

This document is the contract. Anything not specified here is a later-phase decision, and we flag rather than add.

The change trigger, written into the scope



How the pilot gets judged, agreed in advance

Three measures that are ours, and one that is not

Written before the work starts, because a success definition agreed afterwards is not a definition, it is a negotiation. Three of these are our responsibility. The fourth is his, and saying so in advance is the part that protects the relationship.

The four measures

All three numbers
reconciled at close

Yes or no. Ours.

Jobs with confirmed
presence

A percentage, on a distributed sample. Ours.

Qualified scan ratio

A percentage. Ours. It also shows the noise before us.

The end client reorders

His measure, and not our responsibility

The fourth is his own definition of success, in his words: if they reorder, it means it worked. It is worth adopting and worth ringfencing, because a reorder depends on whether the campaign actually performed. If the report shows that it did not, the pilot still succeeded, because he found out the truth for the first time. That is the whole point of the load-bearing finding.

Why none of these is a revenue number

Revenue and reorders are lagging indicators. They arrive after the first invoice has already been judged. Everything in the list above can be shown at the end of a single campaign, which is the window the client is actually paying for. Promising a lagging indicator on a leading timeline is how projects that were working get cancelled.



The method, pulled back out

Every move in this document, as something you can repeat

Nothing here required a technique that cannot be copied. What it required was refusing to move on at a handful of specific moments.

Extract, do not summarise

Build the fact table from the recording with every row carrying its source, and label your own inferences as inferences. The correction on page four only survived because the row said where the number came from.

PAGE 4

Ask what must not be touched

The three working systems, one of which he built himself. This one constraint shaped the architecture more than any technical consideration.

PAGE 5

Steelman, then find the level they stopped at

Concede the half he had right before adding the half he missed. Arguing with his sentence directly would have ended the conversation.

PAGE 7

Watch for a person in the magic wand answer

When the wish is a human being, it is coordination and not labour, and the mechanism is completely different from the one they asked for.

PAGE 7

Run the exception-rule test

Is this new, or one of about ten that repeat? If it repeats it is a rule, and a rule is buildable. This is what turned continuous chaos into a finite specification.

PAGE 8

Find the load-bearing number

Ask which single claim the whole product rests on, then how firm the number under it is. That moved the offer from a tool to a defence.

PAGE 9

Write the gap list before the price

Four items blocked pricing, so no full quote went out. What went out instead was a small fixed slice that answered some of them.

PAGE 10



What this engagement did not get right

Included because a case study without it is marketing

Four habits, before the failures

- Count the refusals. He declined the same topic twice. Two is a boundary, and a third attempt is a cost.
 - Read the transcript a third time. The best finding here was not audible on the first pass, and not audible at all to the person in the room.
 - Write the confidence numbers before you quote, including the one that has to say unknown.
 - Agree the success measures before the build, and name the one measure that is not yours.
-

And two things this engagement got wrong

- The direction changed on a later call we had no access to.** Scope moved in a room we were not in, and the new direction contradicted a document already sent. The fix is unglamorous: keep one channel, and re-confirm scope in writing after any meeting you missed.
 - The load-bearing finding should have surfaced on the call, not on a third read of the recording.** It was said out loud, in one sentence, and nobody stopped. The habit that would have caught it is the simplest one there is: when they give you a number, stop and ask where it came from.
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Both of these cost more than any technical decision in the project. That is usually true, and it is the reason discovery is worth treating as a discipline rather than as the friendly part before the real work starts.
