# The Trust Equation

**By Paul Farris**
*With intellectual partnership from GPT-5*[1]
FarrisP@darden.virginia.edu
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In an advertising class years ago, I learned three patterns that have been used to describe agency–client relationships: the **boss–employee model**, in which the client directs and the agency executes; the **partnership model**, in which the agency and client work together as peers toward a common goal; and the **expert–advisor model**, in which the client presents symptoms and the advisor is expected to diagnose the underlying problem and prescribe solutions—much like a patient relies on a medical doctor. I wasn't aware at the time how deeply this simple categorization would stay with me. It surfaced again and again across my career - not only when I was teaching or consulting, but also in marketing management roles, research into channel management, service on corporate boards, and expert witness testimony.

In recent years, the memory of this framework prompted me to reflect backward on my earlier professional experiences—even those that occurred before I had any formal training in business. As I revisited these episodes, I realized that long before I had a vocabulary for it, I was already operating—sometimes knowingly, sometimes instinctively—within one of these relationship modes, and what determined whether I was effective or not often had less to do with the accuracy of my analysis and more to do with whether others trusted me in that role. What follows is a set of moments, drawn from different stages of my life, where I struggled to understand exactly what others expected of me: Was I simply there to collect and report facts? Was I a collaborator? Or was I supposed to take responsibility for telling people what to do?

These stories are presented not as a linear biography, but as reflections on the recurring question at the heart of all advisory work: **What is my role here—and what does it take for others to trust me enough to act on my recommendations?**

# Lessons from the Cotton Fields

My first experience acting in a role that resembled an advisor came long before I thought of myself as a professional. During two summers in college, I worked as a cotton scout in Southeast Missouri along the Mississippi Delta. I was trained by personnel from the University of Missouri's Agricultural Extension Service. The job appeared straightforward: enter a cotton field, follow a predetermined zig-zag pattern to ensure a representative sample, inspect a specified number of plants at each stop, identify pests or signs of crop damage, and then determine whether economic thresholds had been met to justify spraying. The decision protocol included detailed rules based on the growth stage of the cotton plant, the number and

[1] The AI facilitated the author's reflective process by asking questions, suggesting frameworks, and helping to structure the narrative flow.

developmental stage of larvae (early-stage larvae, meaning the immature growth stages before becoming adult moths), and environmental factors that might naturally reduce pest pressure. If larvae were in late developmental, transitional stage when insects transform into moths, the protocol recommended against spraying because the insects were nearly at the end of their feeding cycle.

At the beginning of the season, the stakes were low. Farmers often paid little attention to my reports. My role felt procedural—almost clerical. But as the cotton matured and the economic stakes and the danger from insect infestations increased, anxiety among farmers rose dramatically. Some waited at the edge of a field for me to emerge. My written report was no longer just a formality—it became a decision point that could cost thousands of dollars in spraying expenses or, if wrong, far more in crop loss. That shift in farmer behavior fundamentally changed how I viewed my role.

I had been trained as a data collector, not as a decision authority. But the farmers did not want a recitation of observations—they wanted a recommendation. My early attempts to walk them through the various contingencies ("on one hand, the larval counts are low, but on the other hand, the weather forecast suggests a possible increase…") were met with visible impatience. They were not looking for an academic discussion. They wanted me to tell them what to do and convey confidence in that recommendation.

This required a change in my behavior. Instead of walking directly out of the field after collecting the last sample, I stayed in the rows longer. I thought through the evidence, weighed the trade-offs privately, and emerged only when I had a clear recommendation and clear justification. I learned that in moments of heightened economic risk, **clarity is valued more than completeness**. The farmers did not need to be convinced that the world was complex—they already knew that. They needed to know whether to spray or not.

Another lesson emerged as well: the question of "Who is my client?" was not as simple as I first assumed. I was paid by the Extension Service, but I was accountable in practice to the farmers' economic outcomes. Yet I was also influenced by the Extension's professional norms, which discouraged unnecessary pesticide application. In other words, from the beginning of my working life, I was functioning in an **expert–advisor role**, navigating multiple loyalties and expectations—even if I had no language to describe it.

# The Uncomfortable Truth at Work

Fast-forward a few years to my first corporate job, where I joined one of the world's greatest packaged goods company as an assistant product manager. We used a **regression-based forecasting process** that was used to compare actual sales to forecast sales. Early in this particular year, actual sales levels appeared to be significantly underperforming relative to forecast. The reports triggered mounting concern throughout the division, and speculative explanations began circulating—ranging from competitive actions to supposed failures in advertising strategy. Then, a few months later, the discrepancy diminished. The forecasts and

actual sales aligned again, and the earlier anxiety seemed to evaporate as quickly as it had appeared.

Because I was between assignments in June, my marketing manager asked me to investigate what had caused the earlier variance. I went back through five years of monthly data and quickly identified a straightforward explanation: during the prior year, our brand had announced a price increase scheduled to take effect at the end of February. Predictably, customers had advanced their orders into January to avoid the higher prices, resulting in unusually inflated sales for that month. The current January's sales were perfectly normal—it was the previous year's January that was artificially high. That spike distorted the regression model and caused the forecast to overestimate forecast sales until that anomaly had cycled out of the baseline.

I expected this explanation—supported by a simple chart—would resolve the issue immediately. However, when I presented it to my manager, it did not have the effect I anticipated. My boss was not quantitatively inclined, and he called in a senior member of the market research team to validate my findings. That individual had already formed an alternative explanation that had nothing to do with pull-forward due to the announced price increase. The meeting ended not with clarity, but with persistent uncertainty.

What struck me was this: the correctness of the analysis was not in dispute because it was never fully engaged. It wasn't that people thought I was wrong—they simply didn't grant my explanation enough *credibility* to be thoroughly examined. In that moment, I learned a lesson that **being correct is not enough**. Unless the audience believes in the person delivering the explanation—believes in their experience, neutrality, and judgment—truth alone rarely carries the room.

I left that meeting understanding, for the first time, that credibility is not merely a function of logic. It is also a function of history and perception. Because I was young, new, and unproven, my analysis was treated as one hypothesis among others—not as the final word. This taught me a lesson I would draw on repeatedly in later years: you cannot wait until a moment of crisis to build credibility. You must either *establish it in advance* or *borrow it strategically* when necessary.

# Boardroom Uncertainty and the Long View

Years later, I found myself in a different kind of advisory role—this time as a director of a building materials manufacturer.  At the time I joined the board, the company was facing a growing number of lawsuits related to alleged product defects. In truth, most failures were the result of improper installation by contractors rather than a problem with the product itself. However, the manufacturer had insurance coverage, while the installers generally were less promising targets for lawsuits. As a result, lawsuits were increasingly being directed toward the manufacturer. To further complicate matters, any real or alleged product failure typically appeared five to seven years after installation. This long tail meant that today's lawsuit volume reflected the practices and market awareness of many years earlier, not the current state of the product or company policy.

Forecasting the reserves the company should set aside to address these liabilities was a challenging problem. There was a real fear that the company might not be able to survive if the growth in suits continued unabated. I worked out an analytical framework to decompose the situation into three curves:

- the **incidence curve**, reflecting when actual product failures were likely to manifest;
- the **awareness and litigation curve**, capturing the degree to which building owners knew of the issue and were willing to pursue legal action;
- and the **mitigation curve**, reflecting the gradual impact of improved product instructions, installer training, and clearer legal disclaimers.

The analysis suggested that while lawsuits might continue to rise in the short term—because of the time lag between installation and failure—the long-term trend would improve as better practices took effect.

In earlier stages of my career, I might have presented only my own analysis and expected it to stand on its merits. But I had learned by then that personal expertise alone does not always suffice in high-stakes environments with multiple decision-makers. So, I recommended that the board commission an independent study by a respected outside expert using a similar methodology. The external findings were consistent with mine. Even though not all board members fully understood each analytical step, they accepted the general logic and conclusions, in no small part because the process had been validated by a disinterested third party.

That experience deepened my understanding of advisory effectiveness. First, it reinforced that credibility is not just personal—it can be institutional. By involving an outside expert, I lowered the perceived risk that I might be advocating for a position based on my own preferences or ego. Second, it clarified that in complex advisory roles, **the identity of the "client" is not always singular**. Was I advising the board in its present capacity? Protecting shareholder value? Safeguarding the company's reputation in the eyes of the public, distributors, builders, and the courts? I think the answer was: all of the above.

Most importantly, I saw that **trust in the advisory role is often more about how you manage uncertainty than how you present certainty**. The board could not know with absolute confidence that the litigation risk would taper off. What they needed was an advisor who would help them confront that uncertainty responsibly—and protect the company's long-term interests, even when the short-term outlook seemed ambiguous.

# When Expertise Meets Judgment: The Tribunal Case

In one of the early expert witness advisory roles of my career, I worked on a case to be decided by a tribunal of judges. The plaintiff (Company P) operated in the real estate services market. They had entered a contract with a major internet media platform (Company M), agreeing to trade a percentage of Company P's equity in exchange for a specified number of digital

advertising impressions to be delivered by Company M. The contract established two classes of impressions: **General impressions**, which appeared on pages unrelated to real estate, and **Relevant impressions**, which appeared alongside content specific to the real estate industry. Relevant impressions were valued considerably higher than General impressions.

Unfortunately, the tracking system that was supposed to distinguish between these two types of impressions failed to be implemented properly. As a result, only about 20 percent of the impressions were classified clearly as either General or Relevant. The remaining 80 percent were logged without any classification. As a result, it was unknown whether they should be valued at the higher Relevant rate or the lower General rate. The companies disagreed on the allocation between R and G impression to be used in the valuation.

I was hired by the plaintiff to determine, using statistical inference and contextual evidence, the most probable distribution of the unclassified impressions between the two categories. The methodology analyzed known placement patterns, page content characteristics, time-of-day distribution, real estate search behaviors, and historical ratios to estimate the likely proportion of Relevant impressions among the unclassified majority.

The judges were attentive and respectful. However, it became clear from their questions that two of the three were struggling to follow some of the inferential reasoning, despite my efforts to explain the analysis in straightforward terms. This experience reinforced something that had emerged in earlier parts of my career: **in complex decisions, trust does not depend solely on whether people fully understand your reasoning—it also depends on whether they believe you are presenting your conclusions honestly, without bias or manipulation**.

In the end, the tribunal ruled in favor of the plaintiff. But the decisive factor, as I later learned, was not that every judge had mastered the logic. It was that they believed my intent was to help them reach a fair decision based on the best available evidence. They trusted my honesty more than they fully grasped the methodology. This was a humbling realization. At a certain point, especially when complexity exceeds the audience's comfort zone, **credibility shifts from a test of comprehension to a test of character**.

That experience brought into sharp focus a truth that had been building throughout my career: the further one advances into high-stakes advisory roles, the more the critical question becomes not simply *"Is this person correct?"* but *"Is this person worthy of being believed?"*.

# What I Later Learned About Trust

When I look back over these experiences—from cotton fields to corporate boardrooms to judicial tribunals—a pattern emerges that I did not fully see at the time. In each case, I was trying to do good analytical work. But the effectiveness of that work—its impact on actual decisions—depended not only on the quality of my analysis, but on the level of *trust* others placed in me in that specific context.

Only much later did I encounter a formal expression that helped crystallize what I had experienced repeatedly. In a conversation about advisory roles, I was introduced to what is known as the **Trust Equation**, developed by David Maister, et al[2]. It is not a rigid formula to be applied mechanically, but it provides a remarkably useful way to understand why some advisors are heeded and others ignored, regardless of their expertise.

It is expressed as:

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**Trust = (Credibility + Reliability + Intimacy) / Self-Orientation**

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- **Credibility** refers to whether others believe you know what you are talking about—your expertise, clarity of thought, and soundness of reasoning.
- **Reliability** is about consistency—whether you do what you say you will do over time.
- **Intimacy** (sometimes referred to as "safety") concerns whether others feel they can reveal what really matters without fear of judgment or exploitation.
- **Self-orientation**, the denominator, is the most subtle and often the most important element: it addresses whose interests people believe you are primarily serving—your own, or theirs.

Although some writings refer to this model as the "Trust Triangle," the equation format is far more revealing. It shows that even if one has strong credibility, reliability, and rapport, trust will be diminished if the advisor is perceived as self-serving or primarily oriented toward personal gain, recognition, or short-term advantage.

When I reflected on the episodes from my career through the lens of the Trust Equation, what had been implicit became explicit:

- In the **cotton fields**, my credibility came from my training, my reliability from consistent methods, and my intimacy from recognizing the farmer's anxiety and delivering recommendations with clarity and empathy. My low self-orientation—demonstrated by not over-recommending treatment simply to appear decisive—made me trustworthy.
- At **my first marketing job**, I had analytical credibility, but I lacked reliability in the eyes of my superiors because I had no track record. Most importantly, my role was unclear enough that my audience did not yet see me as someone whose perspective served the organization's best interests more than proving a clever analysis.
- In the **boardroom**, I consciously bolstered credibility and reduced perceived self-orientation by recommending an external expert replicate my analysis. By doing so, I signaled that I was committed to the company's long-term health—not to being "right." This increased board members' sense of safety in acting on a difficult forecast.

[2] *The Trusted Advisor*, by David H. Maister, Charles H. Green, and Robert M. Galford, The Free Press, October 2000.

- In the **tribunal**, the judges could not fully follow every analytical step, but they believed in my integrity and impartiality. At that point, **intimacy and low self-orientation were decisive**, outweighing even credibility in determining trust.

This framework did not change my past experiences—but it helped me understand them. It provided a language to describe why some recommendations were accepted immediately, while others—equally correct—were set aside. And it confirmed a truth that I had sensed but never articulated: **trust is not merely an outcome of possessing knowledge; it is the condition that allows knowledge to be acted upon.**

# Reflections for Future Advisors

As I reflect on these episodes—from cotton fields to corporate boardrooms to legal tribunals—what stands out most clearly is that the true work of an advisor is not merely analytical. It is relational and ethical. Technical mastery may open the door, but what determines whether others will walk through that door with you is trust. The Trust Equation helped me understand this only after I had lived it many times without a name for it.

Looking across these experiences, four practical reflections emerge:

**1. Be clear about the role you are expected to play.**
Are you there to gather facts, to collaborate as a peer, or to diagnose and recommend? Confusion about role leads to confusion in action. Early in my career, I sometimes explained when I should have recommended, or recommended when I should have facilitated. Effectiveness begins with role clarity.

**2. Trust must be built before it is needed.**
Credibility and reliability are cumulative. They are established not in the moment of crisis but in the pattern of earlier interactions. When personal credibility is not yet established, it can be borrowed—by partnering with institutional authority or independent expertise. Failing to recognize when credibility must be earned or borrowed can render even the most accurate analysis ineffective.

**3. Advisors must create psychological safety.**
People rarely reveal their true constraints, uncertainties, or fears unless they feel safe in doing so. Intimacy in the Trust Equation is not about friendliness; it is about disciplined empathy—showing that you can handle the whole truth without using it as a weapon. Only then will people share the real problem rather than a sanitized version.

**4. The biggest threat to trust is self-orientation.**
No matter how strong the numerator is—credibility, reliability, intimacy—if decision-makers suspect that the advisor is motivated by personal gain, ego, or short-term advantage, trust will be lost. In my most pivotal roles, trust was not earned by being impressive, but by making it unmistakably clear that I was serving the long-term interests of those I advised.

If I could summarize the most important lesson I have learned, it would be this: **an advisor's first responsibility is not to be right, but to be worthy of being believed**. Facts and logic matter profoundly—but they only matter if people trust the person delivering them. The Trust Equation gave me words to describe what I had spent decades discovering: that the real currency of advisory work is not information, but trust.

In roles such as expert testimony, I was sometimes pressured—explicitly or implicitly—to shade my conclusions to better serve the legal strategy of the side that hired me. In those moments, I came to understand that more important than technical expertise was a reputation for integrity. Preserving that reputation requires maintaining independence, even if it risks disappointing the very parties who retained me.

I did not begin my career with this understanding. It emerged gradually, through encounters with uncertainty, resistance, delegation of authority, and, at times, misunderstanding. Only later, when introduced to the Trust Equation, did the pattern reveal itself. It is my hope in sharing these reflections that others—whether acting as consultants, managers, teachers, board members, or expert witnesses—might recognize these patterns earlier than I did, and approach their roles not only with expertise, but with a conscious commitment to growing the trust on which all meaningful advisory work depends.

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