Chapter 1

The Meeting That Changed Everything

Long before I had language for commercial credibility, I was already relying on it. In the early 2000s, just months before graduating from college, I was a young professional jet skier trying to turn my niche expertise into a real business. Having watched many of the popular motocross and skateboard videos of the time, my goal was to introduce a jet ski lifestyle version. I called it *Twangled*, a combination of the words tweaked and mangled, built around the culture, energy, and lifestyle of the sport. After a small first run sold through, I found my way into a major motorsports buyer show in Indianapolis where I showed a promo directly to senior distribution decision-makers and secured purchase orders that later helped me attract investors and scale the business.

At the time, I did not think of any of this as a go-to-market theory. I would not have said I had a framework, much less a system. I was simply trying to make something that I thought people would want and somehow get that in front of the right buyers. Only later did I realize what had happened: credibility opened the door, proof created momentum, and momentum made growth possible.

What I did not realize at the time was that *Twangled* was not a one-off lesson. In the years that followed, across agency roles, publisher-side work, e-commerce leadership, and growth-focused commercial roles, I kept seeing the same pattern from different angles. Sometimes I was helping create momentum. Other times I was watching smart teams struggle because the trust needed for adoption had not been built clearly enough. Even before I had language for it, I was learning that markets do not move just because something is good. They move when enough people believe it is worth the risk of engaging.

I saw parts of that pattern in early-stage work at Newser, in brand-side roles like Lands' End, and later in larger commercial environments including Criteo, where I worked with major clients and saw firsthand how performance, reputation, and buyer confidence interact inside serious organizations. I also saw the opposite inside a major brand. At Lands' End, I watched the launch of Canvas, a younger and more fashion-forward extension designed to attract a new generation of customers. Looking back, the lesson is clear: brand familiarity with one audience does not automatically create credibility with another. At the time, I was managing e-commerce, not setting corporate strategy, but the experience stayed with me. Even strong brands can fail when they assume existing trust will transfer farther than it actually can.

Years later, I began to see similar patterns forming again. This time I was leading RTB House's expansion into the United States. The stakes were higher, the market was harder, and the consequences of getting it wrong felt far more serious. What had once felt intuitive was now starting to become deliberate.

Everything about the launch initially suggested we were off to a strong start. Within my first week working on RTB House's U.S. expansion, I had already secured a strategic client through a personal relationship. Before the end of the second month, we had also signed our first enterprise retailer for a test in the U.S. On paper, it looked like momentum.

This is often how market entry begins. A few early wins create the impression that the path ahead will be straightforward. Leadership sees initial revenue, a couple of promising logos, and the outline of a pipeline, and everyone assumes the market has begun to open. Looking back, I now understand that what we had at that moment was not traction. It was the illusion of traction.

The meeting that broke that illusion took place in New York City near the end of the first quarter, less than six months after the U.S. launch. Senior leadership had flown in from Poland, and we were sitting in a boardroom reviewing the state of the business. We went through the numbers, the current clients, the pipeline, and the expected pace of growth. Then the conversation shifted from progress to performance, and the assumptions that had carried the launch suddenly looked fragile.

The company had decided to terminate the only sales director we had hired in the United States. On paper, the problem looked like sales performance. But the deeper issue was not merely activity, effort, or pipeline hygiene. We were trying to force a sales motion into a market that did not yet have enough reason to believe us. The team needed leads, meetings, and revenue, but what the market needed first was proof.

That meant the responsibility for correcting and rebuilding the go-to-market strategy fell directly on me. At the time, I was serving as Vice President of Operations and U.S. Country Manager, and while my role already included partnerships and market-building, this was different. We were no longer talking about supporting the global corporate launch plan. We were talking about redesigning it.

What made the meeting so clarifying was not the personnel decision itself. People get hired and fired all the time, especially during international expansion when companies are trying to determine what will and will not work in a new market. What made the moment important was the realization that the product itself was not the problem. The product worked, the technology was real, and the early performance data supported that.

At the time, RTB House was already an impressive company by any reasonable standard. Globally, it had established itself as a serious player in performance advertising, particularly in programmatic remarketing. In multiple international markets, it had built a reputation for competing directly against major incumbents like Google and Criteo and winning measurable performance tests. Internally, we were not a startup with an idea. We were a global technology company with proof.

That distinction mattered a lot inside the company, but it mattered very little outside it in the United States. American buyers had no reason to care what had happened in Poland, France, Germany, or Brazil if they had never heard of the company and could not find recognizable

domestic references. We entered the U.S. with a global track record and still discovered that, in practice, we were treated as an unknown vendor. In one of the most competitive business environments in the world, being globally successful and being locally credible are not the same thing.

To understand why this was so damaging, it helps to understand what RTB House actually did. The platform specialized in programmatic remarketing, which means advertising to users who have already visited a customer's website. If someone browses a product page, leaves without buying, and later sees a display ad while reading an article or visiting another site, that is remarketing at work. It is a category built on performance, which means buyers evaluate it closely and compare results carefully.

RTB House's differentiation was technical and real. The company had invested deeply in deep learning at a time when many competitors were still relying more heavily on traditional machine learning approaches. That difference improved the system's ability to evaluate behavior, predict intent, and optimize campaigns in ways that often produced stronger results. In markets where the company was already established, the technology helped generate better return on ad spend than larger and better-known competitors.

The problem was that most of the people we were trying to sell in the United States were marketers, not engineers. They were not looking for a technical lecture on neural networks, model depth, or learning architectures. In 2018, most buyers did not have enough familiarity with artificial intelligence to distinguish meaningfully between machine learning and deep learning, and many were already skeptical of black-box systems. Without visible proof, our technical advantage did not sound like clarity. It sounded like complexity.

That disconnect became one of the earliest lessons of the launch. Leaders often assume that technical differentiation will naturally create buyer interest. They believe that if the product is genuinely better, the market will make room for it. In reality, technical superiority rarely creates the first meeting. The first meeting usually comes from a wedge the customer already understands, framed in language that reduces risk rather than increases it.

At that point, we had one mid-market client, Gifts For You Now, that was active and live, and that relationship had come through a personal connection. We also had one enterprise retailer running with us, but they would not allow us to use their name, logo, or story in any commercial conversation. So although we technically had revenue and early validation, we did not yet have what I would later call usable credibility.

That distinction would become one of the central ideas in this book. An early customer can be paying you and still provide no real leverage in the market. If they will not let you reference them, quote them, or use their results as proof, the relationship may help your revenue but not your momentum. In practical terms, that means you can have business and still have no growth.

The Gifts For You Now relationship was different. I chose that client early because the Director of E-Commerce was a close friend and someone I trusted, but the strategic value went far

beyond friendship. He was willing to provide transparency into actual performance results, which meant we could optimize quickly, understand what was working, and learn in real time as we brought the platform to market in the U.S. That made the relationship more than a sale. It made it a learning environment.

That transparency mattered because RTB House was not simply selling software in the United States. We were also building the business infrastructure required to deliver the product effectively. On one side, we had to win advertiser demand. On the other, we had to build the publisher relationships and ad supply needed to serve those campaigns at competitive rates. In other words, we were building both sides of the market at the same time.

Many outsiders underestimate how difficult that is. They assume the challenge is purely on the sales side, when in reality the quality of what you can deliver is often constrained by the surrounding ecosystem. In our case, better campaign performance depended on stronger publisher relationships, and stronger publisher relationships depended on enough advertiser demand to negotiate from a position of strength. Early clients were not just revenue. They were inputs into the product's ability to improve.

That is one reason smaller early clients can be strategically more important than larger ones. The first client does not have to be the biggest logo you can find. In many cases, that would actually be the wrong move. The first client needs to create the right learning environment, the right level of data transparency, and the right foundation for future credibility.

Gifts For You Now did that for us. The campaigns launched on a relatively small budget, measured in the thousands of dollars per month rather than tens of thousands, but that was enough to begin proving the model. Within the first two weeks, we were roughly matching the returns generated by the incumbent platform. By the end of the first month, we were starting to outperform them. Within a couple of months, the performance gap widened to the point where we were materially ahead, often by twenty to thirty percent.

That kind of lift creates something more valuable than a technical argument. It creates a business case. Marketers do not need to understand how the algorithm works if they can clearly see that it generates more revenue for the same or lower spend. Performance is the language they understand, and once we stopped trying to explain the technology first and started proving outcomes, the path became much clearer.

At the same time, we learned that performance alone was not enough. Many marketers already liked the returns they were getting from retargeting in general. What they disliked were the operational and brand-level issues surrounding existing solutions. The creative in many programmatic campaigns felt templated and unattractive, especially to retailers with strong brand standards, and brand safety remained a serious concern.

I had seen that firsthand before RTB House. While I was at Criteo, one of the major clients I worked on was a major show manufacturer, and at one point their ads appeared next to a satirical article on *The Onion* that made light of school shootings in terrible taste. The campaign

itself performed well, but that did not matter at the moment. What mattered was the brand risk. A senior executive called me personally to terminate the relationship, and although they later returned because the ROI was too strong to ignore, the incident taught me something important: marketers will tolerate a great deal for performance, but they will not tolerate feeling out of control.

That lesson sharpened what the New York meeting had exposed. Up to that point, I still believed we were mainly dealing with a sales execution problem. Maybe we needed better scripts, better outreach, better positioning, or better subject lines. By the time that meeting ended, I was starting to think that none of those things would matter until we solved our underlying trust problem.

The real issue had two dimensions. First, we were not generating enough qualified meetings with the right prospects. Second, even when we won an early client, we could not always convert that win into visible market proof. Sometimes that was because the relationship was agency-owned. Other times it was because the brand did not want competitors knowing who they were using and wanted first mover advantages. Either way, we were working hard to create revenue without necessarily creating leverage.

That realization changed how I thought about go-to-market strategy. It was no longer enough to ask, “How do we sell this?” The better question was, “How do we build trust in a sequence that makes selling easier?” Once you ask that second question, the structure of the work changes. You think differently about which prospects matter first, what kind of data you need, and what type of early client can help move the next deal forward.

That sequence became one of the central ideas in this book. Markets do not move just because you have a product. They move when enough people trust that the product is worth their time, attention, and risk. In that sense, credibility is not a soft brand concept. It is a hard commercial input into growth.

Looking back, I can see that this was the moment when the first pieces of *The Credibility Engine* started to take shape. We had a strategic wedge forming around performance, creative quality, and brand safety. We had a credibility anchor in Gifts For You Now. We had early proof that could become the first rung on a larger ladder. Most importantly, we had a growing awareness that our real job was not just to win customers, but to construct trust in a way that compounded.

It would take years, more clients, a pandemic, internal board pressure, and later launches with companies like PayEye and StarHouse Games before I could fully articulate the system. But the origin point was that meeting in New York. It was the first time I understood clearly that the hardest part of bringing a company to market in the United States was not closing the deal.

It was getting the first meetings.

And getting a meeting requires credibility.