



YOU ARE NOT
ONE FUNNEL
AWAY

The Real Way Trust Is Built in the Age of AI

Tom Schwab

Chief Evangelist Officer, Interview Valet.

You Are Not One Funnel Away: The Real Way Trust Is Built in the Age of AI

Copyright © 2026 Tom Schwab

All rights reserved.

Published by Interview Valet

InterviewValet.com · IAmTomSchwab.com

This is the second in a monthly series of mini-books on how trust is built, earned, and compounded in the age of AI. The first, *From Megaphone to Magnet*, is available at IAmTomSchwab.com/books.

CONTENTS

Introduction

The Lie We Were Sold

01

200 Years of Getting in the Way

How the wires got between us

02

Efficient but Ineffective

The funnel was a phase, not the future

03

Trust Lives in the Conversation

Why a voice carries what text cannot

04

The Proof Is Already Here

What the loudest signals are telling us

Conclusion

One Conversation Away

Your Next Step

About the Author

INTRODUCTION

THE LIE WE WERE SOLD

You are not one funnel away.

That is the promise you have heard from marketers a thousand times. One funnel away from freedom. One automation away from scale. One clever sequence, one viral hook, one perfectly tuned ad set away from the business you have always wanted.

The secret, we are told, is in the app. In the code. In the software. In the outreach that runs while you sleep. Build the machine, feed it strangers at the top, and customers fall out the bottom. Set it and forget it.

It is a seductive story. It is also, increasingly, a lie.

Not because the tools do not work. They do. They have made us astonishingly efficient. We can reach more people, faster and cheaper, than at any moment in human history. But somewhere in the chase for efficiency, a quieter truth got buried: we have been getting more efficient and less effective at the same time.

We are sending more messages and earning less trust. We are reaching more people and connecting with fewer. We have optimized the funnel to a science and watched our reply rates fall to a rounding error.



We are getting more efficient at things that are less effective.

Here is what I have come to believe, after a decade of helping people build real authority, and a lifetime of watching what actually moves human beings: the best things in life and in business have never come through a funnel.

They came through a conversation.

That is the argument of this mini book. It is also, I believe, the most important shift you can make in how you grow your business right now, at this exact moment, as the ground shifts under all of us.

To see why, we have to go back about two hundred years.

CHAPTER ONE

200 YEARS OF GETTING IN THE WAY

In 1838, Samuel Morse stood in front of a room of skeptics and sent a message down a wire.

It was a small thing and an enormous thing at the same time. For the whole of human history up to that morning, a message could travel no faster than a human being could carry it. A horse. A ship. A runner. Distance and time were the same problem. Then Morse closed a circuit, and a thought crossed a continent in the time it took to tap it out.

That was the beginning of the electrical age. And for the next two hundred years, we have been chasing the same dream: to communicate across distance, instantly, and to make that communication richer, faster, and less expensive.

THE WIRE

The Telegraph Taxed Every Word

The telegraph was a miracle, but a clumsy one. To use it, you needed a trained operator who knew Morse code. You needed access to the line. And you paid by the word.

So messages were short. Compressed. Stripped of everything but the bare signal. Arrived safely. Send money. Mother ill. There was no room for warmth, for nuance, for the small human texture that tells you who is really on the other end. The technology connected us and dehumanized us in the same stroke.

THE LINE

The Telephone Was Richer, and Costlier

The telephone gave us back the voice. Suddenly you could hear the person, the catch in their throat, the laugh, the hesitation. It was a leap forward in richness.

But it was still expensive, and the price shaped the behavior. Anyone old enough remembers waiting until after eleven at night to make a long-distance call, when the rates finally dropped. We rationed conversation by the minute. We let the meter decide how human we could afford to be.

THE INBOX

Email Was Free, and Hollow

Then we taught computers to carry our messages for us, and the price collapsed. Email was essentially free. We could send a thousand messages for the cost of zero.

And something was lost. Bill Gates is often credited with the observation that email is a great way to share information but not always a great way to communicate. He was right. We gained infinite reach and gave up the richness. We could transmit data perfectly and connect terribly.

THE SCREEN

Video Brought the Face Back

In 2020, almost overnight, the world moved onto Zoom and FaceTime. Near-free, face-to-face communication at any distance. We got the voice back, and the face with it. The richness returned, and the price kept falling toward nothing.

And now, in 2026, the wire has thinned to almost nothing at all. We do not just talk to each other through machines. We talk to the machines. We describe what we want in plain language and watch software build itself. The barrier between human intention and machine action is dissolving in real time.

THE PATTERN

We Were Always Headed Here

Step back and look at the whole arc. Morse code to the telephone to email to video to talking out loud to a machine that understands you. Every step did two things: it made the wire cheaper, and it tried to give back the human richness the previous step had stripped away.

We should not be surprised by where this is going. We imagined it long ago. No one on the bridge of the Starship Enterprise sat hunched over a keyboard, typing. They spoke. They asked. They conversed. We always knew, somewhere, that the future of communicating with our tools was to simply talk.



***One day, typing as a skill will
seem as quaint as knowing
Morse code.***

Think about that. For a brief, strange window of human history, we trained ourselves to move our fingers in a precise pattern to make a machine understand us. We called it a skill. We taught it in schools. And it is ending. The same way Morse code ended. One day, the idea that you had to type to be understood by a computer will sound as archaic

as tapping out dots and dashes on a brass key.

Because we are not, and never were, typing creatures. We are talking creatures. We have always talked to connect. The two-hundred-year detour through wires and keyboards was just that, a detour. And it is ending.

Which raises an uncomfortable question for anyone building a business right now: what if you are optimizing for the detour, just as it ends?

CHAPTER TWO

EFFICIENT BUT INEFFECTIVE

Most business owners today are doing something that feels smart and is quietly self-defeating. They are optimizing for the past.

They are pouring their energy, their budgets, and their best people into automating transactions and building funnels, trying to connect with human beings at scale by removing the humans from the process. They are getting more efficient by the month. And they are getting less effective at an even faster pace.

THE TELL

When the Trick Breaks

You know the moment the machine reveals itself. The automated email that opens with Hi {FirstName}. The message that calls you by the wrong name, or no name, or your company's name as if it were yours.

In that instant, you learn the truth: this was never a conversation. It was a computer trick. Someone built a sequence designed to feel personal at scale, and for a moment it almost worked, until the seam showed. And once you see the seam, you cannot unsee it. Every message from that sender is now suspect.

This is the hidden cost of the efficiency game. Each automated touch that gets exposed does not just fail to build trust. It actively destroys it.

THE MATH

A Game That Insults Everyone

The logic of the funnel is a numbers game. Target a million people to capture a thousand leads in the hope of closing a single client. Then optimize the conversion rate by a fraction of a percent and call it growth.

I reject that model. Not only because it is inefficient, though it is. I reject it because it is inhumane, and it is inhumane in both directions.

It is inhumane to the million who are treated as raw material to be processed, interrupted, and discarded. And it is inhumane to you, the business owner, who is reduced to a spreadsheet of conversion rates, grinding through rejection at industrial scale, wondering why work that is going so well by the numbers feels so empty.

You were never one funnel away. You were one conversation away.

THE EVIDENCE

Look at Your Own Life

Here is the test I keep coming back to. Look at the best things in your life and ask how they actually arrived.

I did not meet Karen, my wife, through optimized Facebook ads and the perfect funnel. We met through a conversation and an introduction. A human being who knew us both thought we should

know each other.

I did not win my best clients through spammy cold outreach and scraped databases. The clients I am proudest of came from personal referrals and word of mouth, someone who trusted me telling someone they trusted.

I did not find my best business partners through a paid campaign. I found them through introductions and conversations, the slow, compounding work of one good relationship leading to the next.

None of it came from a funnel. All of it came from conversation. And I do not think I am unusual. I think if you run the same audit on your own life, you will find the same answer. The things that mattered most were never automated. They were never one funnel away. They were one conversation away.

The funnel was not the future. It was a phase, a brief stretch when the wire was cheap enough to spam, but the machines were not yet good enough to be caught. That stretch is closing fast. What comes next rewards exactly what the funnel could never deliver: Trust.

CHAPTER THREE

TRUST LIVES IN THE CONVERSATION

If the funnel is fading fast, the obvious question is: what replaces it?

The answer is the thing the funnel was always a poor substitute for. Trust. And trust, real trust, the kind that makes someone choose you, refer you, and stay with you, is built in conversation. It always has been. We simply lost sight of it while the wires were in the way.

THE SOURCE

What Trust Is Actually Made Of

People do not come to trust you because you have reached out to them often enough. They come to trust you when they get a sense of your heart. Your point of view. The problem you have chosen to solve and why it matters to you. Whether you are a missionary or a mercenary. In a word, authentic.

None of that survives compression into a funnel. You cannot automate a point of view. You cannot sequence sincerity. These things are revealed, in real time, in the give and take of an actual exchange, where you cannot fully script what happens next. That is what a conversation is. And it is why conversation builds trust in a way that funnels never can.

THE INTERROGATOR

Listen to How They Say It

Someone who spent years in national security work once explained to me how they evaluated whether a person was telling the truth. I expected him to talk about the words, the story, the facts that did or did not line up.

He barely mentioned the words. The transcript, he said, is just the script. Anyone can write a script. It's largely useless. What he watched was the body language, and above all, what he listened for was the voice. The confidence or the lack of it. The inflection. The hesitation in the wrong place. Not what they were saying, he told me, but how they were saying it.

That has stayed with me, because it names something we all know in our bones. The truth of a person lives in how they say a thing, not just in what they say. The meaning is in the music, not only the lyrics. And the music only exists in a real conversation.



***The transcript is just the script.
The truth is in how they say it.***

THE OBJECTION

But Won't AI Just Fake That Too?

It is fair to ask. If machines are getting better at sounding human, won't they eventually fake the conversation, the voice, the warmth, and erase the advantage?

Notice what the machines are doing, and why. The frontier of AI is racing toward voice and conversation, becoming multimodal as fast as it can. That is not an accident. The machines are chasing voice precisely because that is where the richness and the trust live. They are validating the thesis of this book, not refuting it. The most valuable

form of communication is the human conversation, and even the machines know it.

But here is the part that matters. As more of what we read, see, and hear turns out to be synthetic, the value of the verifiably human goes up, not down. When anything can be faked, proof of the real becomes the scarcest asset there is. The answer to a flood of synthetic content is not to out-automate it. It is to be unmistakably, verifiably human, in conversation, on the record, where people can hear your heart and not just your script.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROOF IS ALREADY HERE

If conversation is becoming the unit of trust, you would expect to see the evidence already, in the places where the stakes are highest and the feedback is fastest. You do.

THE ELECTION

When Conversation Beat Broadcast

Consider the 2024 United States presidential election. Set the politics completely aside. What is striking, looking back, is not who won. It is what people could not stop talking about afterward.

It was not the television ads. It was not the traditional press coverage or the polished broadcast appearances. The story that dominated the post-election conversation was the long-form podcast interviews, hours-long, unscripted, human conversations, and the reach they generated.

One approach leaned on the old playbook: legacy media, controlled messaging, broadcast at the audience. The other leaned into long, open conversations on shows where the audience had already gathered to listen. The conversational bet reached people the broadcasts could not, and it shaped the outcome in ways almost no one had priced in beforehand. It built trust.

If conversation can move an electorate of that size, against that much money spent on broadcast, it can certainly move the handful of right-fit clients, the super consumers your business actually needs.

THE INTERNET

Where the Humans Still Are

Now look at the open web. By some estimates, more than half of all content on the internet is now generated by artificial intelligence, and every projection has that number climbing. Text, images, video, entire articles and profiles, synthesized at a scale no human effort could match.

In that environment, ask yourself where the genuinely human content still reliably lives. One answer keeps coming back: podcasts. Two people, talking, thinking out loud, in real time, where the seams of automation cannot easily hide. It is among the last large, thriving formats that is still unmistakably humans talking to humans.

That is not a small thing, and the machines have noticed. Even the large language models, when they look for trustworthy signal about a person or an idea, weight this kind of human conversation heavily, because it is so much harder to manufacture at scale. The trust we feel listening to a real conversation is the same trust the systems are learning to look for.

As the internet fills with the synthetic, the human conversation becomes priceless.

THE CHANNEL

The Conversation That Scales

So we arrive at the practical question. If trust is built in conversation, and conversation is becoming the scarcest and most valuable thing online, how do you have those conversations with enough of the right people to grow a business?

You cannot personally sit down with every ideal client, one coffee at a time. That does not scale, and you have a business to run. But there is one format that lets you have a real, human, unscripted conversation and reach thousands of the right listeners at once, on a stage your prospects respect, one that has already built, with an audience that chose to be there.

It is the podcast interview. Not as a megaphone to shout through, but as a room to be genuinely human in. A real conversation, with a trusted host, heard by the people most likely to need what you do, where they can hear your heart and decide for themselves whether to trust you. A magnet to attract the right people and repel the others.

This is not a coincidence, and it is not a fad. It is the oldest form of trust building, the human conversation, finally meeting a format that lets it scale. That is why podcast interviews have exploded as a way to build a business. They are the funnel's opposite, and they are winning for exactly that reason.

CONCLUSION

ONE CONVERSATION AWAY

For two hundred years, we put a machine between ourselves and the people we wanted to reach. The machine was expensive, and it cost us something human, and we spent two centuries trying to win back what each new machine took away.

Now the machine is nearly free, and nearly invisible, and the strange gift hidden inside that fact is this: the wire is finally getting out of the way. We are returning to where we started, and where we were always headed. To conversation. To voice. To one human being, talking to another, building the kind of trust that no funnel ever could.

The business owners who see this will stop doubling down investing in automating the past. They will stop playing the numbers game that insults the million to maybe reach the few. They will reorient around the thing that actually moves people, the thing that brought every good client, partner, and relationship into their life in the first place.

They will have the conversation.



***You were never one funnel away
from the business you want.
You were one conversation
away.***

Your ideal client is out there right now, listening. Not to your ads. Not to your scheduled posts. Not to your predetermined sequences. They are listening to a conversation, leaning in, deciding who is worth their trust.

Make sure it is your voice they hear. Make sure they hear your heart, your unique point of view, the problem you were put here to solve. Not your script. You.

Because in a world drowning in the synthetic, the most powerful, most human, most valuable thing you can do is also the simplest.

Have the conversation.

Tom Schwab

YOUR NEXT STEP

ONE CONVERSATION AWAY

*If this resonated, do not let it end as a nice idea you read once.
Start the conversation.*

MORE MINI-BOOKS & INTERVIEWS

Each month, I share my latest thinking, and you can hear me discuss these ideas across a range of interviews. New every month.

IAmTomSchwab.com/books



SCAN FOR BOOKS

LISTEN TO THE PODCAST

Each week, I host an amazing guest on the Podcast Interview Marketing Show, thought leaders who challenge how I see the world. If you haven't changed your mind lately, how do you know you still have one?

PodcastInterviewMarketing.com



SCAN TO LISTEN

BOOK A DISCOVERY CALL

Ready to stop optimizing the funnel and start the conversation that actually grows your business? Let's talk, human to human.

interviewvalet.com/dccal



SCAN TO BOOK

ABOUT ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Schwab has been called the Godfather of Podcast Interview Marketing. As the founder and Chief Evangelist Officer of Interview Valet, the first and longest-running podcast interview marketing agency, he has helped hundreds of entrepreneurs, authors, and thought leaders build trust and grow their businesses through real conversations on the right shows.

Before building Interview Valet, Tom ran nuclear power plants on U.S. Navy aircraft carriers. That experience, where precision, preparation, and clear communication were not optional, shaped everything he built afterward.

Tom is the author of Podcast Guest Profits and a sought-after speaker on category design, trust-based selling, and modern go-to-market strategy. He is a member of Entrepreneurs' Organization and coaches early-stage entrepreneurs through EO Accelerator.

In September 2024, Tom and his wife Karen walked the Camino de Santiago. He describes it as one of the most clarifying experiences of his life. Five hundred miles of conversation, with others and with himself, and almost no funnels in sight.

He lives in Lawton, Michigan.