

15 Ways to Show Value Without Giving Secrets Away

Strategic Communication

SCALE | **AI**

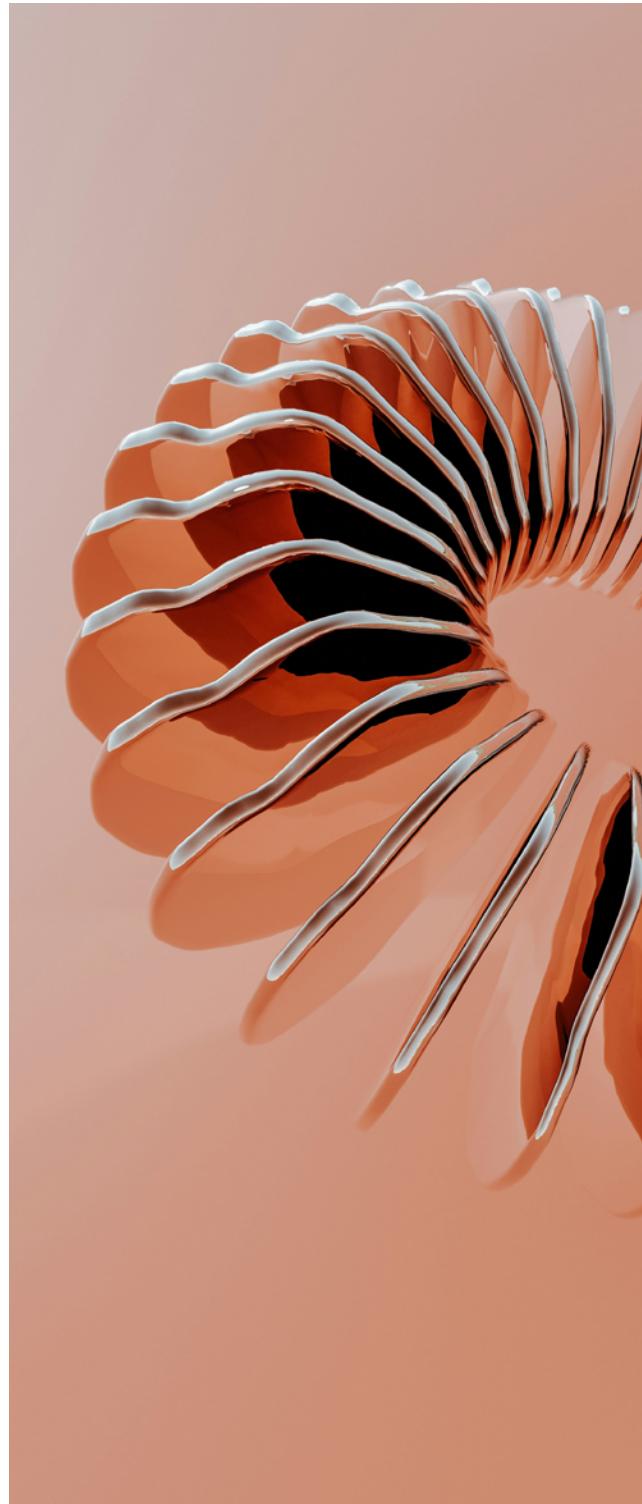
Two Kinds of AI Entrepreneurs

Marketing and selling are essential for any startup - whether it's pitching to clients, investors, or partners. Communicating effectively about your company is crucial to growth and success. But there's a line to walk between oversharing and holding too much back. For most entrepreneurs, it's a difficult balance to master.

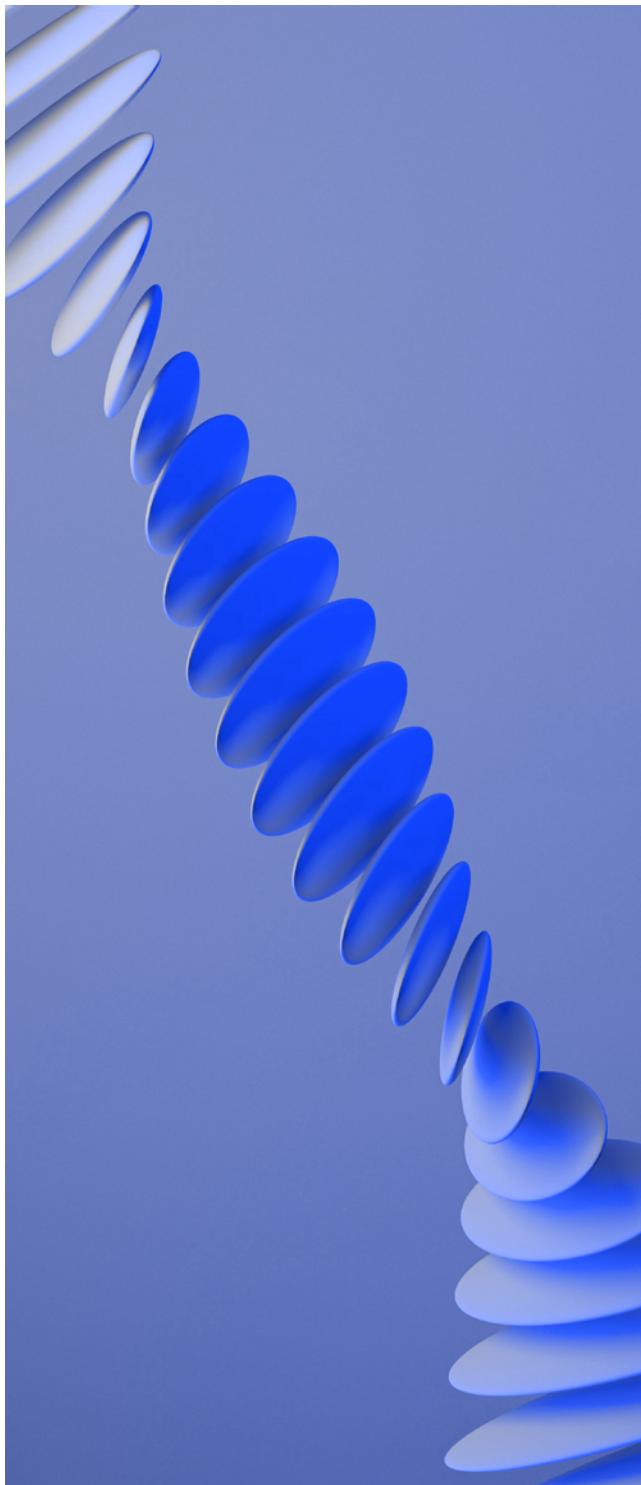
Many find it *hard* to resist explaining how their product works. Often, it's simply a matter of comfort: they know the technology inside out, but are less practiced at marketing and selling. For others, it stems from a deep sense of accomplishment and a natural desire for others to appreciate their work. Yet, most audiences aren't looking for a technical exposé.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are entrepreneurs who hold back too tightly, fearful that their ideas may be stolen. As a result, they also fail to make the desired impact.

Both instincts are natural, but neither serves your startup well. But recognizing these tendencies allows you to channel your enthusiasm into communication that will resonate with your audience. Preparation and the right habits can help you speak confidently and openly about your business, while still protecting what matters.



Why Secrets Matter to AI Ventures



In most industries, trade secrets only play a supporting role. Patents take the lead because the core IP is visible in the physical product. Secrets protect only the “extras,” like processes or methods.

AI flips that around. Here, **your secret sauce is the product**. Models, data, methods, and training approaches are hidden by design - and that puts protecting these secrets at the center of your strategy.

Legal protections for trade secrets are weaker than for patents, which means more responsibility falls on you to handle them carefully. Simply telling yourself that something is a “secret” isn’t enough.

Because the biggest threat to your secrets isn’t theft, hacking, or espionage - it’s the unintentional disclosures that you make through everyday conversations, pitch decks, and enthusiasm. **More secrets are given away through carelessness than are ever stolen.**

Protecting them requires more than good intentions. It takes preparation, discipline, and a culture of **strategic communication**. But when you develop those habits, you also free yourself to speak more persuasively and confidently - without revealing what truly matters.

This guide will show you how.

The Strengths (and Weaknesses) of Legal Protection

NDAs

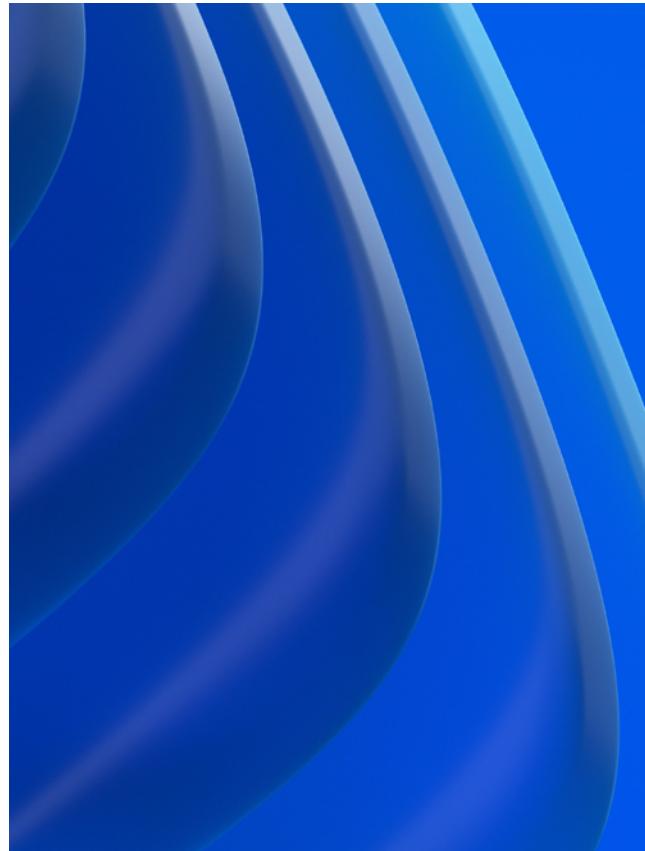
NDAs are essential tools. They enable meaningful conversations, preserve legal options (for example, before patent filings), and also serve as important **behavioural reminders** to handle information carefully.

But NDAs can also create a false sense of security – the feeling that disclosure is now completely risk-free. So, once the NDA is in place, many entrepreneurs start sharing without any further thought.

But instead, think of NDAs like a life jacket: it's useful, but it doesn't protect you from every danger - like cold water or waterfalls. Even with your life jacket on, you still need to be careful.

The same is true of NDAs - they don't protect against everything. They can be breached, they are difficult to enforce in court, and once a secret is exposed, it's gone for good. No court can make that information become secret again.

So while NDAs are necessary, think of them as a backstop, not your first line of defense. The **real protection comes from operational discipline** - the habits and controls that reduce *unnecessary disclosure* in the first place.



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What Should You Be Protecting?

Most startups struggle to answer this - or they just say “everything.” But you can’t protect everything, nor should you. **Effective protection begins with clarity.**

Start by identifying what truly differentiates your business: proprietary algorithms, data sets, code, prompt strategies, or unique methods that drive value.

ASK YOURSELF:

- What differentiates us, from a client’s perspective?
- What would harm us most if disclosed?
- What would someone need to replicate our approach?
- How do we differ from competitors?

Once identified, classify this information. For instance:

- **Red:** Never shared outside the company, even under NDA.
- **Yellow:** Shared under NDA with select parties.
- **Green:** Public or low-risk information, with no controls.

Protection begins by **knowing what not to say.** From there, you can plan how to communicate intelligently and strategically, without exposing what’s core.

Who Poses Risk?

Most entrepreneurs would instinctively say “competitors.” But while that’s true, most startups don’t realize who their competitors - or potential competitors - actually are. **Those you may think of as friends pose more risk than you realize.**

Clients, vendors, and collaborators may seem like ‘friends’, especially when you’re under NDA, so you let your guard down. But clients with too much information may decide to build your solution themselves. Vendors may repurpose ideas or data. Partners may move forward without you.

In fact, most trade secret disputes actually occur between parties that once trusted each other. Recognizing that today’s partner could be tomorrow’s competitor is key to managing your biggest risk.

But the solution isn’t silence.
It’s talking smarter.

The Need to Know

Talking smarter starts with two habits:

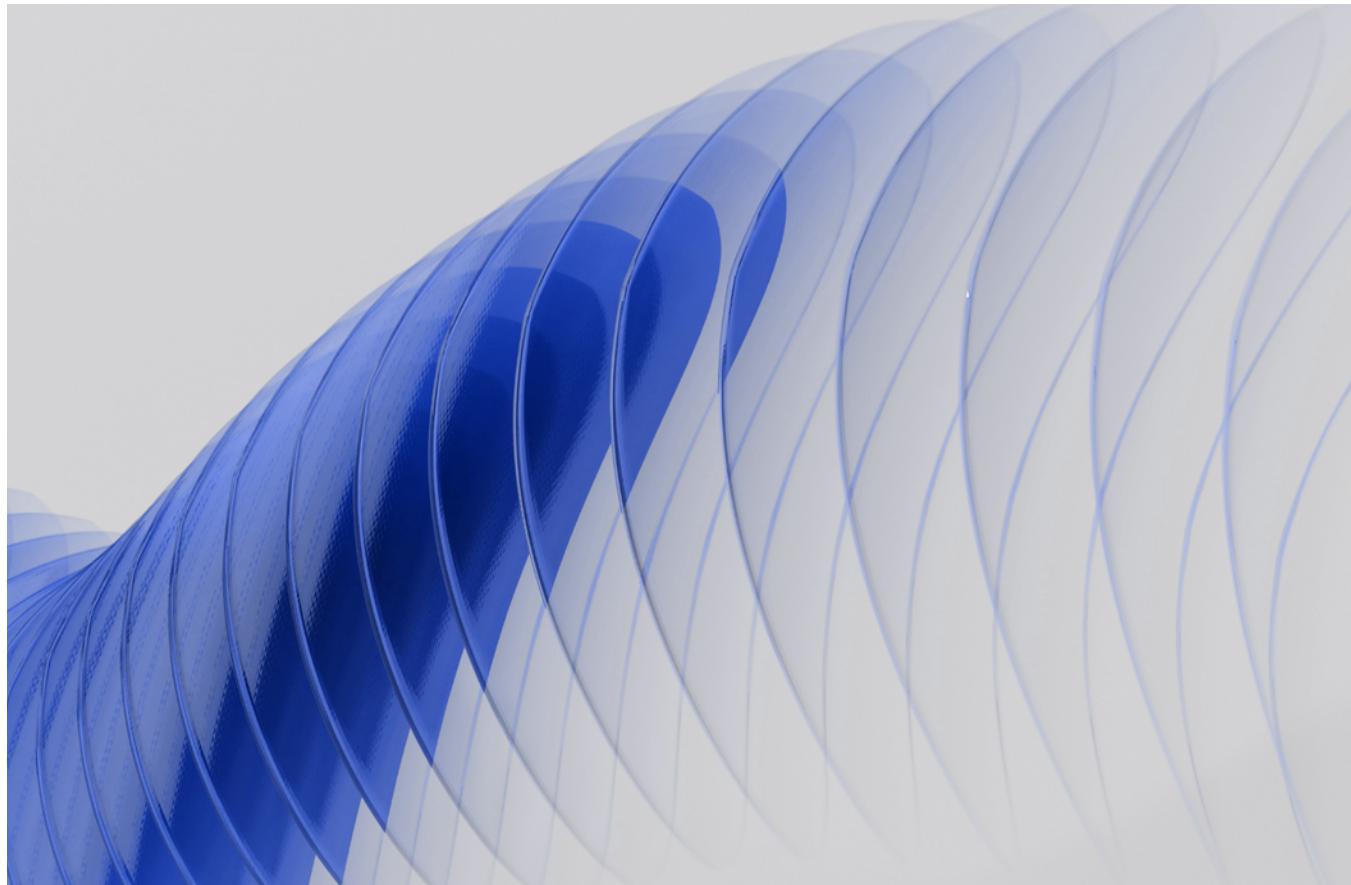
1. Practicing **need-to-know** - limiting conversations to what's relevant.
2. Developing strategies for **talking about your secrets** without giving them away.

Need-to-know doesn't mean silence. It means understanding your objective and keeping disclosures aligned with that goal. For example, a potential client doesn't need to know how your product works; they need to know **why it works for them** - what it does, how it meets their needs, and what results it delivers.

Even under NDA, discipline matters. Many companies sign NDAs, then overshare to "sell" through technical detail rather than highlighting value. But if the deal falls through, the other party may be left with enough to replicate the idea. And that's not what you wanted.

Need-to-know isn't paranoia - it's precision. Ask yourself, **What does this audience need to know to make a decision?** The first and best strategy for protecting your secrets is to avoid disclosing them when you don't have to.

In AI, need-to-know must be core to your operating system.

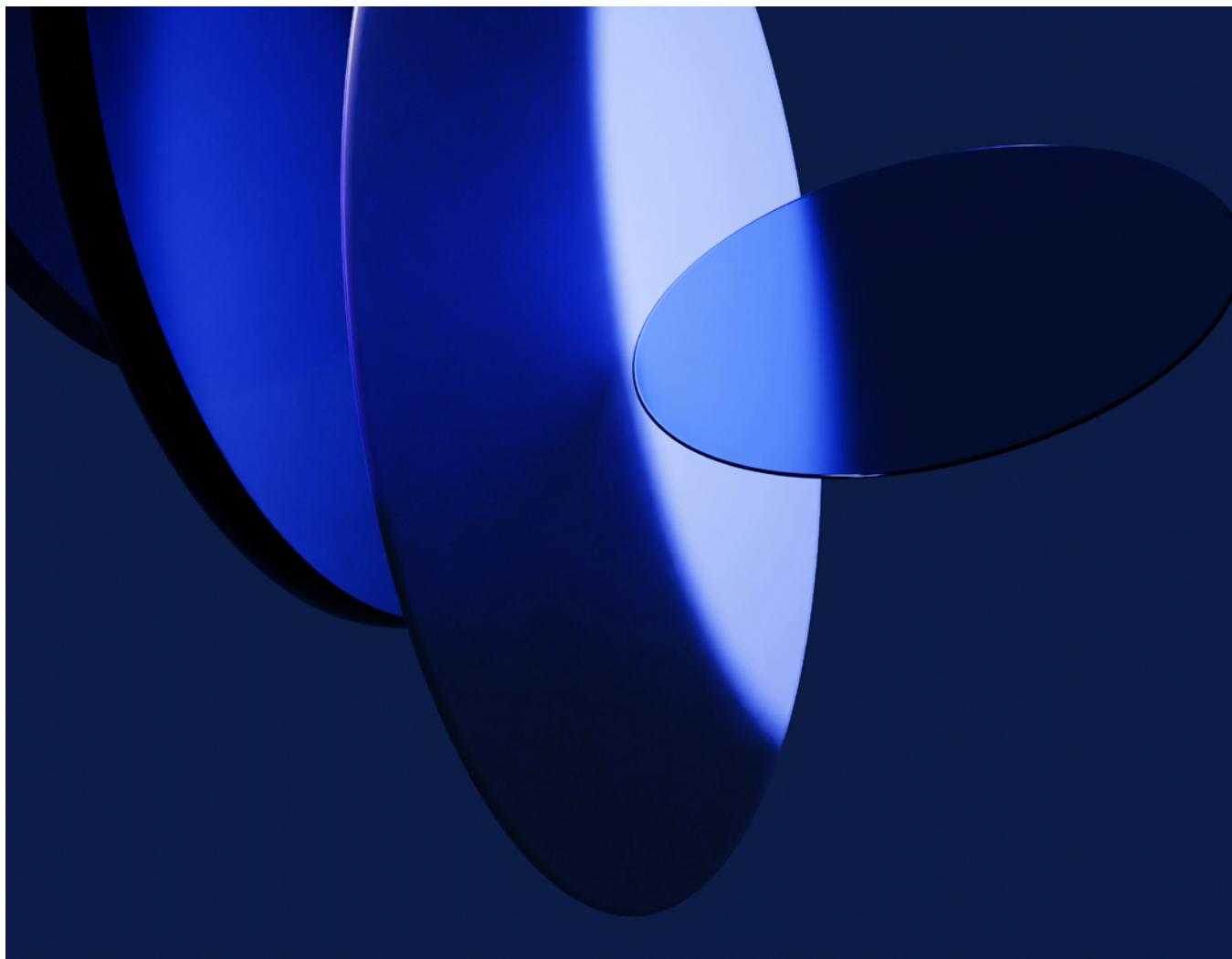


15 Habits to Show Value Without Giving Secrets Away

Even with good need-to-know discipline, situations arise where secret technical information might need to be discussed. Silence is not an option, but indiscretion could be fatal. The key is balance.

So, how can you talk about your AI in a way that inspires trust, without revealing your crown jewels?

Building habits of **strategic communication** is the answer. By following three principles and fifteen habits, you can tell a compelling story while also safeguarding your secrets.



Principle 1: Focus on What They Care About

The first principle of strategic communication is to **focus on what your audience cares about** - their problems, outcomes, and benefits - not your technical details. When you shift the spotlight from how you work to what results you deliver, you **strengthen your message and protect sensitive details**.

Here are five habits to help you practice this principle:

01. THINK CUSTOMER-FIRST

Why: Your audience cares about outcomes, not mechanics. Framing every conversation around business impact makes your message persuasive and keeps your technology strategically in the background.

Example: “We reduce false positives by 40%, saving your analysts several hours a week” instead of revealing inner workings.



02. SHARE USE CASES AND SUCCESS STORIES

Why: Real stories prove value without exposing your methods.

Example: “With Client A, we cut report generation from a week to a day - a fivefold improvement” instead of explaining how it works.

03. DEMONSTRATE RESULTS, NOT INNER WORKINGS

Why: Results persuade; explanations expose. Showing measurable impact makes your case without revealing your approach.

Example 1 - Output-focused presentations: Highlight what your product achieves - accuracy gains, cost reductions, time saved - through dashboards or visuals, instead of live systems or code.

Example 2 - Abstracted or anonymized demonstrations: Present results using anonymized or synthetic data to show impact, instead of revealing sensitive datasets.

04. TEACH YOUR AUDIENCE HOW TO EVALUATE VALUE

Why: Redirect curiosity from how you work to *what success looks like*.

Example: Encourage questions like “How do you measure accuracy or drift?” instead of “What algorithm do you use?”

05. USE PROXIES AND ANONYMIZED REFERENCES

Why: Protect clients and data by generalizing names and details.

Example: “A major client saw a 30% uplift” instead of naming the client.

Principle 2: Show Value, Not the Recipe

The second principle of strategic communication is to demonstrate capability strategically, by controlling what you reveal and how. Abstraction, analogy, and controlled environments let you tell a compelling story while keeping your “black box” closed.

06. USE ANALOGIES AND GENERIC PHRASING

Why: Translating technical ideas into familiar language helps your audience understand your value without exposing proprietary details.

Example: “It’s like a personal assistant for compliance teams,” instead of listing architectures or datasets.

07. CONTROLLED DEMONSTRATIONS

Why: By designing controlled environments and limiting access, you can show capability without exposing your secrets.

Example 1 - Sandboxed demo environments: Use preloaded, closed systems that block access to your source code or training data.

Example 2 - Synthetic or sample data environments:

Build demo instances with anonymized or fabricated data, so real data stays protected.

Example 3 - Output-only APIs: Allow evaluation of performance without exposing model internals.

Example 4 - Watermarked or access-limited sessions: Use dynamic watermarks and disable downloads or recordings.

08. REDACTED OR ABSTRACTED VISUALS

Why: Diagrams can show data flow and logic without disclosing implementation details.

Example: Use a block diagram like “Data → Model → Insight” and omit parameters or training details.

Principle 3: Set Boundaries

The third principle of strategic communication is to set clear limits and enforce boundaries. Setting boundaries isn’t defensive or a sign of weakness - instead, it signals professionalism.

The following habits help you decide what to say, when to say it, and - crucially - how to pause before saying too much.

09. LIMIT THE SCOPE OF DISCUSSION

Why: Staying focused reduces risk. Redirect out-of-scope questions to future, NDA-protected conversations.

Example: “That’s a great technical question, but it’s out-of-scope for today’s discussion. I’ll follow up once we’re under NDA.”

10. BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT BOUNDARIES

Why: Setting expectations early builds trust.

Example: “We’ll cover product fit and outcomes today; system internals are for a separate session.”

11. SELECTIVE DISCLOSURE

Why: A secret is only powerful when it's whole. Avoid giving any single party the full picture.

Example 1: When discussing close to sensitive details, provide only the relevant aspects for that discussion, instead of disclosing the entire set.

Example 2: When outsourcing sensitive work, split it between two vendors so neither holds the complete secret.

12. PROGRESSIVE DISCLOSURE

Why: Different audiences require different detail. Reveal gradually, based on stage, context, and trust.

Example 1 - Stage-based sharing: Marketing, sales, diligence, contracting, integration - each has its own threshold.

Example 2 - Role-based decks: Prepare separate materials for executives and engineers.

Example 3 - Dual documentation: Keep a broad “selling deck” and a sanitized “diligence deck” for use under NDA.

13. DEFLECT AND REFRAME SENSITIVE QUESTIONS

Why: Preparation helps you manage risky discussions without losing momentum.

Example 1 - Pause-and-respond: “Let me double-check before I comment on that.”

Example 2 - Offer alternatives: “We can’t share that detail non-confidentially, but under NDA we can provide a summary.”

Example 3 - Escalate when necessary: Move sensitive topics offline or to later stages.

14. STRATEGIC SUMMARIES

Why: Summaries can provide high-level answers without diving into details.

Example: “We use a hybrid of zero-shot and chain-of-thought prompt strategies”, instead of providing all of the details of the strategy.

15. BE WARY, BUT NOT FEARFUL

Why: You can’t build relationships without sharing. Sometimes you’ll need to make tough judgment calls on the fly. But preparation builds confidence to communicate openly - and wisely - while still making solid strategic decisions.

Finally, it’s important to understand that ‘perfection’ isn’t required. Simply by striving to follow these habits, you’ll learn to communicate more powerfully, with both authenticity and control.



Creating a “Non-con” Pitch Deck

You may sometimes face the prospect of pitching investors who won’t sign an NDA. This can feel uncomfortable, but it can also be an advantage because it forces you to practice disciplined disclosure.

A great pitch deck shouldn’t contain secrets or confidential information in the first place. Its job is to open doors, intrigue, and earn a meeting - not to explain every nuance. Legal steps like NDAs add friction that slows the door-opening process.

Enter the non-confidential pitch deck, or “non-con” deck. It is designed to communicate **why** your company is awesome - not **how** the magic happens. It tells a story about the problem, the solution, and the opportunity, without revealing the recipe. Investors don’t need to know how it all works - and typically don’t want to, anyway.

A non-con pitch deck has all sensitive details removed - the stuff you want to protect is gone. You may even want to omit ideas around pricing, cost, or monetization until deeper in the discussion cycle.

Instead, focus on differentiation and defensibility - what is hard to replicate (e.g., data sources, network effects, distribution, scale) - rather than on implementation details.



What to Leave Out of a Non-Con Deck:

1. **Technical inner workings:** Don’t make it easy to reverse-engineer. Use analogies and high-level framing.
2. **Model architecture, data sources, or algorithms:** Use general terms or internal project names.
3. **Anything you consider a secret:** If you’d hesitate to say it publicly, leave it out.
4. **Patent pipeline:** Wait until filings are complete.
5. **Unnecessary technical detail:** Avoid busy slides so investors aren’t tempted to probe every element.

Also, recognize that some investors will push for deeper detail even though they won’t sign an NDA, so prepare a plan: use analogies and other habits discussed in this guide to avoid details, or defer until an NDA is in place.

Then, consider how you’ll share your deck. Hosting decks online, instead of emailing copies, discourages casual sharing, may give insight into who’s engaging, and provides an opportunity to make updates.

A non-con deck **forces you to focus on the story, not the secret.** It’s another habit of disciplined disclosure that lets you pitch more freely and confidently.

Building a Culture of Protection

Protecting secrets isn't a single act - it's a culture. Your true protection lies in your people, and the habits for strategic communication that your team prepares and practices. Every team member must understand what's confidential, how to speak about it, and what to withhold.

Ensure clarity around your "red zone" information that must never be disclosed. Encourage your team to pause and reflect before responding to probing questions. Rehearse pitches internally; have colleagues try to extract information to test your readiness.

This preparation strengthens both protection and professionalism. Over time, it becomes cultural: communication that's open, targeted, and intentional.



The Discipline of Secret Protection

Learning to master these habits is both science and art.

The “science” is in the **preparation**: knowing what needs to stay secret and preparing to speak without them. The “art” lies in **finding the right balance** for the situation: weighing the value of disclosure against the risk, so you can communicate fluidly with authenticity, clarity, and enthusiasm.

All startups thrive when they (1) know what they’re protecting, (2) communicate strategically, and (3) stay disciplined every day. That means, every entrepreneur should ask: *What am I doing today to protect what makes us unique?*

Because in the end, your secrets are only as strong as your discipline.

About the Author

Todd Bailey, Chief Intellectual Property Officer and General Counsel at SCALE AI, leverages extensive expertise in business, law, and engineering to help Canadian SMEs adopt a practical approach to “IP thinking” in the field of artificial intelligence. He encourages leaders to seamlessly integrate IP strategies into both their day-to-day operations and long-term business planning.

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