

UNITED WISDOM

Commercial value and an honest promise to the customer

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *The foundation of justice, moreover, is good faith—that is, truth and fidelity to promises and agreements.*

Cicero, De Officiis, I.23. Translation by Walter Miller (1913). Text.

What this article is about

Imagine a small workshop selling tables. A customer asks whether a table will last twenty years. The owner knows how to select timber, join parts and repair defects, but cannot know the humidity in a future home or how the object will be treated. A confident answer is tempting: wages, rent and the next order depend on this sale. This is where the question of a promise begins. How can a seller communicate real value without claiming control over an outcome that does not yet exist? This article examines commercial honesty through the offer, its evidence, its conditions and the responsibility that continues after payment. Philosophical arguments help us recognise the customer as a participant in the decision. A specific advertising standard illustrates how factual claims can be bounded. The aim is to clarify what should remain true after the presentation ends and the buyer starts using the purchase.

I. Value begins with somebody else's task

Commercial value becomes clearer when we name a change in the customer's life. The product alone does not explain why this person needs it. A table may provide space for family meals, withstand daily work or fit into a small room. The same object serves different purposes and sometimes misses the purpose entirely. The workshop owner in our hypothetical example therefore asks about the room, daily habits and family size. These details matter because they determine whether the offer fits. They are not a performance of attentiveness. If the buyer needs a folding table, an exceptionally beautiful heavy table does not become suitable simply because it is beautiful.

It is tempting to describe value in the language the maker uses to explain their own work. Hand finishing, unusual timber and complex joints may genuinely matter. Yet the customer needs to understand what they change: comfort, repairability, appearance or the waiting time. Otherwise the maker is selling recognition of their effort while the customer is looking for a solution. Recognition is welcome, but it cannot replace suitability. A craftsperson can take

pride in a difficult technique and still acknowledge that a simpler model is more practical for a particular kitchen. Professional judgement then means relating quality to its use, rather than only to the difficulty of producing it.

In Book V of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle considers exchange between people with different occupations and connects exchange with need. His account of proportion supplies no modern pricing formula, but keeps the parties' different contributions in view. Aristotle, V.5. The following is our editorial question, rather than an ancient sales rule: what particular difference makes this offer useful to the customer? The answer may be modest: the right dimensions, a clear delivery date or a replaceable damaged component. A small, precise benefit can be more intelligible than a general speech about quality because it can be related to the buyer's actual situation.

II. A promise is different from a possibility

An honest offer distinguishes what the seller will do from what may happen in the customer's life. A workshop can commit to making a table of specified dimensions, delivering it within an agreed period and remedying a manufacturing defect. It cannot secure the family's future relationships, even if its advertising shows a warm family evening. A school can provide lessons and feedback; entering a new profession also depends on learning, circumstances and the market. A consultant can offer an analysis without controlling every subsequent decision. These distinctions may be obvious to the provider and remain invisible in the presentation. The test must therefore include the meaning conveyed to the recipient, as well as the seller's intention.

Suppose the workshop's page says that this table will become the centre of a happy life. Imaginative language can be a recognisable advertising genre. But beside it stands a promise of lifelong reliability, while the photograph shows conditions the product cannot withstand. An image and a concrete expectation have become mixed together. The customer may not separate them as the copywriter did. A useful correction is to describe the possibility separately from the commitment. A large table offers room to gather; its ability to withstand daily use is a different question. The desired experience remains the person's possibility, while the specifications and operating conditions become the seller's responsibility to explain.

This distinction does not require sterile language stripped of hope. A seller can communicate taste, beauty and the meaning of their work while remaining precise. An artist may describe a painting's mood without promising an identical emotional response to every buyer. A service can show an example of convenient use while identifying the conditions that make it possible. The issue is control over the outcome: what does our work provide, what requires the customer's participation, and what remains uncertain? Clear boundaries allow the buyer to

choose for their own reason. They do not first have to accept somebody else's story about the person they will become after paying.

III. Silence can also change a decision

Cicero's grain merchant, aware of other ships on their way, raises the boundary between silence and concealment. After presenting competing Stoic answers, Cicero rejects withholding relevant information for one's own gain. This is philosophical reasoning, not current commercial law. De Officiis, III.50–57. Our workshop faces a narrower question: what would a buyer reasonably want to know before agreeing? A table must not stand next to a radiator, or delivery excludes carrying it upstairs. Such information changes use and cost even if the seller has uttered no literally false sentence.

Honesty does not mean uploading every fact about the business into the customer's mind. The buyer need not know the colour of every tool or the entire history of selecting a supplier. Completeness matters in relation to a decision. Information is relevant when it can change the choice, use, cost or understanding of risk. A starting question is whether learning it tomorrow would make the person feel that they had decided from an incomplete picture. This is not a definitive legal test. It helps locate a point where silence convenient to the seller has become part of the sale. Difficult cases need specific professional review rather than a universal moral formula.

In our example, the owner puts limitations where the customer selects a model, rather than hiding them at the end of a long document. They explain the difference between a photograph of a sample and natural variations in timber. The buyer may still prefer another table. This is disappointing for the owner, but it clarifies the offer: the mismatch has been noticed before it becomes a complaint. It does not promise the business greater profit. An open description may genuinely reduce sales. Honesty is tested by the willingness to permit an informed refusal, not only by the hope that transparency will pay. The customer's choice matters when the customer walks away too.

IV. The basis must exist before the promise

A claim about a product needs a basis appropriate to its strength. The US Federal Trade Commission's Policy Statement Regarding Advertising Substantiation requires a reasonable basis for objective advertising claims before dissemination, including the level of evidence the advertising claims to possess. FTC, 1984. This is a US regulatory standard, not universal legal advice. The editorial distinction we use is evidence before words. Intending to test a table later is different from having tested it. One successful order is not an observation of every future item. The maker's confidence matters, but its description must reflect what has actually been checked.

For the workshop, each strong word invites a question about its support. Does sturdy mean that a specified load was tested, that a familiar construction method was used, or simply that the table looks substantial? Does fast mean that production time is known, that a slot is available, or that the owner hopes to work through the night? Does safe refer to a particular material and finish that were assessed, or merely to an absence of complaints? Different grounds can be named honestly without silently promoting their status. A test of one sample should be described as such. A deadline conditional on agreeing dimensions should include that condition.

Precision can be lost as a statement passes between people. The craftsperson says that a joint performed well in earlier orders. A manager calls it time-tested. The page writer turns this into a promise of everlasting service. None may think of themselves as lying: each slightly strengthened what they heard. It helps to keep the literal basis beside the promise and identify who owns the wording. A small business may need only a clear record of what was checked, when, under which conditions and what remains unchecked. This is no bureaucratic certificate of perfection. It makes the original meaning recoverable when an advertising phrase becomes more confident than the work it describes.

V. The customer retains a purpose of their own

The customer need not want the outcome of which the seller is proudest. Kant's example of a lying promise concerns treating another person merely as a means: the recipient cannot consent to the promiser's actual intention. Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals, Section II. This is a moral argument, not customer research. Our example raises the question of informed agreement. If the buyer needs an inexpensive work table, the seller cannot use concern for the family to make a more expensive model appear obligatory. The customer retains their own account of a suitable purchase.

Pressure often sounds caring. A seller says that someone deserves the best, should not economise on loved ones, or must finally invest in themselves. In a friendship these might be

ordinary words; in a sale they can change the basis of the decision. Instead of comparing features and costs, the buyer begins defending their dignity. Refusal can feel like admitting that they do not love their family enough or believe in their future. An honest offer requires no such confession. It permits discussion of budget, preferences and uncertainty without a moral examination. The owner can explain the models and ask what matters. The answer then belongs to the customer, even if the seller judges value differently.

This does not mean that a seller must remain passive or never persuade. Persuasion can supply reasons: demonstrate a surface, explain a repair or compare models under the same load. It becomes more honest when the customer can describe the choice in their own words afterwards. In our scene the buyer says that a simpler table is right because dimensions and the possibility of moving soon matter most. This does not show that the consultation failed. It shows that the seller helped the person see what was relevant to them. Autonomy does not require an absence of influence. It requires accessible reasons and room to refuse without turning refusal into a failure of loyalty to the seller.

VI. A price need not justify an entire life

An honest price calls for an intelligible exchange, not disclosure of every private feeling the seller has. The workshop owner may consider materials, labour, expenses and the survival of the business. The customer may compare quality, convenience, timing and their budget. Their reasons differ, and that is ordinary. Trouble begins when price is defended through guilt: I invested so much, therefore you ought to agree. A business may refuse an unprofitable order, while a person may decline a suitable object at an unsuitable price. Fitness for purpose and affordability should be discussed separately. Otherwise every refusal appears to deny the seller's work, when the buyer may simply have different spending priorities.

A low price is not by itself evidence of respect for the customer. If it is achieved by dropping the promised material, adding hidden charges or accepting work that cannot be performed for the payment, the problem has only been postponed. In our hypothetical order the workshop might offer smaller dimensions, a different finish or a longer schedule. The buyer can then see what saving money changes. An offer to make it cheaper without affecting quality needs an explanation of how. Genuine improvements in organisation are possible; so is moving the cost into a future failure. We need not assume the latter, but should be able to distinguish the possibilities by their content rather than by the attraction of the price.

It also helps to separate the price of an object from a promise of status. An expensive table may be beautiful, rare and carefully made. Its price does not establish that owning it will make someone a more worthy host. People may pay for style and enjoyment; the seller need not belittle that choice. Symbolic value simply should not be presented as an assured personal transformation. In our scene the maker explains the grain and the work involved, then states

the price and terms. The buyer is not made to prove their prosperity. Ordinary commercial clarity becomes possible: this work costs this amount and includes these things; whether it suits your life now is yours to decide.

VII. After payment the promise becomes work

Payment changes the seller's task. Describing value persuasively is no longer enough; the accepted commitment must be performed. The workshop now needs a drawing, purchasing, a schedule and communication with the client. If the promise exists only in the salesperson's memory, the maker can produce an excellent object that is not what was ordered. A sound handover preserves the choice: model, dimensions, material, date, delivery arrangement and significant exclusions. None of this should depend on the charm of the original conversation. The buyer paid for an identifiable exchange, not merely for the hope that the team understood every word alike. A clear record makes discrepancies discussable without a contest of memories.

In our hypothetical example, timber delivery is delayed. The owner can wait until missing the deadline is certain, or communicate the risk earlier. Early communication is awkward: the buyer may ask questions, request an alternative or seek cancellation under the agreed terms. Yet the customer is also planning a life. Perhaps the table is needed for a move, and a week means more than a minor schedule change. Honesty during fulfilment includes recognising this dependence. The message should identify what is known, what is unknown and when the next update will come. Everything is under control is unhelpful when that control consists only of waiting for a supplier who is outside the workshop's control.

Responsibility still has limits. The seller need not fulfil every new request merely because the customer is unhappy. If the buyer changes the room after dimensions were agreed, a revised agreement is needed. The change should be discussed without automatically blaming the other side for every inconvenience. What was promised, what changed, and which options remain? Each option can have a stated cost and time frame before the person decides. This clarity protects both parties. It lets the maker decline an impossible additional commitment without disappearing into cold silence. Reliability does not mean endless concession. It means maintaining an intelligible connection between words, conditions and action.

VIII. An error needs a remedy, not another story

A failure in the work and a failure in the promise need different remedies. A table may be damaged in transport, requiring action on that item. But if every buyer was promised a property the model does not have, replacing one table does not correct the offer. The next customer will encounter the same phrase and decide on the same basis. The owner should therefore review both the latest complaint and the description that preceded it. A single case does not prove a systemic problem. It raises a question about recurrence: is there something in the process or wording that could affect other orders? Facts, rather than injured pride, are needed to answer.

In our example, the photograph turns out to show a different surface treatment. The seller first wants to say that the customer took the image too literally. Yet the image was part of the offer. A more useful response acknowledges the discrepancy, clarifies available remedies and updates the description for future orders. There is no need to promise an immediate outcome not yet agreed with the workshop. The seller can say what happened, what is offered now and when the remaining questions will be answered. Acknowledging an error does not concede every alleged liability; contractual disputes require separate assessment. The immediate ethical task is to stop using the original ambiguity as a way to avoid discussion.

The hardest moment may be when a truthful correction makes earlier sales uncomfortable. The owner sees that precise wording is weaker than the previous promise and fears losing appeal. A return to accuracy should not be described as a decline in quality. The product may remain good; the strength of the language around it has changed. Stability during ordinary use is a worthwhile property even if any load can no longer be promised. Real benefits can be explained without defending an old exaggeration. Correction gives the work a manageable task again: make a useful object, rather than continually justify an image of perfection that nobody can deliver under every condition and for every duration.

Sometimes an internal habit also needs correction. If a manager is recognised only for the number of sales while makers carry every consequence, exaggeration becomes conveniently divided: one person sees success, another pays its cost. This is a hypothetical organisational scene, not a proven law of every company. A business can still examine it. Who may change a promise? Who receives complaints? Can the maker stop a sale with an impossible deadline? Such questions can make honesty part of ordinary work rather than an individual employee's heroic exception. Otherwise a conscientious person must repeatedly choose between accuracy and the form of success their own organisation rewards.

There is a corresponding check after a successful order. If the customer is pleased, ask what proved useful and matched their expectations. Perhaps they value replacing a leg themselves, although the workshop previously emphasised rare timber. This answer does not show that every buyer wants the same thing. It identifies a particular use that can be described more

accurately as an example. Permission to show a testimonial does not turn an individual experience into a general guarantee either. That person achieved a good result under their conditions; the next buyer has different conditions. A successful case is better preserved with its circumstances than converted into a promise of success for everyone. Honesty matters in handling success as well as remedying failure.

IX. A good offer permits boundaries

Commercial value does not require promising the maximum imaginable outcome. Sometimes the strongest offer is narrower than the seller's imagination: this table suits daily work in a dry room; these lessons introduce a particular technique; this consultation helps compare specified options. There is less general excitement and more to decide about. Such wording does not guarantee business success; competition, costs and circumstances remain. It does make clear what the enterprise expects to be paid for. Without that clarity, growth can mean more and more people offered an increasingly uncertain result. A larger number of orders does not repair the substance of the original promise.

Return to the workshop owner and the question about twenty years. The answer can name the material, the joint, the care instructions and the responsibility assumed for manufacture, while explaining that every possible condition over twenty years cannot be promised. The owner can show the object, explain maintenance and describe available repairs. This offers no instant feeling of omnipotence, but it gives the customer reasons to decide. A required long-term guarantee remains a separate question needing specific terms. If a well-made item with intelligible service is enough, the purchase may go ahead. The seller cannot know which answer the person will choose and should not substitute their own confidence for that choice.

Both sides can keep their dignity without reaching a deal. Refusal need not make the customer ungrateful, and declining to promise the impossible does not make the maker incompetent. Between them remains an actual offer that can be accepted, changed or rejected. This is a manageable connection between value and honesty: offer what you can do, name significant limitations clearly, and support the promise through action. Its moral basis is wider than a calculation about future reputation. Even if precision brings no sale today, it leaves another person able to use their money and organise their life from intelligible reasons. Tomorrow's table begins with a conversation in which the buyer was genuinely allowed to choose.

What this means in practice

A small business can take one offer already shown to customers and review it before the next sale. This is an editorial exercise, not a tested method for increasing revenue. Write down the literal commitment: what the person receives, by when and at what price. Separately identify the image of a future life suggested by the text or photograph. If that image is much stronger than what the work provides, locate where the two became mixed. Put the basis beside each factual property: a test record, an observation from earlier orders, a material specification or still only a supposition. Do not promote the basis through impressive language.

Then list conditions that could reasonably change the customer's decision: limits of use, extra costs, scheduling dependencies or an important action the customer must take. Present significant information before agreement. Someone uninvolved in making the offer can describe what they understood. This checks clarity on a small scale, not the response of an entire audience. If interpretations diverge, revise the relevant wording and read the changed passage again.

Finally, identify who supports the promise after payment. Who confirms specifications, communicates a risk of delay, receives a question and proposes a remedy? Choose one actual weakness and correct it in the description or the work. Complex guarantees and contracts require specific professional assessment for the place of business; this article does not replace it. A narrower offer or declining an unsuitable order may be a valid outcome. The exercise ends with a clearer account of what you offer another person and can support through action, rather than with a feeling of being beyond reproach.

Key quotation

> *rational nature exists as an end in itself.*

Immanuel Kant, Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals, Section II. Translation by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott; the clause after the colon is reproduced with the source's lower-case initial. Text.

Connections between traditions

The comparison connects the article's questions; it does not turn the sources into a single doctrine.

Question	Comparison	Difference
Why exchange?	Aristotle's account of need; the workshop's offer	The philosophical model does not set a modern price.

Question	Comparison	Difference
What supports a promise?	Cicero's good faith; an order record	A moral ground is wider than an operational record.
What is agreement?	Kant's person as an end; independent choice	The sales example does not exhaust Kantian ethics.
When is evidence needed?	FTC prior substantiation; reviewing a description	A US regulatory standard and an editorial exercise have different status.
What about silence?	Cicero on concealment; a significant product condition	An ancient text does not settle a modern case as law.

Primary sources

1. Cicero, De Officiis, I.23, III.50–57; Walter Miller, 1913. Epigraph and concealment.

2. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, V.5; W. D. Ross. Need and exchange.

3. Kant, Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals, II; Thomas Kingsmill Abbott. Lying promise and key quotation.

4. FTC, Policy Statement Regarding Advertising Substantiation, 23 November 1984. A specific US standard.

Russian quotations were translated for this article from the named English editions. Reading was confined to the identified passages; scenes and exercises are original editorial proposals.

Tags

commercial value, honest promise, customer, buyer, enterprise, offer, price, exchange, need, consent, good faith, trust, commitment, evidence, advertising claims, limitations, quality, responsibility, delivery, remedy, silence, dignity, independent choice, Cicero, Aristotle, Kant, FTC, workshop, terms, business ethics

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