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Assumption surface model

Core idea:

Most debate happens above the surface, while most strategic risk sits below it.



Above the surface

Visible, discussed, comfortable

- Campaign ideas
- Channel plans
- Messaging frameworks
- Budgets and timelines
- Tactical optimisation

Below the surface

Implicit, undiscussed, risky

- What customers actually notice
- How decisions are really made
- Price sensitivity assumptions
- Brand trust taken for granted
- “People like us” thinking
- Channel relevance assumptions

How to use the model in practice

1. **Start every major initiative above the line**
   Let the team articulate the plan as they normally would. Do not interrupt.

2. **Next, deliberately dive below the surface**
   Ask a single forcing question: “What must be true beneath the surface for this to work?”

3. **Tag what you find**
   For each below-surface item, tag it as:
   - Evidence-backed
   - Assumed
   - Unknown

   This reveals where confidence exceeds knowledge.

4. **Act proportionately**
   You do not need to validate everything, focus on the assumptions that are:
   - High impact if wrong
   - Weakly evidenced
   - Emotionally defended

   These are where risk often lives.

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Focus on
What Matters Most