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What topical authority actually is — and the half nobody publishes

Complete coverage of a subject earns you consideration. But completeness isn't authority — credible completeness is. And the most reliable way to signal credibility is the one thing most SEO advice tells you to hide: your weak spots.

Ask most people what topical authority is and you'll hear “cover a subject completely.” That's half right, and the missing half is the interesting one.

Coverage is the price of entry. [The complete guide](#) walks the whole method — map the subject as entities, cover it as one linked network, let historical data accrue. All true, all necessary. But you can do every bit of it and still not be trusted, because a search engine — and increasingly a language model — isn't only asking *did they cover everything?* It's asking *can I rely on what they said?* Completeness gets you considered. **Credibility** gets you cited. They are not the same thing, and the second is the one almost nobody builds on purpose.

Here's the counterintuitive part. The most reliable signal of credibility is the one thing nearly all SEO advice tells you to bury: honest coverage of where you're weak.

The page that tells you not to buy

Take a glazing repair business. The obvious content plan is every page that makes the sale — misted-unit repair, broken-pane replacement, emergency call-outs. But a genuinely authoritative glazing site also publishes the page nobody in sales asks for: *repair vs replace — when it isn't worth fixing*. A page that will, some of the time, tell the reader to walk away.

That page looks like a hole in the funnel. It's the opposite. It is the page that makes every *other* page believable. A source that only ever says "yes, buy this" reads — to a human and to a model — like a brochure. A source that will tell you when *not* to buy has just demonstrated that its recommendations track reality rather than revenue. That is exactly the quality a language model is trying to detect when it decides whose answer to lift into an AI overview.

Why it works, mechanically

There's a real mechanism under this, not just good manners. A search engine reads your site as a set of statements about entities, and it weighs how those statements behave *across the whole network*. A network that covers the profitable questions and the inconvenient ones — the failure modes, the cheaper alternative, the case where your own service is the wrong call — looks like expertise. A network that covers only what converts looks like marketing. And the honest page is, not coincidentally, what Google's own information-gain thinking rewards: the page that adds the thing the other ten results left out because it was off-message.

The soft spots also make the *strong* pages credible by association. Anyone can claim to be the best at the thing they sell. The site that also documents the limits of the thing it sells is making a different, harder-to-fake claim —

that it understands the subject well enough to know where its own offer stops. That is the claim authority is actually built on.

What it changes about how you build

It changes the content plan. The instinct is to cover the core — the pages that convert — and stop there. But the outer section, the honest and the unprofitable and the *actually, in your case, don't*, is not padding around the core. It is the part that makes the core rank at all, because it is the part that proves you're a source and not a sales page.

So cover the subject completely, yes. But leave the soft spots in — visibly. In a search landscape increasingly mediated by models trained to work out who's trustworthy, the willingness to say “this one isn't for you” is quietly becoming one of the hardest ranking signals to fake — because faking it means arguing against your own sale.

The [full method is in the guide](#), and the [field study](#) shows it holding across sixteen months of real data. This note is the half the method only mentions in passing.

WRITTEN BY PHIL YARROW • [about](#)



Publish your weak spots.

Completeness earns consideration; credible completeness earns citation. The full method is in the guide at pyc.agency — or book a teardown to have it built for you.

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