

STRATEGIC GUIDE

The CFO-Proof Business Case

Why most business cases fail under scrutiny—and how to build one that survives the toughest questions in the room.

WRITTEN FOR

CFOs, Finance Leaders & Value Engineers

www.valuenova.ai

INTRODUCTION

The Real Reason Business Cases Fail

Most business cases fail for one reason: they are designed to persuade, not to withstand interrogation. CFOs do not reject value. They reject fragile logic.

You've seen it happen. The presentation goes well. The champion is nodding. Then someone from finance asks a simple question: "Where does this 34% come from?"

Ten seconds of silence. A vague reference to "industry benchmarks." The energy in the room shifts. The deal doesn't die in that moment—but it stops moving forward.

This guide exists because that moment is preventable.

The goal isn't a bigger number. It's a number you can defend in under 30 seconds, with named assumptions, clear logic, and an owner for every input.

SECTION ONE

How CFOs Actually Evaluate Business Cases

Understanding what finance leaders look for—and what triggers their skepticism—is the foundation of building cases that close.

1

Payback Credibility Beats Upside Magnitude

A believable 18-month payback wins over an ambitious 6-month projection every time. CFOs have seen too many "conservative" estimates that were anything but. They're calibrated to discount

2

Assumptions Matter More Than Outputs

The final ROI number is just arithmetic. What CFOs scrutinize are the inputs: Where did that productivity gain come from? Who validated the time savings? What happens if adoption is 60%

3

Explainability Beats Sophistication

A simple model you can walk through in two minutes beats a complex model that requires a spreadsheet expert to interpret. If the logic can't be explained to a non-technical stakeholder, it won't

The CFO's real question isn't "Is this ROI good?" It's "Can I defend this number to the board if this investment underperforms?"

SECTION TWO

The Five Failure Modes of ROI Models

These are the credibility killers. If your business case has even one of these, expect pushback—or worse, quiet disengagement.

1

Hidden Assumptions

Assumptions buried in formulas or referenced vaguely as "based on industry data." If a number can't be traced to a stated, visible assumption, it's a liability waiting to be exposed.

2

Single-Point Estimates

Presenting one number as if uncertainty doesn't exist. "You'll save \$2.4M" invites the question "What if we don't?" Ranges and scenarios show you've thought about downside—and that builds trust.

3

Unowned Inputs

Numbers without attribution. "Average handle time will decrease by 15%"—according to whom? Every input needs an owner: customer-provided, vendor benchmark, or industry study with citation.

4

Spreadsheet Logic Opacity

Formulas that span multiple tabs, reference hidden columns, or require archaeology to understand. If someone can't follow the math in a live meeting, the case loses credibility.

5

No Sensitivity or Downside View

Only showing the happy path. CFOs assume you're showing them the best case. When there's no stress test, they mentally apply their own discount—usually more aggressive than yours would have

SECTION THREE

What a CFO-Proof Case Looks Like

A defensible business case isn't about perfect numbers. It's about transparent logic that can withstand scrutiny.

**Named Assumptions with Owners**

Every input is explicitly stated and attributed. "Current processing time: 4.2 hours (per Operations Director, validated in discovery call 11/15)." No ambiguity about where numbers come from.

**Ranges, Not Absolutes**

Present conservative, expected, and optimistic scenarios. "Projected savings: \$1.8M–\$2.6M depending on adoption rate." This shows intellectual honesty and gives stakeholders room to anchor

**Clear Linkage: Activity > Impact > Financial Outcome**

The chain is explicit and traceable. "Automation reduces manual steps (activity) > saves 12 hours per close cycle (impact) > equals \$43K quarterly in labor costs (financial outcome)." No logical leaps.

**The 30-Second Test**

Any number in the model can be explained in under 30 seconds. If it takes longer, the logic is too complex or the assumption isn't solid. Simplify until you can defend it in real time.

The standard isn't perfection—it's defensibility. A CFO-proof case doesn't claim certainty. It demonstrates rigorous thinking and gives decision-makers confidence that the analysis can be trusted.

SECTION FOUR

How to Build One in Practice

A step-by-step walkthrough using the ValueNova methodology. Each step builds on the last to create a case that survives scrutiny.



**Build business cases that
survive the CFO—not just the
pitch.**

ValueNova gives GTM teams the methodology, AI guidance, and executive-ready outputs to build defensible business cases in minutes, not days.

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