THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

THE DECISION SCIENCE SERIES

The Four Seconds of Engagement that Decide Everything

DS 09

Relevance and Attention

–A Strategic Resource by Joe Worden | More @ www.thedecisionsequence.com

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Foundations of Decision Science · Entry 09

Relevance, Attention, and Recognition

Sperber & Wilson · Daniel Kahneman · George Loewenstein · Daniel Berlyne · Petty & Cacioppo

Definition. Attention is the small, fast-draining budget of mental focus a person can spend. Relevance is the screen the mind runs before it spends a cent of that budget: does this matter to me, and is it worth the work? Recognition is the instant someone hears you and thinks, "That's my situation." The sequence is the argument. No buyer sits down to weigh your evidence until they first spot the problem as their own. Miss that, and even excellent proof never really gets a chance.

Thirty Managers, Three Days, Four Seconds

I've spent a lot of my career at investment conferences where fund managers present one after another, thirty of them over three days, twenty minutes apiece. Day one, the allocators in the audience are attentive, taking notes, asking questions. By the afternoon of day two, the laptops are open, and the triage is brutal.

Here's what the triage looks like from the back of the room. The title slide goes up. The presenter opens their mouth. And within about four seconds, every allocator in the room has made a decision: lean in, or check email. The manager spent six weeks perfecting slide fourteen. Nobody who opened their laptop during slide one ever saw it.

I used to coach managers on their fourteenth slide, the one with the elegant attribution analysis. Eventually I learned to coach the first sentence instead, because nobody earns slide fourteen without winning the first four seconds.

And the pattern in who won those seconds was consistent. The presentations that held the room almost never started with the firm's history, its AUM, or its philosophy. They started with the audience's problem, named so precisely that an allocator three rows back thought, "that's my portfolio he's describing."

The research says those allocators giving four seconds weren't being rude. They were being human, and ruthlessly economical, and the rest of this entry explains the economics.

Attention Is Limited

Begin with the constraint, not the copy. Years before his name became shorthand for bias, Daniel Kahneman was studying attention itself. In Attention and Effort (1973), he treats attention as a finite pool of mental effort that has to be allocated, parceled out, spread thin. You can't hold everything in focus. A few items get oxygen, the rest don't.

That's why most outreach to busy people lands with a thud. It isn't impolite, and it isn't a character flaw. It's the basic math of a mind with limited capacity. Picture a partner racing through a hundred emails before lunch, each subject line earns about a second, and most pitches die there, unopened.

The Mind Filters for Relevance

So what determines where the scarce attention goes? Relevance does. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson built their theory of communication around that idea in Relevance: Communication and Cognition (1986). The mind, they argue, hunts for relevance and judges it through a plain exchange rate: how much this information upgrades my understanding, compared with how much effort it costs to process.

Big payoff, low effort, that reads as relevant and wins attention. Small payoff, high effort, it gets dropped. People aren't so much lazy as economical. They invest attention where the return looks good. An email that starts with the buyer's own problem tends to pass the test, one that starts with the sender's résumé, often doesn't.

Curiosity Comes from a Gap

There is, however, a dependable way to pull attention toward you: curiosity. George Loewenstein lays it out in "The Psychology of Curiosity" (Psychological Bulletin, 1994): curiosity comes from an information gap, the distance between what you know and what you want to know. Once someone notices a gap inside something they care about, they feel that small tug, a nagging sense of missingness, and they want to close it.

The condition matters. The gap has to live inside a topic the person already recognizes as theirs. If it sits in a subject they don't care about, the gap stays inert.

Daniel Berlyne had already set the stage in Conflict, Arousal, and Curiosity (1960). Certain message features, novelty, surprise, things that don't quite fit, raise arousal and kick the mind into "go look" mode. Give people the right dose of the unexpected and they lean in. That's the machinery behind a well-aimed question or a fact that's just off-center enough to feel urgent, it creates a gap the mind wants to shut.

Salience can steal a glance. Relevance earns engagement. Novelty that has nothing to do with the recipient may capture a moment, but it doesn't earn meaningful consideration.

Relevance Decides Whether Proof Gets Heard

For this stage, the key piece of work is Richard Petty and John Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model in Communication and Persuasion (1986). Their finding is simple and sharp: people process persuasive messages by one of two routes.

On the central route, they do the hard work, they evaluate the argument itself. On the peripheral route, they glide on surface cues, how confident the speaker sounds, how polished the design is, how long the bullet list runs. Personal relevance supplies much of the motivation to take the central route; ability and opportunity matter too.

When the issue feels personally relevant and the buyer has the ability and opportunity to engage, people are more likely to take the central route and work with the substance. When it doesn't, they drift, skim, rely on cues, or tune out. The implication is plain and a little unpleasant. If the buyer doesn't see the issue as theirs, even strong evidence is handled on the shallow path, where quality barely lands. A buyer who recognizes the problem reads your case study line by line, the one who doesn't scans the logo strip and moves on. Relevance supplies the motivation that can turn careful evaluation on. Without that switch, your best proof is delivered to someone who isn't truly listening.

Why This Belongs in Decision Architecture

This is the research sitting under the Relevance gate, the front end of the sequence. The Decision Architecture claim is that early engagement has to establish relevance first, the buyer has to believe the issue applies to them and that you understand it. The ordering is a requirement, and the research above is why.

Attention is finite (Kahneman). The mind allocates it based on relevance (Sperber and Wilson). And relevance is what activates the kind of processing where arguments get weighed at all (Petty and Cacioppo).

It also clarifies the Decision Architecture rule that relevance comes before credibility, and credibility before proof. The Elaboration Likelihood Model supplies the mechanism. Until an issue becomes personally relevant, the buyer isn't on the route where credibility and evidence are truly evaluated. Start with proof and you're feeding facts into a mind still running on the shallow route. Start with relevance, help the buyer recognize their own problem, and the route changes, then what follows can finally land. Curiosity, opened as a gap inside a problem the buyer already owns, is one of the cleanest tools for making that happen.

Now add the present environment. With content increasingly produced by machines, the relevance filter tightens, not loosens. Buyers, and the AI systems they depend on, sift an exhausting volume of material, and only what reads as clearly relevant survives the first cut. Machines sort and rank by relevance too.

The information-gap idea cuts both ways here. If AI can fill a buyer's gap instantly with a generic answer, then merely supplying information carries less pull than it used to. The edge shifts to the firm that frames the right problem, the one that helps the buyer recognize what matters most, quickly and unmistakably, before anyone asks for proof.

The Marketing Read

The four seconds your buyer gives you were never for your credentials. They're for one question: is this about me? Everything in your marketing either answers that question immediately or spends the budget answering a question nobody asked.

So run the first-sentence audit. Pull up your homepage, your last three emails, your pitch deck's opening slide, and read only the first sentence of each. Count how many open with the buyer's situation and how many open with your firm's biography. Sperber and Wilson's exchange rate is merciless about this: "we were founded in 1987" asks the reader for effort and pays them nothing. The fix costs nothing but pride, which is why so few firms make it.

Then sharpen recognition until it's almost uncomfortable. "We help firms manage complexity" triggers nothing, because it describes everyone and therefore no one. "If your quarter-end reporting takes three weeks and two apologies" triggers the flinch of recognition in exactly the buyer who has lived it. Precision beats breadth every time, because recognition is binary: either the buyer sees their situation in your words or they see another vendor talking about themselves.

Use curiosity gaps, but only inside owned problems. A teaser about a topic the buyer hasn't claimed is noise. A gap opened inside their acknowledged problem, "the reporting delay usually has one cause, and it's not the one ops blames", pulls them through to the substance. Open the gap, then close it well. Buyers remember firms that pay off their curiosity and blacklist the ones that bait it.

Sequence your proof behind recognition, because the Elaboration Likelihood Model says proof shown to an unengaged mind evaluates your fonts, not your evidence. The case study belongs one step after the buyer thinks "that's my situation," and one step is the whole art. Most funnels ship the proof first because the firm is proudest of it. Pride isn't a sequencing strategy.

What backfires: cleverness without recognition. The witty campaign, the handsome brand film, the award your agency won for it... attention without recognition is a stranger's applause. It spends real money to be memorable to people who never once saw themselves in it.

The hard call: read your homepage's first sentence right now. If it's about you, you spent your four seconds introducing yourself to someone who was asking a different question, and the research in this entry says they've already stopped listening.

Primary Sources

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