THE DECISION SEQUENCE
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

THE DECISION SCIENCE SERIES

Why the Sequence is more Important than the Message

DS 13

Journey Sequencing

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Customer Journey, Buyer Journey, and Touchpoint Sequencing

Lemon & Verhoef · David Edelman · McKinsey Consumer Decision Journey · Gartner / Forrester / McKinsey · Schmitt

Definition. Call it a customer journey or a buyer journey, the idea is the same: it's the whole route someone takes from the first twinge of need through choice, purchase, and then the quieter, longer stretch of living with what they bought. Touchpoints are the mile markers, any point of contact that nudges the person along: a story they read, an ad they notice, a friend's referral, a sales call, a review, the first real product experience. Sequencing is the extra claim that keeps showing up in this literature: the order and the match between those moments matters, not just the count. The pivot is easy to say and harder to practice: marketing works best when it's built around the buyer's decision journey, instead of being scattered across channels and left to chance.

The Shopping List We Called a Plan

For years, the marketing plans I reviewed, and, in the early days, the ones I wrote, all had the same shape. A list of channels with budgets next to them. Website refresh. Conference sponsorships. A webinar series. Some LinkedIn. The trade press. Add them up, present the total, get it approved.

We called it a marketing plan. It was a shopping list with a logo on it.

Here's the question that eventually broke that habit for me: what order does any of this happen in? Not our order, the buyer's. What does a prospect encounter first, what's it supposed to make them believe, and what's supposed to happen next? I started asking that in planning meetings and getting silence back, because the honest answer was: whatever order the buyer stumbles into, we hadn't thought about it, and each piece was built as if it would be the only thing the buyer ever saw.

Then a prospect closed the loop for me. First meeting, and before I got two slides in, he waved it off: "We'd decided to meet with you weeks ago. Your white paper made the rounds of our committee. My colleague quoted it in the memo." The decision to take us seriously had been made in rooms we'd never entered, by a document making a journey we hadn't planned, and the meeting I'd prepared for was the last mile, wearing a first-mile suit.

The research says that prospect was the rule, not the exception.

The Funnel Was Too Simple

For a long time the field leaned on a comforting picture, the funnel. You start with a broad pool of awareness, narrow it through interest and consideration, and end at a purchase. Neat, readable, and for many real purchases, misleading. David Edelman put the problem plainly in "Branding in the Digital Age" (Harvard Business Review, 2010): companies were placing bets in the wrong spots because the funnel stopped resembling how decisions really get made.

McKinsey's "Consumer Decision Journey" work (Court and colleagues, 2009) offered the alternative that stuck. Buying, they argued, doesn't behave like a straight chute, it loops. People begin with a shortlist already floating in mind, then they add options and drop them as they learn, which means the consideration set can expand instead of only contracting. After purchase, the experience doesn't end the story, it triggers a loyalty loop that shapes whether the next decision even starts with searching. The path curves back. The funnel never did.

One Journey, Many Touchpoints

Lemon and Verhoef gave the area its anchor model in "Understanding Customer Experience Throughout the Customer Journey" (Journal of Marketing, 2016). Their structure is simple, three broad phases, before purchase, during purchase, after purchase, but what fills those phases is the point: a stack of touchpoints, stitched together into one lived experience.

The piece worth holding onto, especially for this library, is control, or the lack of it. Touchpoints come in different buckets: those the brand owns, those partners own, those customers create, and those that sit fully outside the firm, reviews, press, word of mouth. Only some are truly manageable. Buyers assemble confidence from moments the firm never sees, let alone designs.

In B2B, Most of It Happens Without You

Complex business buying stretches that logic even further. Across work from Gartner, Forrester, and McKinsey, the B2B journey shows up as nonlinear and repetitive. Teams move back and forth, naming the problem, scanning solution types, translating needs into requirements, building internal agreement, then circling again when something doesn't fit. Often there isn't "a buyer" at all, there's a buying group.

And the uncomfortable part is how little of that motion is visible to suppliers. Gartner reports that while buyers work through a purchase, only about 17 percent of their time is spent meeting potential suppliers, and much less than that with any one supplier. People read, compare, and quietly settle opinions long before they talk to sales. When the firm finally gets a seat at the table, a lot of the decision is already half-formed.

My white-paper prospect, in other words, was behaving exactly to spec. The committee did its deciding in the stretch of the journey I was never in the room for, and graded us on a document I'd assigned to the junior team as a content-calendar filler.

Experience Is a System, Not a Campaign

Once you accept the journey as a connected experience built from many touchpoints, the management unit changes. Customer experience management, associated with writers like Bernd Schmitt (Customer Experience Management, 2003) and influenced by Pine and Gilmore's The Experience Economy (1999), treats the end-to-end experience as something you design, not a pile of separate campaigns you run. The journey becomes the work. The individual ad becomes a part, not the plan.

Why This Belongs in Decision Architecture

From a Decision Architecture standpoint, this marketing literature lands on a familiar claim by another route. Funnels are too blunt for decisions that matter, they list what the buyer does, but skip what is happening inside the buyer. Edelman and the decision-journey researchers end up in the same place from the marketing side: decisions form over time, across many touchpoints, with loops and blind spots, and marketing has to align with that formation process rather than spray content across channels. The framework's split between engagement, a deliberate sequence that lowers uncertainty, and simple distribution is basically this argument in different words.

There is also a clean line worth drawing. Journey research maps the outside of choice: stages, touchpoints, the observable route. Decision Architecture and Trust-Sequenced Marketing aim at the inside: which uncertainty is being resolved at each step, and where trust is gained or lost. The journey work demonstrates that decision formation is multi-stage and multi-touchpoint, a foundation the framework needs. The framework, in turn, provides the psychology for why a given touchpoint advances the buyer or stalls them. One sketches the path. The other accounts for motion along it.

Now the path is increasingly machine-shaped. A growing portion of the touchpoints the firm doesn't control are AI-mediated, assistants, overviews, search tools that summarize and compare options before anyone contacts a salesperson. If buyers already spent little time with suppliers, machines compress that further by answering questions a buyer once carried into a sales call. Aligning to the journey now means being readable and present at those machine-mediated moments, not only inside the channels the firm owns. A company that designs only its own surfaces is managing a shrinking slice of the real journey.

The Marketing Read

Your buyer spends about 17 percent of the purchase in front of suppliers, all of them combined, and your slice of that is even smaller. Odds are your marketing plan is organized around the slice. That's the whole problem in one sentence, and the options below show the way out.

Start by rewriting the plan in the buyer's order instead of yours. Take everything you produce and arrange it as a sequence a real buyer would encounter: what comes first, what belief it's supposed to establish, what doubt the next piece resolves. If a piece can't answer "what does this set up?", it isn't part of a sequence. It's inventory. Most plans, honestly audited this way, turn out to be shopping lists with logos on them, and I say that as a reformed author of several.

Then build for the rooms you'll never enter. The document that gets forwarded to the committee is your best salesperson, and it works the long stretch of the journey where no one from your firm is present to clarify, reframe, or recover. That changes the spec: every substantial piece needs to stand alone, survive being quoted in someone else's memo, and hold up when the skeptic in the room reads it without context. The white paper you're assigning as calendar filler may be the most consequential thing your firm produces this year. Staff it accordingly.

Mind the loop, because the journey doesn't end at the signature. The loyalty loop means today's client experience is next cycle's shortlist, and a client who re-buys without re-searching is the cheapest revenue you'll ever earn. The quarterly review, the onboarding, the first deliverable, those are marketing touchpoints with better attendance than any webinar you'll ever run.

And audit the machine-mediated stretch, because the uncontrolled bucket now includes AI summaries that compare you to competitors before any human reads a word you wrote. Ask the assistants what they say about your firm and your category. That's a touchpoint. It's early in nearly every journey now, and most firms have never once looked at it.

What backfires: channel-first planning. "We should be on LinkedIn" is not a strategy, it's a purchase. Channels are real estate; sequence is architecture, and buying more lots doesn't design the house.

The hard call: read your marketing plan as a story the buyer experiences in order. If it doesn't read as a story, it isn't a sequence. It's scatter, and scatter is what spray is called once it has a budget.

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