THE DECISION SEQUENCE
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

THE DECISION SCIENCE SERIES

Why the Same Facts Close One Deal and Kill Another

DS 19

Framing, Sequence, and Context

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

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Framing, Sequence, and Context Effects

Tversky & Kahneman · Thaler & Sunstein · Petty & Cacioppo · Mellers, Schwartz & Cooke · Huber, Payne & Puto

Definition. Call framing the way information is put into words. Context is the material sitting next to it, the surrounding cues that quietly color it. Sequence is the trail behind it, what the listener has already heard and filed away. Read together, the literature keeps landing on the same unsettling point: those three features, not the facts alone, decide what the facts become in someone's mind. Hand two people the same numbers and you can still watch them walk to opposite conclusions, not because one is dim, but because the description, the surroundings, and the timing did a share of the thinking. The takeaway the framework keeps circling back to is plain: when and how information arrives often matters as much as what it says.

The Two Versions of the Same Quarter

Early in my fundraising education, I worked with a manager whose fact sheet carried a number that kept killing meetings: down 8.2 percent for the year. The number was true. It was also, presented bare, a conversation-ender. Allocators would reach that line, and you could watch the meeting's temperature drop through the floor.

Here's the thing the fact sheet didn't say: the benchmark had fallen 12 that same year. The manager had protected nearly four hundred basis points in the worst stretch the strategy had ever been tested in, which, for the risk-conscious institutions we were talking to, was the single most persuasive fact available. It was just wearing the wrong sentence.

So we rewrote the sentence. Same number, same audited return, now presented as what it was: downside protection, demonstrated live, in the exact conditions these buyers feared most. The meetings changed. Not gradually, immediately.

I didn't change a digit. I changed the sentence the digit lived in, and for a long time that felt vaguely like cheating, until I read the research and discovered it had a name, a Science paper, and a Nobel attached. There's no such thing as a number without a sentence. Somebody picks the sentence, every time, and this entry is about what happens when you let that somebody be anyone but you.

The Same Facts, Framed Two Ways

Start with the tidy demonstration from Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. In "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice," participants faced a public-health scenario and two policy options. Describe the outcome as lives saved and people drift to the safer choice. Describe that same outcome as lives lost and the appetite for risk rises. Nothing in the math changed. The judgment did. So the engine of the reversal was the frame, not the evidence, language makes gains feel like shelter and losses feel like a dare, and a small shift in phrasing can decide which world people think they're in.

There Is No Neutral Presentation

Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein pulled the idea outward into what they named choice architecture, the central theme in Nudge. Put options in a different order, set a default, change how choices are grouped, and behavior moves, even though the menu stays the same. Their point is uncomfortable because it refuses a comforting fiction: neutrality. There is no option list that is "just" a list. Any presentation is a design, and design always pushes somewhere, even when no one meant to push.

Entry 01 in this library compared neutral presentation to bigfoot: widely discussed, never once photographed. The fact sheet with the bare 8.2 wasn't neutral either. It was a loss frame with compliance approval.

Joel Huber, John Payne, and Christopher Puto, in their original decoy-effect research, make the surrounding material feel less like scenery and more like a lever. People don't usually size up an offer on its own, they size it up against what's nearby. Slip in a third option that's plainly worse than one of the first two and preferences can flip between the originals, even if nobody selects the added choice. The decoy goes untouched, yet it bends the outcome. Context, then, is not passive background. It acts.

The Same Message, Processed Differently

Even when the words stay fixed, the mind doesn't always read them the same way. Richard Petty and John Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model sketches two paths, one careful and argument-focused, the other a shortcut that leans on cues like confidence, length, or who is speaking. Which route people take depends on motivation and ability right then, and those are set by circumstances, including what they encountered earlier. A message can be weighed or waved through, not because the content changes, but because the conditions, many of them created earlier in the sequence, steer the mode of processing.

Beneath these studies sits a deeper theme from judgment and decision-making work. In their review of the field, Barbara Mellers, Alan Schwartz, and Alan Cooke argue that people often don't carry stable preferences around like sealed answers waiting to be revealed. Preferences are frequently assembled on the spot. How the problem is stated and which aspects feel heavy in the moment shape that assembly. Change the presentation and you're not only changing a response, you're shifting the preference that produced it.

Why This Belongs in Decision Architecture

The studies establish that frame, context, and order shape interpretation. Decision Architecture turns that into a practical sequence: the trouble is often not the information, it is the order. If frame, context, and sequence steer how evidence is read, then even strong proof can fail by arriving too soon, before relevance and credibility have prepared a lens in which it can be taken seriously. The Decision Architecture insistence that relevance tends to precede credibility, and credibility tends to precede proof, isn't a stylistic quirk. It reflects how interpretation works. Put the same affirmation in the right sequence and it can feel decisive, put it in the wrong one and it lands like static.

That said, the research sits close to a moral boundary worth stating plainly. Frames, defaults, and decoys can be used to warp judgment, nudging someone toward a choice that doesn't serve them. That is manipulation, and Decision Architecture turns away from it for the same reason it rejected a manipulative reading of the small yes. Sequencing here aims the other direction. The point is to deliver the right information in the order that lets a decision maker judge it on the merits, to clarify instead of bend. A fair frame helps someone see the real problem. A crooked one hides it. Same science, different intent.

My 8.2 percent story sits exactly on that line, which is why I still like it. We didn't hide the number or soften it. We told the buyer what the number meant, which the bare figure had been failing to do. That's the test: does the frame add the context a fair reading needs, or subtract it?

Artificial intelligence changes who gets to set the first frame and the early sequence. Often the first description a buyer meets is a machine-written summary, not the firm's own wording, and whatever angle the system chooses becomes the anchor through which later details are filtered. The opening is no longer fully owned. Also, AI has made producing individual messages close to free, which quietly shifts the advantage away from any single proof point and toward sequencing, the part AI doesn't reliably handle by default. Now, anyone can generate evidence-like copy. Far fewer grasp that it shouldn't arrive before a buyer is ready to treat it as believable. Content has been cheapened. Order has not. AI can draft every piece, it still can't, by itself, pick the moment when a particular person becomes ready to accept it.

The Marketing Read

Somebody picks the sentence your numbers live in. Your buyer, their consultant, a machine summary, or you. The frame gets set either way, and an unset frame defaults to whichever reading serves you least.

So run the frame audit on your scariest true numbers. The fee that looks high until it's next to what it replaces. The minimum that looks exclusionary until it's explained as protection. The drawdown that looks like failure until it's benchmarked against the storm it happened in. For each one, write the honest gain-frame and the honest loss-frame, then choose deliberately, because right now, if you've never done this exercise, your most important numbers are wearing whatever sentence a compliance review left them in, and compliance reviews write loss frames for a living.

Then sequence your material like the research says minds work: something that establishes relevance before anything that claims credibility, credibility before anything that asks to be believed as proof. This has a practical test. Take any campaign and ask of each piece: what has the buyer seen before this, and did it build the lens this piece needs? A case study that runs as a first touch is proof delivered to the peripheral route, where the reader grades your formatting. The identical case study, third in a sequence, gets read as evidence. Same asset. The order did the work.

Control the comparison set, or inherit one. Huber, Payne, and Puto's decoy research says the options sitting next to you change what you're worth, and in most buying processes you don't pick your neighbors, unless you do: the "three ways firms like yours handle this" piece, the honest comparison framework, the criteria checklist you publish before the RFP gets written. The firm that frames the comparison rarely loses it.

And defend the first frame, because the machine is setting it now. The AI summary a buyer reads before your first meeting is a frame you didn't write, built from the public record. That's one more reason the audit ritual from Entry 15 belongs on the calendar: you can't own the opening anymore, but you can stock the shelves it's assembled from.

What backfires: winning frames that poison the well. The A/B-tested angle that converts today and feels like a trick in month three of the engagement is a crooked frame, and clients remember who bent the light. The test from this entry holds: add the context a fair reading needs. Never subtract it.

The hard call: take your single most important true number and write three honest sentences it could live in. If you've only ever published one, you didn't choose your frame. It chose you.

Primary Sources

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