THE DECISION SEQUENCE
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

THE DECISION SCIENCE SERIES

Why Deals Begin Before Anyone Calls It a Deal

DS 22

Motivation and Need Recognition

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

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Foundations of Decision Science · Entry 22

Motivation, Need Recognition, and Problem Awareness

Maslow · Deci & Ryan · Prochaska & DiClemente · Kotler · Christensen

Definition. Decisions don't begin with a purchase, or even with a preference, they start when something feels missing. Still, "need" is a slippery word. People carry around endless wants they never translate into action. A need that stays quiet is different from a need that demands movement, and liking the idea of change is not the same as being prepared to chase it. This entry sits in that space between the two, the moment a dormant need turns into a live motive, the reason timing can outweigh messaging, and the reason early engagement works best when it clarifies what someone is trying to get done instead of trying to whip up urgency that isn't there.

The Campaign That Worked Two Years Late

One of the best campaigns I ever ran was a failure. I know it was a failure because I wrote the postmortem myself: strong open rates, good meetings, and a pipeline that produced almost nothing. We'd targeted the right institutions with the right message and, by every ninety-day measure a marketing department lives by, wasted the budget.

Then the phone calls started. Not that quarter, not the next. Over the following two years, those "dead" prospects came back one at a time, and every return call had the same shape: something had happened. A new CIO arrived with a mandate to shake things up. A drawdown embarrassed the incumbent. An auditor asked a question nobody could answer. A merger doubled the assets and broke the old arrangement. Each caller reached for us like we were an old bookmark, "you're the folks who talked about this," and several became clients on timelines that made the original campaign, retroactively, a bargain.

Here's what I finally understood. The message had been fine. The need had been asleep. We'd graded the campaign on a ninety-day clock while the buyers were on a when-my-world-breaks clock, and only one of those clocks was real.

The research below explains the whole thing: why need can't be argued awake, why pressure fails where timing succeeds, and what marketing is for during the long stretch when the door you're leaning on hasn't been installed yet.

Motivation Comes From What Is Missing

Maslow starts with a plain claim: we move toward what we lack. Once a need is satisfied, it stops pulling at us, and the more basic needs tend to crowd out the higher ones when they're unmet. His ladder has been argued with for decades, but the core point remains hard to shake. What pushes a person is the need that feels unresolved and close to the surface. In buying terms, action comes from the buyer's own sense of a gap, not from whatever a seller wishes were urgent. Miss the active need and you end up pushing at empty space, like leaning into a door that was never installed.

Wanting Is Not the Same as Being Ready

Deci and Ryan complicate the picture in a useful way: not all motivation is built the same. They separate motivation people truly stand behind from motivation created by outside pressure, then connect lasting action to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When the drive is self-endorsed, effort tends to hold. When the push is external, you may get compliance for a while, but it can dissolve when the pressure eases. For anyone hoping to create demand by force of will, the implication stings. You can't count on pushing a need into existence.

Prochaska and DiClemente describe the same reality as a progression. Change moves from not considering it, to considering it, to preparing, to acting, to maintaining. Their key insight is blunt: stages don't vanish just because you argue well. If someone hasn't started to contemplate change, you can't reason them straight into action, pressing harder usually just thickens resistance. A buyer can nod along with every point, accept the logic, even admire the solution, and still stay put because they're earlier in the sequence than the seller assumes. The corrective isn't more intensity. It's accuracy, meeting the person where they are.

The stages-of-change model was developed in health behavior. I use it here as a readiness lens for B2B decisions, not as a literal sales funnel or proof that every buyer moves through the same stages.

Every one of my two-years-late callers had moved a stage, and nothing I'd said in the campaign moved them. Life did. The campaign's real job, it turned out, was to be remembered when life made its move.

The Decision Starts With Recognizing the Gap

Kotler's buyer-behavior model opens before products enter the frame. First comes need recognition, the instant someone senses a distance between their current state and the one they want. Without that felt gap, nothing downstream starts. No search. No comparison. No purchase. That's why so much marketing that begins with the product lands oddly, it arrives before the problem has registered as a problem.

Christensen makes that "gap" concrete through jobs to be done. People aren't collecting products for their own sake, they're hiring something to accomplish progress in a real situation. The job is the real unit of choice, not the category label. What buyers want is not the object, it's the forward movement the object makes possible. Naming the job is the discovery work this framework depends on, and it marks the difference between a firm that understands the buyer's live need and one that only knows how to describe its own offer.

Why This Belongs in Decision Architecture

Decision Architecture begins with need, then draws a line that's easy to say and easy to forget, need isn't the same as desire. Plenty of desires never get pursued, and none become active until staying the same starts to feel less tolerable than changing. Maslow points to the source of motivation, Deci and Ryan show why it resists being imposed, Prochaska and DiClemente explain why readiness arrives in steps, and Kotler with Christensen clarify what the need is and where the sequence really starts. Put together, they support a simple claim: the beginning of a decision belongs to the buyer. A firm doesn't so much create it as notice it, interpret it, and help bring it into focus.

That shift changes the first move of engagement. If pressure can't manufacture need, then the opening move is discovery rather than persuasion, listening for what the buyer is dealing with, identifying which need is active, naming the job they're trying to finish, and gauging how ready they are to move. Confuse a quiet want for an active need and you push too soon, then misread hesitation as objection when it's really timing, it's stage. Meeting someone at their true level of readiness isn't "patience" as a virtue. It's the only place a decision can honestly begin.

AI has moved the site of need recognition. More and more, buyers put words to the gap between where they are and where they want to be while talking to a machine, before any firm shows up, so the first framing often happens offstage. AI can speed up the path from vague dissatisfaction to a stated problem, and it can help map the possible jobs a buyer is trying to do. What it cannot supply is the motive force itself. The drive that gets someone to act, autonomous and self-endorsed, comes from the inside, and no output conjures it. AI can help a buyer name the gap. It can't make them willing to cross it. The decision still waits on motivation that's theirs alone, which is why firms have to be helpful in the early moment when the need is being articulated, not only later, when the buyer has already shifted into shopping.

The Marketing Read

Most of your market isn't ready to buy anything, and that's the most useful sentence in this entry, because most marketing budgets are spent pretending otherwise.

Start with a trigger map instead of a media plan. List the events that wake the need in your market: the leadership change, the bad quarter, the audit finding, the merger, the regulation, the growth breakpoint where the old arrangement snaps. Those events, not your campaigns, are when buying begins, and they hand you two plays. Watch for the triggers you can see, new CIO announcements are public, and be unforgettable to the people whose triggers you can't see, which is what my "failed" campaign accidentally got right. The goal of early-stage marketing is to be the bookmark the buyer reaches for when their world breaks.

Then match the message to the stage, because Prochaska and DiClemente's finding converts directly into content strategy. The pre-contemplator needs the problem named, vividly and without an ask. The contemplator needs the cost of staying put made honest. The preparer needs the path and the first step. Send action-stage material to a pre-contemplator, the proposal, the demo, the pricing call, and you're not early, you're irrelevant, and you've taught them to ignore you before their need ever wakes. Most funnels are built entirely from action-stage material. Check yours.

Write in job language, not category language. Nobody wakes up needing "a strategic communications partner"; they wake up needing the board off their back, the fundraise unstuck, the succession explained to clients without panic. Christensen's discovery work, real conversations about what buyers were trying to get done when they hired you, produces the vocabulary. Your category label is what you are. The job is why anyone calls.

Be present where the gap gets named, because that conversation now happens with a machine first. When a buyer describes their symptoms to an assistant, before they know the category or any firm in it, the content that surfaces is problem-naming content: the piece that says "here's what that grinding noise in your operation usually means." Publish the vocabulary buyers will discover their problem in, and you enter the decision before the shopping starts, which is the cheapest seat in the entire sequence.

What backfires: manufactured urgency. The fake deadline, the fear campaign, the countdown clock on a considered decision, Deci and Ryan already wrote that ending: pressure buys compliance that dissolves the moment it eases, plus a buyer who remembers being shoved. You can't rush a stage. You can only be welcome in it.

The hard call: sort your current prospect list by honest readiness, not by how much you need the revenue. Then look at your budget and notice how much of it speaks only to the thin slice who are ready now. The rest of your market isn't deaf. It's early. Market to early, and the phone rings for years.

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