THE DECISION SEQUENCE
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

The Rule Nobody Voted For

MARKETING STORIES WORTH SHARING

No law required it. No tradition demanded it.
Millions of people follow it anyway.

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STORIES FROM THE FIELD
J.R. WORDEN

Because Some Decisions are Forever

The Rule The They Didn’t Vote For

Love, commitment, and the day marketers decided a private promise needed public proof

The brief was to take a product nobody needed, attach it to one of the most important decisions a person ever makes, and convince millions that the decision would feel incomplete without it. There was no law requiring it and no tradition demanding it. The rule had to be built, and it worked so well that most people now mistake it for something ancient.

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The Problem

The assignment sounded impossible.

Take a product people didn't need, attach it to one of the most important decisions they would ever make, and then convince millions of them that the decision would feel unacceptable without it.

Not less romantic. Not less fashionable. Unacceptable.

That distinction matters. Plenty of marketers have persuaded people to prefer one car over another, one beer over another or one hotel over another. That is difficult enough, but it is a considerably smaller job because the customer already understands the category. The marketer does not have to explain why cars exist or persuade people that checking into a hotel is an important part of leaving town. The decision has already been established. Marketing only needs to influence which option wins.

This assignment was far more ambitious. The marketing team was being asked to influence what the decision itself was supposed to look like.

Imagine presenting that in a conference room.

"*We are going to stop explaining how to shop for the product*."

"*Okay*."

"*We are also going to stop educating consumers on how to compare one product with another. In fact, we are no longer going to tell them our product is better*."

A little less enthusiasm.

"*Then what are we going to tell them?*"

"*We are going to tell them that one of the most important commitments they will ever make is not entirely credible unless our product is involved*."

Someone at the other end of the table puts down his pencil.

"*You think we can make our product a critical part of the defining moment?"*

"No. We are going to make its absence raise questions about the moment itself."

Now the room is quiet.

The assignment was no longer simply to convince a buyer that the product was beautiful, rare or worth the money. It was to convince him that buying it would demonstrate the seriousness of his intent, communicate that seriousness to the person on the other side of the decision, and teach everyone else involved how to interpret what he had done.

One of the more experienced people around the table would eventually have asked the question everyone else was thinking.

"*Who says?*"

Nobody, really. That was the problem. There was no law requiring it. No religious commandment. No biological instinct. No universal tradition stretching uninterrupted across human history. Nothing declared that this particular object had to accompany this particular promise or that its absence should invite suspicion.

"*So, let me make sure I understand the strategy. We are going to take something nobody needs, insert it into a decision people have been making without us for thousands of years, and establish it as evidence that the person making the commitment is serious*."

"*That's right*."

"*And if they don't buy it?*"

"*We want the other party to question the credibility of the decision*."

It is difficult to imagine a more audacious marketing assignment. They were not trying to capture market share. They were trying to implement themselves into a human ritual. They needed to define the rule, establish the expectations on both sides of the decision and make the entire arrangement feel as though society had always understood it that way.

And somehow, over the decades that followed, that is precisely what happened.

The product became so embedded in the ritual that millions of people eventually mistook the expectation for tradition. Its presence became proof. Its absence became a message. The marketers had not simply influenced what people purchased. They had helped establish what one of life's most important decisions was supposed to look like.

That accomplishment belongs in the marketing hall of fame. It also sheds considerable light on the uncomfortable process through which decisions are made. We like to believe culture creates meaning and marketers merely respond to it. This time, marketers helped create the meaning, culture absorbed it, and generations of consumers inherited the resulting expectation without knowing who had written the rule.

Marketing Distinction One: The Buyer

Picture the decision from the buyer's side.

The buyer has decided to make a commitment that makes a mortgage look short-term. That alone creates enough uncertainty for one human being.

What will the person on the other side say? Will the commitment be taken seriously? Is the timing right? What will the people closest to the buyer think? What will the people surrounding the other person think?

What will the larger community make of the decision? What does the proper expression of a commitment like this look like? How should the product accompanying it be valued? What counts as excessive? What does the selection say about the buyer's ability to provide, judgment, taste and commitment?

The decision is intensely private and strangely public at the same time. Two parties making a commitment while allowing everyone surrounding the decision to inspect the evidence.

The person on the other side will share the news with those closest to them. Those people will ask questions. Whatever the buyer selected will become part of the story, passed through friends, colleagues and the larger community surrounding them both. Some will want to see it. Many will quietly form an opinion based on it.

That creates a problem.

The terms of the commitment are invisible.

The buyer can say, "I intend to honor this commitment for as long as I exist," but words have always suffered from an inconvenient defect. People can say them.

What if there were an object capable of making the invisible visible? Something difficult enough to acquire that acquiring it demonstrated sacrifice, rare enough to signal value, durable enough to symbolize permanence, small enough to remain present and recognizable enough that nobody needed the story explained.

Now the product has stopped being decoration.

It has become evidence.

That changes the decision.

The Better Question

Most marketing begins with the product and works outward. What does it do? Why is it better? Who needs it? What problem does it solve? How do we differentiate it?

There is another way to build demand. Start with a human decision that already matters enormously, then ask what the decision is missing.

Not functionally. Psychologically.

The buyer understands the commitment being made. What the buyer may lack is a way to make that commitment legible to the person on the other side of the decision. That person may want something legible too.

Families understand symbols. Communities understand symbols. Human beings have been using physical objects to represent invisible ideas for thousands of years. Flags represent nations, uniforms represent roles, medals represent sacrifice and religious objects represent belief. The object does not create the underlying commitment. It gives that commitment a form other people can recognize.

Which means the marketer's job is no longer to simply persuade somebody to buy something. The marketer can attempt something considerably more powerful.

Define the symbol.

If enough people accept the symbol, the next person entering the decision does not begin from zero. Culture has already done part of the reasoning.

That is when marketing becomes something larger than persuasion.

It becomes architecture.

The Rule Begins to Form

One person sees another mark the decision this way, then sees someone else do the same. Movies show it. Celebrities display it. Magazines photograph it. Advertisements reinforce it.

Families begin expecting it. Friends begin asking about it. Retailers organize themselves around it. The next generation grows up seeing the object attached to the event so consistently that the association begins to feel natural.

Eventually, the question changes. At first, someone might ask:

“Why would I buy one of those?”

Later, the stranger question becomes:

“Why wouldn't you?”

That reversal is enormous. The marketer is no longer fighting for inclusion in the decision. Exclusion now requires an explanation.

Once a cultural expectation reaches that point, it begins reinforcing itself. The buyer purchases the object because the person on the other side expects it. That expectation exists because other people received it. Other people received it because buyers understood the expectation. Families reinforce it because it signals seriousness. Retailers reinforce it because customers arrive already understanding the category. Movies reinforce it because audiences instantly recognize what the object means.

Nobody has to coordinate the system anymore. The decision architecture has become social.

The market starts marketing to itself.

Marketing Distinction Two: The Price of Seriousness

Then comes another extraordinary possibility. Once an object becomes proof of commitment, its cost stops behaving like an ordinary price.

Normally, buyers prefer to pay less for equivalent value. But what happens when sacrifice becomes part of the value?

Cheap can create a problem because the buyer is no longer purchasing only the physical object. The buyer is purchasing what the object communicates about the seriousness of the commitment. Spending too little risks allowing the economics of the purchase to undermine its symbolic purpose.

That opens the door to one of the strangest pricing ideas in marketing. What should the object cost? Not what the materials justify, and not simply what competitive supply and demand produce. What if the appropriate amount could be expressed as a portion of the buyer's income?

Now the price itself becomes evidence. The expenditure says: this mattered enough for me to sacrifice something meaningful.

The specific recommendation moved around over the years, but the strategy underneath it is what deserves attention. It converts what should ordinarily be purchase friction into part of the product's symbolic value.

Expensive is no longer merely a problem to overcome. It helps prove the point.

That only works because the product has been attached to a decision where seriousness needs evidence. Nobody pays several months of income for an ordinary object simply because an advertisement says expensive things are nice. People become willing to do it when the expense itself has been made meaningful.

I would add one thing the trade rarely says out loud. A rule expressed as a fraction of income does something no fixed price can do. It tells the buyer when the obligation has been satisfied. The buyer is no longer calculating objective value, but looking for the point at which enough has been done. A number tied to the buyer's own income provides that answer without forcing anyone to argue over the product's specifications.

Marketing Distinction Three: Establishing Permanence

There was still another problem.

The object could not mean only wealth. Wealth was not the promise being made. The decision was supposed to represent permanence, so the object needed to connect with that idea too.

A permanent commitment deserves a permanent symbol.

The reasoning is simple enough that, once stated, it feels inevitable. That is usually a clue that somebody has done very good work. The best decision architecture disappears into common sense after it has been established. Nobody remembers learning the rule. They simply know it.

A serious commitment requires an appropriate symbol. The symbol should reflect permanence. The object is durable. Therefore, the object belongs in the ritual.

Step by step, the commercial product disappears inside the human meaning attached to it. By the time the buyer reaches the store, the marketer has already won an enormous part of the decision. The customer is no longer asking whether the category belongs.

The customer is selecting within it, which is a much better place to compete.

Four Words

Then, in the late 1940s, a young copywriter was working late on the account.

Her name was Frances Gerety. She had been writing advertising around the same basic idea for years, and the next morning's copy was due. According to the history that grew around the campaign, she scribbled down four words before going to bed and did not think they were particularly inspired.

The words contained no product comparison, price, technical specification, craftsmanship claim or celebrity endorsement. They did something considerably more useful. They connected a physical property of the object with the emotional meaning of the decision.

The commitment was supposed to last. The object could last.

Those two ideas could become one.

Four words. Once you hear them, the entire architecture looks painfully obvious.

That is the trick.

The Rest of the Story

By now, you know the product was a diamond. The company financing and benefiting from the campaign was De Beers. The agency that developed the marketing architecture was N.W. Ayer. The decision was marriage.

And the four words Frances Gerety wrote were:

A Diamond Is Forever.

Now go back through the story.

De Beers helped make the diamond become the evidence that defines the entire decision. It becomes an analogy. The stone lasts, love should last and the commitment should last. The stone therefore becomes evidence of the commitment.

That is brilliant enough by itself. The larger campaign did something more consequential. It helped establish that a diamond was not merely one possible way to mark an engagement. It was what serious engagements should look like.

The scale of the change is documented. GIA puts the share of American brides receiving diamond engagement rings at 10 percent in 1939 and 80 percent in 1990.

Something far more valuable than preference had been accomplished. The category itself had become part of the decision.

They Didn't Sell the Stone

This is where the story stops being about jewelry.

The traditional explanation is that De Beers was brilliant at emotional branding. True. It connected diamonds with romance. True. It used Hollywood, cultural influence, advertising and repetition to reinforce the association. Also true.

Those explanations still make the achievement sound like communications strategy. The deeper accomplishment was structural, because De Beers helped influence the criteria by which a serious romantic commitment would be evaluated.

The campaign wasn’t saying the product represents love. It was establishing that love of this magnitude should be represented in this way.

Once that becomes culturally accepted, the customer enters the marketplace carrying a piece of the seller’s argument inside his own expectations. The marketer no longer needs to persuade the buyer that the product belongs in the decision.

The buyer arrives asking which one.

That may be the highest form of decision advantage a category can achieve.

Upstream of Every Gate

Here’s where the story connects to everything else and where it breaks the usual pattern.

Buyers move through five gates, each carrying a question in the buyer’s own voice:

- **Relevance:** Is this about me?
- **Credibility:** Do these people understand this?
- **Proof:** Can they show me rather than tell me?
- **Safety:** What could go wrong, and has anyone named it honestly?
- **Access:** What is the next proportional step?

Most marketing lives inside those five questions, trying to answer them in the right order.

De Beers and N.W. Ayer worked upstream of all of them.

The gates assume the buyer already knows what decision is being made. That assumption is doing more work than anyone gives it credit for. Before buyers can ask whether something is relevant to them, something has to tell them what “this” is. Before they can determine whether a provider understands the decision, something has to establish what credible participation looks like. Before they can ask what could go wrong, something has to define what getting it right means.

De Beers helped supply the answers long before their buyer walked into a jewelry store.

Watch what that does to the gates when the buyer arrives.

- **Relevance is largely pre-cleared.** The buyer is not wondering whether the diamond category belongs in the decision. Culture answered that question long before the decision became personally relevant.
- **Credibility has been transferred to the convention.** The buyer may still need to decide whether a particular jeweler is knowledgeable and trustworthy, but the category itself no longer has to establish its authority. Diamonds have become the recognized language of serious engagement. A provider inside the category begins with credibility the convention has already accumulated.
- **Proof has been redefined.** The buyer may know little about cut, clarity, color or carat weight and may have no independent way to determine whether a particular stone

is worth the asking price. Those remain legitimate product questions, but they are no longer the proof that matters. The diamond itself has become proof of something else: that the buyer understands the significance of the commitment and is prepared to make it visible.

- **Safety is partially supplied by conformity.** One risk is financial, and the convention does little to protect the buyer from overpaying. The larger psychological risk is that the commitment will not be interpreted as serious by the person receiving it or by the people surrounding the decision. Selecting the recognized symbol protects against that risk. The buyer may still be wrong about the stone, the price or the retailer, but is unlikely to be accused of misunderstanding the ritual.
- **Access has been institutionalized.** The next step is familiar, socially understood and available almost everywhere. The buyer does not need to invent an appropriate gesture or determine how a private commitment should be made public. The path leads to a jewelry store, a recognizable category and a purchase that can be completed without designing the ritual from scratch.

The campaign did not eliminate the five gates. Individual jewelers still had to establish their own credibility, provide proof of quality, reduce transaction risk and make purchasing easier. What the campaign accomplished was more valuable: it moved the diamond category through a substantial portion of every gate before the individual transaction began.

That’s the leverage. It’s a kind of leverage no marginal product improvement could have purchased.

Trust That Belongs to a Category

There is another layer here, and it may be the most interesting part of the entire story.

Trust does not always mean trusting a company. Sometimes people trust a convention.

The framework defines the threshold precisely: trust exists when uncertainty has been reduced sufficiently that commitment becomes psychologically acceptable despite the continued presence of risk. Read that against the diamond buyer. Considerable product uncertainty may remain. The buyer may know very little about diamonds, may be unable to independently verify the price and may have only a limited ability to distinguish one stone from another.

And yet, the buyer commits.

That becomes possible because the meaning of the object is understood by everyone involved. The buyer understands it. The person receiving it understands it. Their families, friends and communities understand it. That shared understanding carries the buyer across a threshold that product knowledge alone could never have reached.

The trust was not necessarily sitting with De Beers, the retailer or even the individual stone. It had accumulated in the ritual.

That distinction is worth making plainly. The campaign did not cause buyers to trust every diamond company, every jeweler or every price. It did something more specific. It created trust in the category's role inside the decision. Millions of buyers were given permission to stop questioning whether a diamond belonged in an engagement and begin concentrating on which diamond to buy.

The Dangerous Oversimplification

This is the version of this story marketers love because it makes advertising sound superhuman:

De Beers invented the diamond engagement ring.

That is not true, and the accurate version is more interesting.

Diamond engagement rings existed centuries before the campaign. Aristocratic examples go back hundreds of years, and GIA notes that before the 1940s diamonds were among several gemstones used in engagement rings. The practice existed before N.W. Ayer ever received the account.

What De Beers and N.W. Ayer did was take an existing practice and dramatically strengthen, normalize and scale its meaning. That distinction matters because culture is almost never created by marketing alone. The campaign had considerable help. Movies mattered. Celebrities mattered. Rising prosperity mattered. Retail distribution mattered. Existing marriage customs mattered. Social imitation mattered. The physical properties of the product mattered.

Marketing was not standing outside society manipulating helpless consumers. It was participating in a culture and reinforcing an interpretation of what an important decision should look like.

That is both less sinister and more useful than the myth. Great marketing does not have to invent a new human desire. Sometimes it needs to understand an existing desire well enough to attach a product to it. That may be a less impossible assignment, but it requires a far more sophisticated understanding of how people assign meaning.

People already wanted love. They already wanted commitment. They already wanted symbols capable of making important promises visible.

De Beers did not create any of that. Working through N.W. Ayer, it found a way to make one object carry the weight.

Become Part of the Question

This is where comparing this with ordinary marketing becomes unfair.

Most marketers are trying to win a contest. Why us instead of them? Why our software, our bank, our car or our peanut butter?

The De Beers story points toward a more powerful position: become part of the question.

If the customer is asking which diamond to buy, the diamond category has already won. The retailer does not have to establish during every transaction that an engagement requires a diamond. That decision was made earlier, socially, through millions of previous decisions.

A company that wins preference gets a customer. A company or industry that influences the criteria by which the decision is made can shape a market.

Those are not remotely equivalent outcomes. Most marketing departments spend their entire budgets pursuing the first without ever asking whether the second is available.

AI and the Return of the Question

This becomes more interesting as the information environment changes.

For decades, a buyer could walk into a jewelry store with little to no knowledge while the retailer knew considerably more about the product, pricing, grading and available alternatives. That asymmetry is disappearing. Buyers can now compare natural and laboratory-grown diamonds, understand grading, analyze prices, investigate resale value, examine alternative gemstones and question the history of the entire tradition before entering a store. AI makes that interrogation easier still.

That matters because information can reopen questions culture had previously closed. Why a diamond? Why natural rather than laboratory-grown? Why this size? Why this amount of money? Who decided what an engagement ring was supposed to cost?

Those are healthy questions, and they expose something important. Technology can weaken inherited rules by making their origins, economics and alternatives easier to inspect.

It does not eliminate the psychological need the rule was serving. People still want to make commitment visible. They still want symbols. They still care how important decisions will be interpreted by the people around them, and they still want private meaning to become socially legible. AI can tell a buyer that the tradition was commercially amplified, but the buyer may still arrive at the defining moment wanting something capable of carrying the meaning.

Evidence that the mechanism still works is more recent than many people assume. GIA reports that the share of Chinese brides receiving diamond engagement rings increased from nearly none during the 1990s to more than 50 percent by 2019, following years of diamond promotion in that market. That happened with the internet already running.

The coming fight is probably not over whether people want to represent commitment. It is over which objects will be trusted to carry the meaning.

The Moral to the Story

Marketing people love the idea of owning a word. Volvo owns safety. FedEx owned overnight. Brands spend decades trying to associate themselves with an attribute strongly enough that customers think of them when the attribute matters.

De Beers, working through N.W. Ayer, accomplished something larger. It helped attach an entire product category to a human decision.

Not diamond equals luxury. Not diamond equals expensive.

Diamond equals commitment.

- **More specifically**: permanent commitment deserves a permanent symbol. Once that sequence became culturally familiar, generations of buyers entered the market with a substantial portion of the decision already made.

That is why the line deserves to be studied as more than one of the greatest slogans ever written. Frances Gerety's four words did not merely describe a stone. They compressed an entire piece of decision architecture into a sentence simple enough for culture to remember and powerful enough for the market to repeat.

The stone lasts. The commitment should last. Therefore, the stone belongs in the commitment.

And perhaps that is the larger lesson. The strongest marketing does not always persuade customers that a product is worthy of the decision.

Sometimes it changes what people believe the decision requires.

The Details

The company. De Beers had engaged N.W. Ayer to stimulate U.S. diamond demand before Frances Gerety wrote the famous line. De Beers dates "A Diamond Is Forever" to 1947 and credits Gerety, and GIA uses the same year. The Smithsonian's finding aid for the N.W. Ayer archive lists the tagline as 1949, and other published accounts give 1948. The 1947 date is the one De

Beers and most later histories use, and the spread is worth knowing about before anyone quotes it back at you.

The copywriter. Frances Gerety worked at N.W. Ayer and became permanently associated with the four words. In 1999, *Advertising Age* named the line the leading ad slogan of the twentieth century.

The behavior. Diamond engagement rings existed long before De Beers, and GIA notes that before the 1940s diamonds were one among numerous gems used as engagement stones. The defensible claim isn't that the company invented the tradition. It's that sustained promotion dramatically expanded and normalized the association between diamonds, romance and engagement.

The scale. GIA reports the share of United States brides receiving diamond engagement rings rose from 10% in 1939 to 80% in 1990, and attributes the rise in significant part to De Beers marketing.

The replication. GIA also reports the share of Chinese brides receiving diamond engagement rings went from nearly none in 1990 to more than 50% in 2019, following De Beers market promotion.

The price rule. De Beers promoted salary-multiple guidance for engagement ring spending, and the recommended multiple moved upward over time. Published accounts disagree on the specific figures and on when each version was introduced, so none is stated here. The argument in this piece concerns the structure of the rule rather than its size.

The decision architecture. The campaign connected an existing human aspiration, enduring romantic commitment, to a physical attribute of the product, durability, then reinforced the product as the culturally recognizable symbol of that commitment.

The result wasn't simply a famous advertisement. It was a decision rule.

A serious commitment should last. The symbol should represent permanence. A diamond is forever.

And once enough people accepted the sequence, the next generation barely needed the argument explained.