THE DECISION SEQUENCE
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

The first line decides everything

How to set the first thing a prospect reads

Why the opening claim anchors everything that comes after it

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How to set the first thing a prospect reads

Making sure the opening claim anchors everything that comes after it

Gates. **Relevance: primary.** Credibility: secondary. Proof: no. Safety: no. Access: no.

A buyer reads the first claim and then reads everything else through it. Firms treat that line as a headline to be refreshed. The market treats it as the frame.

The symptom

The positioning changed eighteen months ago. Nobody outside the building noticed.

New site, new deck, new boilerplate, all of it signed off by people who argued about the wording for a quarter. Then a referral call opens with a description of the firm that expired three years ago. Somebody corrects it politely. The next prospect says something close enough to be the same sentence.

What comes back is rarely the old tagline word for word. Usually it's the old category, the old client type, carried by people who never read the new language and had no reason to.

So the firm decides the problem is reach. More posts, more repetition, another round of the same claim in more places. Eighteen months of that, and the market's description of the firm hasn't moved an inch.

Why it keeps happening

Because the first piece of information a buyer receives sets a reference point, and everything that arrives afterward gets interpreted through it rather than sitting beside it as a fresh option.

The opening claim sets the standard the rest of the material gets graded against. Firms think about it as a headline, which is a reasonable thing to think about a headline. Headlines get refreshed. Campaigns turn over. Somebody rewrites the hero section for the new fiscal year and the work feels finished.

The market never agreed to any of that. It took the first sentence it heard, filed it as the frame, and has been reading the firm through it ever since.

Ask a language model what a firm does and it hands back the most confident sentence anyone ever wrote about that firm, which is frequently the one the firm retired.

We've watched enough relaunches to know how the next part goes. We've refreshed the headline and left the anchor alone, then wondered why the market's description of the firm never moved.

What it costs

In 2011 a retail executive who had made Target's merchandising cool and then built Apple's stores, including the Genius Bar, took over a 110-year-old department store chain.

He inherited a machine that ran nearly 600 sales, promotions and markdown events a year. A $30 blouse was ticketed at $60, marked down to $34.99, then couponed to $29.97. Almost three-quarters of everything sold went out at 50 percent off or more. Looked at honestly, the whole apparatus was theater.

On February 1, 2012 he replaced all of it with one honest everyday price. Same blouse, $30, no games.

Store traffic dropped 10 percent. Fourth-quarter same-store sales fell 32 percent. Full-year revenue went from $17.3 billion to $13 billion. $4.3 billion gone in twelve months. He was fired on April 8, 2013, after seventeen months.

Price does not explain itself. Neither does value. A buyer needs a reference point before numbers mean a thing, and that $60 ticket, dishonest as it was, gave every shopper something to measure $29.97 against. Remove the anchor, and you remove clarity. Without clarity, you create uncertainty. Information is not the same thing as meaning. A confused customer doesn't deliberate harder... they leave, landing somewhere that feels more certain.

He wasn't wrong *about the math, he was wrong about attracting the correct species to visit the store.*

What the buyer is doing at the Relevance gate

Running the same arithmetic with worse information. The buyer is looking for something to measure your fee against, and the anchors available in professional services are the cost of the problem they already have, the risk of carrying it another year, what the incumbent charges, and the size of what they keep missing.

A firm that names none of those has handed the buyer a fee with nothing to measure it against. So the buyer grabs the nearest available number, usually a competitor's rate or whatever they paid last time for something that sounded adjacent. The price then gets judged against a comparison the firm had no part in choosing.

That's the Relevance gate. The buyer is deciding whether the firm is talking about their situation at all, and the decision comes early, quietly, and without anyone telling you it happened. Whatever credibility work follows has to operate inside a frame it didn't choose.

The correction

Decide the opening claim deliberately, rather than inheriting whatever the homepage headline turned into after four rounds of internal edits and one committee.

Name the comparison the buyer should be making, out loud, in the first thing they read. Say what the current situation costs them before any number about the engagement appears anywhere. Not in paragraph four. First.

Here's the concrete move. Take the four things a prospect encounters first: the top of the site, the opening paragraph of a proposal, the first ninety seconds of a meeting, the first line of the follow-up email. In every one of them, the cost of the current situation arrives before the fee does. Once a fee lands first, the fee becomes the anchor, and everything said afterward gets measured against a price rather than against the problem.

Then write the comparison as a single sentence a client could repeat to a colleague without your deck in front of them. If you can't get it into one sentence, you don't have an anchor. You have a headline, and headlines are the thing that got the firm into this.

Defensible beats precise. The number has to be theirs, drawn from their operation or their industry rather than from a benchmark study nobody in the room believes.

One more piece of hygiene. Everyone who talks to prospects uses the same opening sentence, and it stays put longer than feels comfortable. Firms get bored of their own language roughly two years before the market has finished learning it.

Before and after

Before. *We're a specialist advisory firm delivering tailored operational strategy for middle-market manufacturers. Engagements typically begin at $85,000.*

After. *Most middle-market manufacturers we meet are quoting from a process nobody has rebuilt since 2016. It costs them somewhere north of two million a year in work they win late or lose on price. That's the number worth arguing about, and our engagements start at a fraction of one year of it.*

Run this on your own material

Pick three prospects you spoke with in the last six months, including at least one you didn't win. Ask each of them to describe what the firm does, in their own words, and write down what they say before anyone corrects them.

Then listen for whose words come back. If it's the language from the new deck, the anchor moved. If it's the old category, a competitor's framing, or a description of a firm you stopped being years ago, that's the first thing they read, still doing its job.

Three phone calls. Do it before the next proposal goes out.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when prospects open the conversation with their problem in their own terms and a number attached to it. When the fee discussion starts from what the situation costs rather than from someone else's rate. When a referral describes the firm the way you'd describe it, to a person you've never met.

Hold when the first question is about price, or scope, or how the firm compares to a name nobody on your side brought up. That's a buyer working without a reference point of your making, doing what buyers do. Hold too when your own people describe the firm three different ways in the same week. The market can't hold an anchor the firm hasn't set.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · *The $4.3b Man Crush*, on the man who removed every reference point his customers had.

Research Library · Entry 01, bounded rationality. Entry 02, heuristics and cognitive biases.

Next move · Go to *How to describe who you serve*.