THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

Your pitch deck is backward

How to order a pitch deck

Why the order that survives internal review is the reverse of the one a buyer needs

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Gates. **Relevance: primary.** Credibility: secondary. Proof: secondary. Safety: secondary. Access: secondary. This is the rare piece that touches all five, because slide order is where the whole sequence either holds or breaks.

A deck is an argument with a running order. Relevance has to clear before credibility, credibility before proof, proof before risk, and risk before the ask.

The symptom

The deck is accurate. Every number in it survives scrutiny, the design is good enough that nobody comments on the design, and the partner presenting it knows the material cold.

And every meeting goes quiet somewhere around slide nine.

Not hostile. Polite. The prospect is still nodding, still scrolling when you share the screen, still saying this is helpful. The energy in the room has dropped by a measurable amount and nobody in the room can name the moment it happened.

Afterward the debrief lands on the usual suspects. The prospect wasn't a fit. Budget was never real. The competitor had the relationship. Somebody suggests tightening the case studies. Somebody else wants a better close. The deck gets revised, the revision goes out, the next meeting goes quiet at roughly the same place, and the firm keeps looking for the defect inside the slides instead of the order they're in.

Why it keeps happening

Because the deck was assembled in the order the firm thinks about itself.

Who we are. What we do. Who we've done it for. Let's talk. That's an org chart with page numbers, and it survives internal review because every partner can find their section in it. The practice leads see their capability represented. Recruiting sees the culture slide. The founder sees the founding story. A deck that gives everyone a slide gets approved faster than a deck that gives the buyer a sequence, and speed of approval is the metric nobody admits they're optimizing for.

We've written that deck. More than once, and with real conviction at the time. The running order has survived three decades of internal review for the same reason it keeps failing in the room: it was built for the people who sign off on it.

The trouble shows up in what it does to proof. Strong evidence introduced before the buyer has a reason to care reads as pressure rather than as evidence. Complex detail delivered before relevance creates friction the buyer has no motive to push through, and by slide nine they're paying the cost of attention without having been given a reason to spend it.

It’s the marketing equivalent of proposing on a first date. Everything you said was true. None of it was welcome yet.

What the buyer is doing at the Relevance gate

Asking one question, and asking it fast: is this about me.

They’re not weighing your credentials at this stage, because credentials only matter once the subject has been established as theirs. Until then, every accomplishment on the screen belongs to a category of information the buyer is filing rather than reading. Firms consistently mistake that filing for engagement.

The gate is cheap to clear and expensive to skip. A buyer who recognizes their own condition on the first slide will grant you the next twenty minutes of technical depth without complaint. A buyer who hasn’t will treat the same twenty minutes as an imposition, and the polite version of that verdict is the meeting that ends on time with everyone agreeing to circle back.

What makes it hard to diagnose is that the prospect doesn’t argue. Nobody stops the presentation to say the relevance hasn’t been established. They stop. They go quiet, they thank you, they don’t return the follow-up, and the firm never learns why.

The deck has to earn depth before it demands attention. Almost every deck does that backwards.

The correction

Rebuild the running order against the gates, in order, one gate at a time.

Slide one names the condition the buyer is in, in their words, before the firm appears at all. Not the market. Not the trend. The specific situation this specific buyer is sitting in, described closely enough that they’d recognize it if they overheard it. If the firm’s name or logo carries any argumentative weight on this slide, you’ve started at the wrong gate.

Then your understanding of why it’s hard. This is where credibility gets built, and it gets built by demonstrating that you know what the buyer already knows. Naming the complication they haven’t said out loud does more for credibility than a client list does.

Then how the firm thinks about it. Approach, method, the way you’d frame the problem for someone in this position.

Then evidence. Case studies, results, references. The same slides that read as chest-beating on page three read as confirmation on page eleven. Nothing about the material changed. The buyer’s reason to want it did.

Then what could go wrong and what you do about it. Failure modes named honestly, each with a response attached. Safety rarely clears on its own and it never clears from a deck where nothing has ever gone wrong.

Then the smallest next step. Proportional to where belief currently sits, which after one meeting is rarely a signed engagement.

Here's the test for whether the reorder worked. Pull the headlines out of the deck and read them in sequence with no slide bodies underneath. They should make an argument that a stranger can follow. Most decks produce a table of contents.

That test matters more than it used to, because decks get forwarded to people who weren't in the room and increasingly get fed to a model for a summary before any human opens them. Both readers see the headline sequence and little else.

Before and after

Slide one, before. *Founded in 1994, we're a 60-person firm with offices in three markets and a practice built on long-term client relationships.*

Slide one, after. *You're defending a budget you didn't set, for work whose results arrive after the review that decides whether it gets funded again.*

The second one has no information about the firm in it. That's the point. It's the only version that earns slide two.

What backfires

Reordering the slides while keeping all of them. Depth moved later still arrives, and the buyer who stopped at slide nine now stops at slide twenty-two with a better opening behind them.

The other failure is writing slide one in the firm's language and calling it the buyer's condition. Generic pain slides clear nothing. If the sentence would fit any prospect in the pipeline, it fits none of them.

Run this on your own material

Print the headlines from your current deck, in order, on a single page. No bodies, no graphics, no notes.

Hand it to somebody who has never seen the deck and ask them what the meeting is about.

Watch where they hesitate. If the answer comes back as a description of your firm, the running order is built for internal review. If they can tell you what problem the meeting exists to solve and roughly how you'd approach it, the sequence is doing its job and the slides underneath are supporting it.

Do this before the next pitch rather than after the next silent room. It takes fifteen minutes and one honest person.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when the buyer interrupts the first section to add detail you didn't have. When they correct your description of their situation instead of agreeing with it, which means they're inside the material. When somebody asks a question that jumps ahead to method or evidence, because that's the gate opening early.

Hold when the first substantive question is about the firm rather than the problem. When they ask you to send the deck instead of walking them through it. When the room stays agreeable all the way to the end... polite attention is the most reliable signal you're presenting to people who never found themselves in it.

Where this connects

Engagement Success in an AI World · Built to Be Read, on the five gates as a hard constraint rather than a menu.

Research Library · Entry 13, the buyer's path and touchpoint sequencing.

Next move · Go to *How to sequence information in a deck*, which handles what to do with everything the reorder pushed out.