THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

No, the first ten minutes aren't yours

How to open a pitch meeting

What changes when the first ten minutes belong to the prospect instead of the firm

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What changes when the first ten minutes belong to the prospect instead of the firm

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

Open with three things you've learned about this prospect's situation that you'd stand behind whether or not you get the work. Credentials come after. The order is the proof.

The symptom

Founded in. Offices in. Practice areas. A wall of notable client logos, and then a slide about the culture.

Fifteen minutes in, nothing has been said that couldn't have been said, word for word, to any other company in the same industry. The room stays polite the entire time. People nod. Somebody asks a friendly question about the Chicago office. The meeting runs exactly on schedule.

Then the part specific to this prospect finally starts, and it starts to an audience that has already spent a quarter of the meeting learning the firm is competent and interchangeable.

Nobody complains. Nobody in that room will ever tell you the opening was the problem, because the opening was fine. It was fine the last four times, too.

Why it keeps happening

The opening is the most rehearsed part of a pitch and the least examined. It's the opening the firm has always used, meetings keep getting scheduled, work keeps getting won often enough, and nothing in that loop forces anyone to look at it.

It also solves a real problem for the presenter. People are still settling, coats are coming off, somebody's finishing a call in the hallway, and whoever's leading needs words while the room assembles itself. Firm background is the easiest material to deliver with confidence. It requires no preparation specific to this account, it can't be contradicted by anyone present, and it fills the time. It's just aimed at nobody in the room.

We've done this. We've opened with the firm overview in a room where somebody had flown in for the meeting, and spent the first fifteen minutes on the only subject nobody there needed. Everyone was gracious about it. That's the trap. Having sat through enough of these, we'd say the polite version of the room is the one to worry about, because politeness costs the buyer nothing and tells the firm nothing.

What the buyer is doing at the Proof gate

Deciding whether this firm can show or only tell.

Everything in the credentials section is a claim about work done for somebody else, verified by nobody in the room. An opening built from real observations about their market is a demonstration, performed live, on their problem, at their table.

It's also the cheapest demonstration available. A case study costs a completed engagement and a client willing to be named. Preparation costs a few hours and the willingness to spend them before anyone has agreed to pay.

Which produces the thing no case study can produce: evidence the firm did work on this account before there was money attached to it. Value given freely, with no invoice behind it, is the one proof of intent and competence a skeptic has real trouble arguing with. They can dismiss your references as cherry-picked. They can't dismiss the hours somebody spent on their market last Tuesday.

Brilliance has very little to do with it. The buyer is reading the opening as a sample of how the firm behaves when nothing has been signed...which is the only sample they have.

The correction

Build the first ten minutes out of three observations about the prospect's situation, and hold each one to a single test: would the firm stand behind it whether or not it gets the work?

Make them observations. A question puts the labor on the buyer, and after the fourth discovery call of the month he's tired of doing the firm's homework. An observation puts the labor where it belongs.

Say out loud that the material is useful regardless of how the conversation goes. Then mean it, because the room can tell the difference between a gift and a setup, and a gift that turns out to have a hook in it costs more than the meeting.

Now the harder discipline. Cut the firm-background section to under two minutes, move it behind the insight, and deliver it when someone in the room has a reason to want it. Most of the material in that section survives as a handout. Snippet 10 covers the order of the slides in the deck. This is the order of what gets said, which the deck doesn't control and can't fix.

Last, decide in advance what happens when one of the three observations turns out to be wrong. It will happen, and it should. The buyer knows that market better than you do after two weeks of research, and they will correct you. The answer is to ask what you got wrong, write it down where the room can see you writing it down, and let the correction stand without repair. Trust was earned during the moments when the presentation broke. The prepared material proves the firm can prepare. What the buyer is measuring is what's left when the prepared material stops.

Before and after

Before. *Thanks for having us. Let me start with a little background on the firm. We've been in business since the eighties, we have offices in four markets, and our client list includes several names you'd recognize.*

After. *Before we talk about our firm, let me share three things we've learned about your specific market that might be useful regardless of where this conversation goes.*

The first opening asks the room to be impressed. The second hands them something they get to keep.

What backfires

Observations that are really industry trends wearing a name badge. If the same three points would work for any company on that list, the room will register the effort and discount the specificity, and you've now demonstrated that the firm's idea of insight is a search result.

Flattery counts as generic. Three observations that all conclude the prospect is doing well aren't observations.

And the worst version: delivering the insight, collecting the goodwill, then pivoting into the full forty-minute credentials deck anyway. The buyer will read the opening backward as a technique, and everything after it as the real meeting.

Run this on your own material

Pull up the agenda for your next pitch. Mark the exact point where something specific to this prospect first appears, the first sentence that would be wrong if you sent it to a competitor of theirs.

Then look at where that mark falls on the clock.

If it's past minute five, the opening is doing a different job than the one it was given. Move the mark forward and see what has to come out to get it there. Whatever comes out is the material the firm has been delivering because it's comfortable to deliver.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when somebody interrupts inside the first ten minutes. When one of your three observations gets corrected, in detail, by a person who wasn't planning to talk. When a name gets added to the meeting on the spot. When the credentials never come up, because nobody needed them.

Hold when the first prospect-specific sentence lands after the credentials. When the observations survive a copy-paste into another pitch unchanged. When the room is warm and agreeable and asks nothing. And hold when someone requests the firm background early and you feel relief, because that's the opening you were prepared for rather than the one they needed.

Where this connects

Engagement Success in an AI World · When Everyone Stopped Reading, on where trust gets decided when the presentation breaks.

Research Library · Entry 18, expertise and pattern recognition.

Next move · Go to *How to sequence information in a deck*.