THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

The work you refused is evidence

How to write about work you turned down

What a declined engagement proves that a win can't

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

A record of wins shows a firm can do the work. A record of the engagements it turned away, with the reasons attached, shows it knows which work it shouldn't take. Capability can't reach the second one.

The symptom

Pull up the firm's credentials page and scroll it.

Every entry is something the firm did. A system implemented, a fund raised, a merger closed, a campaign that worked. The page has been rebuilt three times and every rebuild added more of the same, because that's the only kind of entry anyone thinks to add.

Now look for the other entry. Something the firm was offered and didn't take. A situation it walked away from, and why.

It isn't there. It's never been there. Nothing on that page records a decision the firm made about its own work, which means a buyer reading it learns what the firm is able to do and nothing about what it would refuse. The record shows activity. Judgment is a different thing and it isn't on the page.

Why it keeps happening

A win is easy to write about and easy to clear. The client's happy, somebody already approved a quote, and legal has seen this shape of document a hundred times.

A decline is none of that. The client never became one, so there's no relationship to ask permission from. The conversation happened on a call nobody minuted. The judgment behind it was one partner's read of a situation, and another partner might have taken the work. Write it down and you're publishing an opinion the firm has never had to defend in writing.

Then there's the part nobody says out loud in the approval meeting. Publishing a decline feels like advertising lost revenue, like announcing to the market that the firm left money on the table last quarter.

So the most distinctive thing a firm knows about itself stays in the room where it was decided. What gets published instead is the accumulated pile of successes, and a process description assembled only from success stories reads to an experienced buyer as a narrative fitted after the fact. It produces skepticism where confidence was the whole point.

What the buyer is doing at the Credibility gate

Working out whether the people on the other side of the table understand the problem well enough to be taken seriously.

Anyone can claim selectivity. We've read that claim on close to every professional-services website we've touched, and it costs nothing to say, which is why a buyer discounts it before finishing the sentence. A specific engagement the firm declined, with the reason attached, turns the claim into something checkable.

It also answers a question the buyer has and won't ask you: whether you'll tell them the truth when the truth costs you money. A firm that has published a decline has already done that once, in public, at its own expense.

There's a Safety effect that arrives free with it. A published decline tells a buyer the firm has a boundary somewhere, which means the engagement they're weighing sits inside that boundary deliberately rather than by default, and that somebody would have said so if it didn't.

The correction

Publish the criteria first. Then the instances.

Write the three conditions under which the firm says no. Plainly, in the language you'd use on a call with a partner. Values-statement language ruins this faster than anything else. The timeline demands a result the work can't produce. The budget forces a scope that would fail. The problem sits outside what the firm has done often enough to do well.

Then one anonymised example of each, from the last year. What the situation was, what the firm said, and what it recommended instead. That last piece carries more weight than it looks like it should. A decline with a redirect attached reads as judgment. A decline on its own reads as a firm that was busy that month.

Handle confidentiality the way you handle any case material. Describe the situation type in place of the client: a regional health system, a founder-led manufacturer, a fund in its second close. Then clear it through the same process a case study goes through, because the legal question here is the familiar one wearing a different coat.

Piece 33 covers naming the failure modes inside work you took. These are the engagements that never got that far.

Then put the whole thing where a buyer weighing fit will hit it, which is the engagement page and the FAQ. A blog post scrolls out of view in six weeks, and nobody choosing between two firms goes digging through the archive.

A published decline is also a claim no competitor's material contains. When a summary compresses the category, the shared claims average away and the unusual specific one survives.

Before and after

Before. *We're highly selective and only take on engagements where we're confident we can deliver exceptional value.*

After. *We say no to three kinds of work. Last year we declined a regional distributor's brand refresh because the timeline required results the channel couldn't produce inside two quarters, and we pointed them to a firm built for faster campaigns. We also passed on a specialty insurance mandate, because we've worked in that category twice and twice isn't enough to charge for.*

What backfires

The version where every decline was the client's fault. Unrealistic timeline, unrealistic budget, unrealistic expectations, difficult stakeholders. Three of those in a row and you've published a complaint about buyers with a selectivity label glued to the front.

We've written that document. It's a worse one, and the tell is that nothing in it costs the firm anything to admit.

At least one of the three conditions has to reflect on the firm's own limits. A capability it doesn't have. A sector it's been in twice and won't pretend to know. That's the condition a buyer stops on, and it's the one that makes the other two believable.

Run this on your own material

Ask three partners to name the last engagement the firm turned down and the reason. Ask them separately. Write down what each one says.

If the three answers describe three different situations, the criteria live in three heads and nowhere else, which is fixable in one meeting with the door closed.

If nobody can name a single one, that's the finding, and it's a bigger finding than anything on the website. Sit with it before you write a word of copy.

Then test whichever declines you do have against the confidentiality question. Could the situation be described without naming the client? Most of the time it can, and the exceptions will tell you which corners of your market are too small to write about at all.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when a buyer brings the criteria back to you in a first conversation. When somebody says their situation sounds like the second one on your list and wants to know whether you'd take it anyway. When the question moves from whether the firm can do the work to whether they qualify for it, which is a better conversation to be having.

Hold when the three conditions read as work any competent firm would decline. Bad-faith negotiations, impossible budgets, buyers who can't sign. Nobody's impressed by a firm that turns down work nobody wants. Hold too when the examples came out of a marketing session rather than the file, because one follow-up question from a buyer will find the bottom of an invented decline fast.

Where this connects

Engagement Success in an AI World · When Everyone Stopped Reading, on judgment as the thing that stays scarce.

Research Library · Entry 18, expertise, pattern recognition and judgment.

Next move · Go to *How to name what could go wrong*.