How to branch a sequence

Why everyone who downloaded something gets the same emails, and shouldn't

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

A prospect who picks one download over another has told you which topic earned their attention. The follow-up either continues that topic or teaches them the choice meant nothing.

Questions this guide answers

- How should follow-up change when prospects choose content about different problems?
- What should change between follow-up branches, and what should stay consistent?
- How can we branch follow-up before we have automation available?

The symptom

Two people downloaded two different guides last month. One took the piece on cost pressure. The other took the one about revenue growth stalling in a mature market. Different problems, different reasons for showing up, a few hours apart.

Both of them got the same five emails.

Same subject lines, same order, same ask on day fourteen, sent from the same address by the same automation. Nothing in any of the five referred to the thing either person had picked up, or to the fact that they'd picked up different things at all. The system did exactly what it was built to do. That's the part worth sitting with, because nobody made a mistake here. Somebody built one good sequence and pointed every form on the site at it.

Why it keeps happening

One sequence is one thing to write. One thing to route through approval, one thing to fix when a link breaks, one thing somebody has to own. Two sequences is two of everything. Five is a small department.

So the second branch goes on the list, and it stays there, because the first one is performing acceptably. Acceptable performance is the most effective argument against additional work that has ever been invented. Open rates are fine. A reply comes in now and then. Nothing is visibly broken, and nothing visibly broken is nobody's Tuesday priority.

What got built in the meantime is a sequence written for the average prospect, assembled by averaging away every specific thing that brought any actual prospect in. We've written the one sequence for the average prospect, and the average prospect has never replied to anything.

The same instinct produces the follow-up that repeats one ask five times in five different phrasings. Circling back. Checking in. Wanted to make sure this reached you. Read four of those in a row and you learn something durable about the sender, which is that nothing you do changes what arrives next.

What the buyer is doing at the Relevance gate

They told you already. That's the whole event.

Choosing one asset over another is the first piece of information a prospect volunteers, and it costs the firm nothing to collect. It arrives at the single moment they raised their hand. Then the first email lands and refers to none of it.

Relevance is the gate where the reader decides whether this firm appears to understand the problem they came in with. The download had half-cleared it. They found the title, recognised something of their own situation in it, and decided that recognition was worth an email address. Generic follow-up closes the gate again, and closes it harder than silence would have. Silence is neutral. Five emails about something else is evidence.

The reason I favor response-triggered progressions has nothing to do with clever automation. Each subsequent touch continues the thread the prospect chose. The alternative reverts to whatever the firm most wants to say, immediately after the reader indicated what they wanted to hear about.

The correction

Build two branches rather than five. Two is achievable and gets maintained. Five is a plan that never ships, and a plan that never ships leaves the single generic sequence running for another year.

Pick the one distinction that matters most in your market. In most professional-services firms that's problem type rather than industry or seniority. A cost-reduction path and a revenue-growth path from the same firm are two genuinely different arguments, and each one continues its own line of reasoning through every touch. Two industry variants are usually the same argument with different photography.

Then hold the content rule, because this is where branching goes wrong. The branch changes the examples, the proof and the next resource offered. The firm's position stays constant across both. The argument can change with the problem the reader chose. A cost-pressure branch and a growth branch should still sound like one firm. A reader who somehow saw both sequences should recognise one firm with two areas of work, rather than two firms with unrelated opinions.

Name the maintenance discipline before you build anything, because maintenance is what kills branching. Each branch gets an owner and a review date. Without both, eighteen months from now you have two sequences and one of them is wrong: a stale case study, a resource that moved, a claim the firm stopped making. The wrong one goes to whoever self-selected into it, which means the failure lands on the prospects who told you the most about themselves.

If the firm can't build automation, or can't get it approved this quarter, there's a version that costs nothing. Send one sequence with a branching first email. Ask the reader which thread they want,

give them two clear options, and send the rest manually. It works, response rates on it are usually better than anyone expects, and it has the advantage of being honest about what's happening. Somebody is reading the reply and choosing what to send next, which is what the reader wanted from the automated version anyway.

Before and after

Before. *Thanks for downloading our guide. Here are three more resources our clients find valuable. Let us know if you'd like to schedule a call.*

After. *You picked up the piece on cost pressure. The part most firms miss is on page nine: the savings show up in year two, and the board asks about them in year one. Here's how two firms handled that gap. If revenue growth is the more pressing problem right now, tell me and I'll send that thread instead.*

What backfires

Branching on the wrong distinction. Two sequences that differ only by industry label produce identical arguments in different costumes, and the reader can tell inside one email. You've doubled the maintenance and changed nothing about relevance.

Branching the positioning along with the content is the other failure. When the cost path and the growth path describe the firm differently, the firm has quietly become two firms, and neither one is memorable.

Run this on your own material

Find the last two people who downloaded different assets from your site. Pull the actual emails they received afterward, in order, as they landed in the inbox. Read them side by side.

If the two columns are identical, you know what to build. If they differ only in the subject line, that's worse, because somebody already did the work of pretending.

Then ask one more question of the sequence they both got: does any email in it refer to what the reader chose? Not the industry, not the job title. The problem. This takes twenty minutes and you can do it before the next campaign goes out.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when replies come back referencing the specific topic the reader selected. When someone asks for the other thread by name. When the third and fourth touches still feel like a continuation of the first rather than a fresh pitch bolted on.

Hold when you can't name the one distinction that matters in your market. Two branches built on a distinction the buyer doesn't feel is a more expensive version of the same problem. Hold when nobody's name is attached to the second branch, and hold when the branches would draw on the same examples and the same proof, because that's the sequence telling you it hasn't split into two arguments yet.

Where this connects

Engagement Success in an AI World · Proximity is No Longer Measured in Miles, on describing the problem precisely enough that the reader recognises themselves in it.

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

Next move · Go to *How to connect one email to the last*.