THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

The first decider isn't looking for permission

How to approach the buyer who decides first

Why handing an anchor a peer case study tells them they're late

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

The Anchor Client comes first and requires no social proof. Send one a peer case study and you've told them they're late. Their commitment is what makes proof possible for everyone else.

The symptom

The best material went to the best name on the list.

That's how it always goes. Somebody pulls the target list, somebody circles the most impressive logo on it, and the firm sends that prospect everything it has: the case studies, the client roster, the slide showing how many firms in their category have already signed. Months of work went into that material. It's accurate. It's well built. Sending it to the most valuable prospect feels like the obvious call.

Nothing came back. No reply, no forward, no polite decline. And because the material was good, nobody in the debrief could name what went wrong, so the conclusion was the one that's always available: bad timing, wrong quarter, they must be locked into someone else.

Then the same sequence went out to the next impressive name.

Why it keeps happening

Proof is expensive. A case study takes months, a client's permission, a legal review, and somebody's patience. Once a firm finally owns a good one, the instinct is to put it in front of everybody, and that instinct is correct almost everywhere. Strongest evidence, strongest prospect. Nobody has to defend that decision in a meeting.

It's backwards for exactly one segment, and it happens to be the segment that determines whether the rest of the sequence works at all.

We've led with the case studies, on the exact prospect where they cost the most. The mistake still has a certain logic to it, which is why it survives. The material was the firm's best asset. It went to the firm's best opportunity. The only thing wrong was the audience.

The Anchor Client, from the segmentation work, reported accurately about themselves. They come first. They require no social proof. Their commitment creates the credibility foundation that activates every subsequent segment. The persona is the alpha competitor, often self-made, motivated by winning, exclusivity, and strategic advantage. Ask one how they decide and you get some version of *I trust my gut*.

Social proof works by demonstrating that respected others went first. An Anchor's entire self-concept is that they are the respected other. The evidence that reassures every other segment demotes this one.

What the buyer is doing at the Credibility gate

Nothing you'd recognize as due diligence.

An Anchor runs a much narrower check than the one your material is built to pass. Two questions: is this firm worth my attention, and is being first here an advantage or an embarrassment. Whether the market trusts the firm, whether the category has validated it, whether anyone respectable has signed off on it, none of that is on the table.

Both of those get answered by the quality of the thinking in front of them. Credibility for this buyer lives in whether you understand their problem better than they expected a stranger to, and in what kind of access is on the table. Who else signed is close to irrelevant, and when it appears too early it answers the second question the wrong way.

There's a machine version of this now, and it works against you the same way: ask a model to summarize a firm and it will lead with who else has bought, which is the one fact an Anchor was never asking for.

The correction

Build one sequence, for six to ten named Anchors. Not a segment, not a persona bucket. Names, chosen deliberately, with a real argument for why each one belongs on the list.

Snippet 24 covers the full five-segment sequence and the order the work runs in. This is the first segment only, and it gets its own build.

Lead with the unresolved problem and your framing of it. Open on something in their world that hasn't been solved and that you have a defensible view about. The view is the credential. An Anchor will read three paragraphs of genuinely useful thinking from a stranger and will not read one paragraph about your client roster.

Give something away with nothing attached. An analysis, a piece of research, a read on their market that took real work. No meeting request, no next step, no invoice. Value given freely is the one proof of intent and competence a skeptic can't argue with, because there's no other explanation for why you'd do it.

Name what they get that later clients won't. Direct senior involvement. Influence over how the work develops. First position. This is the actual offer, and it's the part most firms leave out because it feels like it belongs in a contract discussion.

Hold every case study and every logo until after they commit. All of it. The client list, the peer-adoption slide, the number of firms served. Don't lead with results or service terms.

Then the part that pays for the whole approach: their commitment becomes the proof asset for the next four segments. You weren't withholding evidence out of modesty. You were making the evidence you'll need later.

Before and after

Before. *We've worked with 40+ firms in your sector, including three of the top ten. Attached is a case study showing how we helped a peer firm increase qualified pipeline by 60%. Do you have 20 minutes next week?*

After. *Your category has a referral problem nobody's naming, and we think we know why. The attached is our read on it, built from our own research, no strings. If it's useful and you want to go further, we're taking on a small number of firms at the front of this work, which means our senior people, and real influence over how the approach develops.*

What backfires

Promising first position to all ten names. Exclusivity you can't deliver is a lie with a short shelf life, and Anchors talk to each other more than most segments do. Pick the ones where the offer is true.

Run this on your own material

Pull the last outreach your firm sent to the most impressive name on the list. Email, deck, letter, whatever went out.

Count the sentences that describe who else has already bought. Client names, logos, numbers served, category adoption. Then count the sentences that say something about that prospect's problem that they didn't already know.

If the first number beats the second, you sent a proof document to a buyer who was never asking for proof.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when they respond to the substance rather than the offer, when they argue with your framing, when they forward the analysis internally, when the reply comes from the principal instead of an assistant. Interest from an Anchor tends to look like engagement with the idea rather than a request for more information about you.

Hold when they ask who else you've worked with. That's a different segment's question showing up in an Anchor's mouth, and it usually means either the framing wasn't strong enough to carry the conversation on its own, or the person on the list was never an Anchor. Hold too when the reply routes you to procurement.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · *The Rule Nobody Voted For*, on becoming part of the question rather than winning a comparison.

Research Library · Entry 08, authority and social proof.

Next move · Go to *How to sell to the buyer afraid of being wrong*, which is the same evidence in the opposite order.