THE DECISION SEQUENCE
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

Some prospects should be ignored

How to spot a prospect worth dropping

What eighteen months of quarterly check-ins really cost

THEDECISIONSEQUENCE.COM
A J. WORDEN COMPANY · JWORDEN.COM

How to spot a prospect worth dropping

What eighteen months of quarterly check-ins really cost

Gates. Relevance: no. Credibility: no. Proof: no. Safety: no. **Access: primary.** Access is where it lands, though this is a triage decision that sits outside the gates rather than inside any one of them.

Some prospects will never buy, and the firm keeps paying for them one quarterly check-in at a time. Mark those names by rule at the pipeline review, so nobody has to make the call in the room.

The symptom

Three names have been on the pipeline review since the spring before last.

Everyone knows which three. They come up in the same order, get the same forty seconds, and get the same update, which is that we're staying close and there's a touch-base on the calendar. Somebody mentions that the timing has been hard on their end. Somebody nods. The meeting moves on to the accounts where something is happening.

Six quarters. Nobody has said no.

That's the part worth sitting with. In eighteen months no one on either side of the table has said the word, and every quarter the absence of a no gets read as something other than an answer. Each name still carries a probability, adjusted downward once, in year one, and untouched since.

Why it keeps happening

Because an open opportunity costs nothing anybody can see, and closing one requires a person to say out loud that it isn't happening.

Hope is free on a spreadsheet. The name sits in the column, carries a number, and makes the quarter look better than the quarter is. Remove it and the forecast drops, someone asks why, and the honest answer involves having been wrong a year and a half ago. Everything the name costs happens somewhere else, in hours, on a calendar, where the firm has no line item for it.

Those hours aren't cheap either. The quarterly touch-base goes to a partner, because it's a relationship and relationships get partner time. So the most expensive hours in the building get spent on the prospect least likely to buy, four times a year, and nowhere does that register as a cost. It registers as diligence.

We've kept a name on the list for six quarters because removing it felt like giving up. That's the whole reason, and it had nothing to do with the prospect. The partner hours that went there should have gone to somebody ready.

What the buyer is doing at the Access gate

Standing somewhere the sequence doesn't reach.

Most outreach assumes a buyer waiting at a gate for the material that gets them through it. Send the right thing at the right moment and they take the next step. That works on the segments that take steps.

This buyer belongs to the one that doesn't. In segmentation the label is Laggards, and the defining characteristic is extreme risk aversion combined with decision paralysis that no amount of evidence or social proof resolves. Read that last clause twice, because it's the part firms keep funding. More proof is not a strategy for this buyer. The barrier was never evidential.

Meanwhile the firm keeps offering the next proportional step. A call, then a working session, then a scoped assessment, each one reasonable, each one sized to where the relationship looks like it is. Every one of them assumes somebody who takes steps.

The email costs almost nothing. The attention behind it was the only thing the firm had to give the segment that would have moved.

The correction

Build the triage into the pipeline review, running on a rule, rather than into anybody's judgment in the moment. Judgment in the moment always says give it another quarter, because another quarter is free.

Three signals mark a prospect for minimal allocation. Two of them, and the name moves.

No unprompted contact in two quarters. Every exchange started on your side, and replies don't count. A prospect with something at stake occasionally reaches out on their own schedule, about their own thing.

No movement in who's involved. Same one or two people, same titles, nobody new on a call, nobody who would have to sign. A live opportunity picks up people as it goes.

A stated reason for delay that hasn't changed. Budget cycle, reorganization, waiting on the new hire. Real obstacles resolve, or they get replaced by different ones. Six quarters of the same sentence describes weather rather than an obstacle.

Then define what minimal allocation means, because dropping doesn't mean deleting. Newsletter only. No partner time. No custom material, no tailored deck, no scoped anything. One calendar reminder a year, and if something has changed by then they'll say so in the first two minutes.

Before any of that, have the direct conversation. Ask what would have to change for this to move, plainly enough that a polite non-answer is recognizable as one, and don't dress it up as a check-in. Usually the answer is real, and a real answer is useful whether or not it's the one anybody wanted. Occasionally the question does what eighteen months of nurture couldn't, and the thing revives on the spot, because somebody finally treated them like an adult with a decision in front of them.

Before and after

Before. *Hi Dana, checking in as we head into Q3. Wanted to see whether anything has shifted on your end, and whether it makes sense to grab thirty minutes. I'll send the updated case studies over in the meantime.*

After. *Dana, we've been talking for a year and a half and neither of us has moved. What would have to change for this to become something you'd take to your board? If the honest answer is nothing this year, that's a fine answer, and I'll stop filling your calendar.*

When this doesn't apply

Slow doesn't mean dead. Plenty of prospects take a long time and then buy, and that segment has a name too: Late Mainstream. They convert late, on consensus evidence, once enough comparable organizations have gone first. Dropping them early is an expensive mistake in the other direction.

The two look identical on a pipeline report, which is why the distinction is worth stating carefully. A Late Mainstream buyer is waiting for other people to move. A Laggard is waiting for the decision to stop being necessary.

So the signals matter more than the tempo. A Late Mainstream prospect adds people, revises the stated reason, and surfaces when something shifts in their market. Watch what moves rather than how fast.

Run this on your own material

Open the pipeline and mark every opportunity where the last meaningful movement came from the firm rather than the prospect. A meeting you requested. A document you sent. A follow-up you put on the calendar. Movement from them means they initiated, introduced somebody, or changed what they were asking for.

Then total the partner hours those marked opportunities consumed last quarter. Not the email time. Prep, the call, the internal debrief afterward, the custom material somebody built for it.

Set that number next to the hours that went to the work that closed, and to the accounts you keep saying you'd pursue if there were time.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when the direct question produces something you didn't already know. When a new name appears on their side without you asking for it. When the stated reason for delay changes, which sounds minor and is the most reliable signal on the list.

Hold when they're warm, responsive, generous with their time, and nothing ever moves. Warmth is the trap, because it feels like progress and costs what progress costs. Hold too when the answer to what would have to change comes back as a version of we're just not there yet... the sentence from quarter one wearing a different jacket. And hold when the reason for keeping the name is that it's been in the pipeline long enough that removing it would look like a concession.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · *The Decision You Could Survive*, on the buyer who needs permission rather than information.

Research Library · Entry 05, status quo bias.

Next move · Go to *How to sequence outreach*.