THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

The buyer has to survive choosing you

How to help a buyer defend the decision

Why the person signing is solving
a different problem than the one you're pitching

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How to help a buyer defend the decision to go with you

Why the person signing is solving a different problem than the one you're pitching

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

Every buyer is purchasing two things: the outcome, and the ability to live with having chosen it. Most proposals address one of them.

A document that only argues the firm is better answers a question that closed before the meeting.

The symptom

The firm won on the merits and lost anyway.

Better references. Sharper approach. A team that had done the exact thing twice before. The evaluation committee said so out loud, in the room, and then the work went to the larger firm with the worse fit and the longer timeline.

Somebody called it politics. Somebody else said the incumbent had the relationship. Both of those are true enough to end the conversation and vague enough to guarantee it happens again next quarter.

Why it keeps happening

Because the firm is optimizing for the wrong risk, and it's the only risk the firm can see.

There are two, and they don't move together. **Outcome risk** is whether the decision produces the result. That one belongs to the company, it's the one your proposal is built to address, and it's the one everybody talks about. **Decision risk** is what happens to the person who made the recommendation if it doesn't. That one belongs to a human being with a mortgage.

Success disappears into the organization. The system works, the reports arrive, nobody convenes the executive committee to applaud the person who picked something that functioned as expected. Failure has a much better memory. Failure gets meetings. Failure gets names. And failure eventually arrives at a question that appeared nowhere in the requirements document: who chose these guys?

Three decades of sitting inside executive committee meetings watching providers get screened out, and the thing that took longest to understand is that the selection rarely went to the most capable firm. Nobody in those rooms was being dishonest about it. They were solving a problem the vendors didn't know was on the table.

What the buyer is doing at the Safety gate

Weighing whether they can carry the choice into the rooms where they'll have to answer for it. That's a separate question from whether the firm is any good, and it stays open long after the capability question has closed.

The asymmetry is brutal and almost nobody prices it. An unfamiliar firm gets asked *why this?* The established one gets asked *why not?* Those aren't the same question, and no specification sheet has ever closed the gap between them.

Which is why the pitch keeps missing. The challenger announces eighteen percent better. The buyer is quietly working out whether eighteen percent better is worth owning a hundred percent of the explanation when it goes badly.

And more information doesn't help, which is the part that surprises people. Give a buyer a model that tells them the challenger is technically superior and you've reduced their uncertainty about the product while leaving their uncertainty about the consequences of choosing it exactly where it was. *The AI said they were better* isn't a career defense. The buyer needs more than an answer. They need permission to act on one.

The correction

Build the document nobody has: one page the buyer can forward to someone who was never in the room.

Not a summary of your proposal. A defense of their decision, written for the person who will interrogate it. It needs four things and it fits on a page.

Who else made this call. Named, comparable, and reachable. A reference does something a case study can't, which is demonstrate that another reasonable executive made the same judgment and is still employed.

What could go wrong, in your words first. The two or three real failure modes, named honestly, each with a response attached. A record with no visible failure modes reads as marketing, and a buyer who can't find the risk in your material assumes you hid it.

How small the first step is. A pilot shrinks the decision and makes it reversible. A phased scope means the commitment isn't all-or-nothing. Reversibility is worth more to this reader than confidence is.

What happens if it isn't working. The exit, the escalation path, the review point. This costs you nothing and buys more than anything else on the page, because it's the only item that speaks to the thing they're afraid of.

Then keep capability out of it. That argument was already won, or the proposal wouldn't have reached this stage.

Before and after

Before. *Our platform delivers 18% faster implementation than legacy providers, backed by 200+ successful deployments.*

After. *Three firms your size ran this in the last eighteen months. Here are two you can call. The most common way it goes wrong is a data migration that runs three weeks long, which happened to one of them, and here's the fix. Start with one business unit. If it isn't working at ninety days, you stop, and you keep the mapping work.*

What backfires

Naming a risk you have no answer for. Honesty about failure modes only builds Safety when each one arrives attached to a response. Without that you've handed your champion a list of reasons to lose the argument.

Run this on your own material

Take the last proposal you lost after a strong evaluation. Read it as the champion who had to defend the choice to a boss who never met anyone from the firm. Count the sentences that would survive that room.

Then count the ones arguing the firm is better. If the second number is larger, that's the loss, explained.

Run it before the next proposal goes out rather than after the next loss.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when the questions turn from capability to logistics: onboarding, timelines, who's on the account. When they ask for something specifically to show someone else. When the champion starts using the firm's own language in a meeting nobody from the firm attended.

Hold when they keep asking for more evidence the work can be done. That's the capability question reopening, and it means the exposure question was never addressed. More proof at that point makes it worse. Hold too when the only advocate is the person who wants it and not the person who signs.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · *The Decision You Could Survive*. Gene Amdahl built the better machine and lost to a sentence: nobody ever got fired for buying IBM.

Research Library · Entry 04, regret theory (Loomes and Sugden). Entry 05, status quo bias (Samuelson and Zeckhauser). Entry 14, professional-services buying and the committee. Entry 21, identity, defensibility and social risk.

Next move · Safety clearing opens Access. Go to *How to know when to make the ask*, and keep the first step smaller than it feels like it should be.