THE DECISION SEQUENCE
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

Sending the tenth document won't help

How to respond when they ask for one more document

Why the tenth was never going to work

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How to respond when they ask for one more document

Why the tenth resource wasn't going to convert them either

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

A buyer who already has the case studies, the references and the credentials is asking for one more document for a reason that document can't fix. Send it and the next request arrives on schedule.

The symptom

They've seen the case studies. They've spoken to two references, and both said the things references say when a firm is good. The credentials were reviewed, questioned lightly, and accepted.

Then they ask for one more document.

You send it that afternoon, because fast turnaround is what a well-run firm does. Two days later there's another request. A methodology overview. A staffing breakdown. Something on the timeline with more detail than the last one had. Each request is reasonable, each response goes out clean and quick, and nothing moves in either direction.

Nobody inside the firm calls this a problem. The deal is active, there's correspondence, somebody is answering email at nine at night to keep it warm. Meanwhile the close date slips twice and the file turns into a research project neither side has the standing to end.

Why it keeps happening

Because the request is legible and the alternative isn't.

Hesitation shows up, and a firm reads hesitation as an information gap. That reading isn't stupid. Information is the one thing a firm can manufacture on demand. Another document costs a day, sits inside the firm's control, and gives everyone something visible to point at in the pipeline meeting. Asking a buyer what's holding the decision up has no script, and it might come back with an answer nobody wants to hear.

So the proposal expands. Questions arrive and the response gets longer. More data, more charts, more footnotes, better rational argument. It's a failure signature you can spot from across the room: a document set that grows every time the buyer goes quiet, stacked with facts that move nothing.

We've sent the tenth document. It went out fast, it was good, and it was answering a question that closed weeks earlier.

The part that stays surprising is how competent it looks while it's happening. Hesitation in professional services is almost always psychological. Firms keep treating it as informational because information is what they have in stock.

What the buyer is doing at the Safety gate

Capability stopped being the question several documents ago. They believe the firm can do the work. That belief settled somewhere around the second reference call.

What's open is exposure. Somebody has to sign this, and that same somebody has to explain the signature later if it goes badly, in a room where the firm won't be present and where nobody is going to read the case studies aloud. The buyer is weighing whether they can carry the choice into that room.

Which is why the material keeps failing to land. More information can reduce a buyer's uncertainty about the work while leaving their uncertainty about the consequences of choosing you exactly where it was.

Asking for material is also the only socially acceptable way to stall. No buyer says *I'm not confident I can defend this internally.* They say the timeline needs more detail. The stall has to be dressed as diligence, and diligence looks exactly like what you've been receiving.

The correction

Stop answering the stated request and address the exposure.

Something still goes out. What changes is what accompanies it. Four moves, all doable inside a week.

Name the risk out loud before they do. Say the thing the buyer is worried about, in plain language, first. *The concern with a firm our size is what happens if your lead contact leaves mid-engagement.* Then answer it and stop talking. A risk the buyer had to uncover reads as something you concealed. A risk you raised yourself reads as something you've already handled.

Make the decision reversible. Offer a smaller first engagement. One business unit, ninety days, a defined stopping point where the work already completed stays useful to them. Shrinking the commitment does more for a stalled decision than any volume of proof, because it lowers what the signature costs if the thing goes sideways.

Write the internal defense language. Your champion has to argue this in a meeting the firm won't attend. Give them the two or three sentences they'll use when someone senior pushes back. A champion improvising your value proposition from memory under questioning is the most common way a strong position gets lost in a room you can't see.

Tell them what would make you the wrong choice. Plainly, with a real example. *If you need six people on site starting next month, that isn't us.* Firms hate this one. It's also the fastest credibility available at this stage, on the simple grounds that nobody selling something says it.

Then replace the eleventh document with a question. Ask what would have to be true for this to be an easy yes, and listen for which kind of answer comes back. If it's about the work, there's a real information gap and you should go close it. If it's about the room, about who else has to agree and how this gets explained upstairs, nothing you attach to an email will reach it.

Before and after

Before. *Attached is the additional methodology overview you requested, plus two supplementary case studies. Happy to send anything else that would be helpful.*

After. *Overview attached. Before I send more, one question: what would have to be true for this to be an easy yes? If the answer is that somebody upstairs still needs convincing, tell me who and what they care about, and I'll write the page you hand them instead of another deck you read.*

What backfires

Asking the question and then filling the silence. The value of "what would have to be true" lives entirely in the pause after it, and firms trained on responsiveness can't sit still that long.

Shrinking the money instead of the scope backfires too. A smaller first engagement makes the decision reversible. A discount on the same commitment reads as a firm that needs the work, which raises the exposure it was meant to lower.

Run this on your own material

Open a stalled opportunity where the proposal went out months ago and the file is still technically alive. Count the documents that have gone to that buyer since. If the number is above three, read each one and mark the ones whose job was to demonstrate the firm can do the work.

That count is the answer to what the firm has been solving for.

Do it on two or three stalled files before the next proposal goes out, and check the dates while you're in there. Note when capability stopped being a live question. Whatever went out after that point went out because producing it felt like progress.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when the requests stop being for material and start being for people: who's on the team, when do we meet them, what happens in week one. When they ask for something in a form they can forward. When the buyer names the internal obstacle without being asked twice, which means they've decided you're on their side of it.

Hold when each new document request is narrower than the one before. Hold when the answer to what would have to be true comes back as some version of wanting to be thorough, because that's what the exposure question sounds like when someone won't say it out loud. Hold when everyone enthusiastic about the project reports to your champion.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · *The Decision You Could Survive*, on the executive who chose the weaker product and was right to.

Research Library · Entry 14, professional-services buying and the committee. Entry 21, identity, defensibility and social risk.

Next move · Go to *How to help a buyer defend the decision*, which is the document that replaces the tenth one.