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MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

Upside is not the safer argument

How to lead with risk instead of upside

Why what a firm prevents lands harder than what it promises

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

The risk section belongs in front of the upside section, and every failure mode named there arrives with a response attached. Where a firm files its risk material tells the buyer how badly it wanted that material found.

The symptom

Page one is opportunity. Growth, transformation, the eighteen-month picture, a headline number that took a week of internal argument to settle on.

The risk material sits on page eleven, filed under Approach, two or three paragraphs written in the voice of a firm that would rather not be having this part of the conversation.

The buyer reads page eleven first.

They're looking for the page the firm had no commercial reason to include. A reader deciding whether to trust a document goes where the incentive to shade things is weakest, and that's never the executive summary. Then they come back to page one already knowing what the document will admit about itself.

Ask the pursuit team afterward who wrote page eleven and you get a pause. Somebody knows. It wasn't the person who wrote page one.

Why it keeps happening

Because the people who write proposals are the people most excited about the work, and excitement writes forward.

The upside section gets drafted first, by the partner who wants the engagement, with the client's best case in mind. Risk gets handled at the end, usually by someone else, often on the last afternoon before the deadline, and then it goes to whoever reviews language for exposure. That review has one job, and calming a nervous buyer isn't in the description.

So the section the buyer opens first is the section the firm considered least, produced by the person with the least stake in the sale, in language built to protect the firm from a reader it's quietly treating as a future plaintiff.

None of that's stupid. Every step makes sense from where the person taking it's standing. What it produces is a document whose most-read page is its least-considered one.

The ordering does something nobody intended. Eleven pages of upside followed by a defensive paragraph reads as a sales document that got cornered. The same material moved to the front reads as a firm that has run this play enough times to know where it breaks.

What the buyer is doing at the Safety gate

Reading for what could go wrong, and for whether anyone on your side was willing to name it before being asked.

Kahneman and Tversky's work on prospect theory established that losses register more heavily than equivalent gains. The magnitude usually quoted is roughly two to three times, though it came out of experimental settings rather than anyone reading a B2B proposal, so treat it as a shape rather than a coefficient. Whatever the upside section promises, the possibility of loss is pressing harder on the reader than the promise is.

Loomes and Sugden took it somewhere useful with regret theory, which explains the result that makes account teams crazy. An option that looks weaker on paper wins because it shields the buyer from regret they can already picture carrying.

A record with no visible failure modes reads as marketing. A buyer who can't find the risk in your material assumes it was hidden, and then goes looking for it somewhere you don't control.

This is the gate nothing on the supply side supplies. Every firm hands over proof of capability. Almost nobody hands over the material that makes a person feel safe choosing them, which is why Safety stays open longest.

The correction

Restructure the document. The section on how this engagement commonly fails, and what your firm does about each way it fails, goes ahead of the section on what the client gains. Same content, different order.

Then rewrite it from defensive to diagnostic. Defensive reads like a disclaimer. Diagnostic reads like a practitioner who has seen this situation before: here are the three ways it goes sideways, here's the one your circumstances are most exposed to, here's what we do when it starts.

Every named failure mode carries a response. That pairing is the mechanism.

Add the line most proposals leave out, which is what it costs to do nothing. The buyer is running that comparison silently whether or not it appears on your page, and running it badly, because the number they're holding yours up against is zero.

Every B2B buyer we've pressed on a price was anchored to something: the cost of the problem they already have, the risk of carrying it another year, what the incumbent charges, the size of what they keep missing. A buyer needs a reference point before numbers mean a thing. Name the reference point yourself and your price lands inside a comparison rather than standing there alone.

Keep the upside. All of it. It belongs behind the risk section, where it reads as the payoff from a firm that already said what the work takes.

A proposal that names its own failure modes also gives a summarizing model something specific to carry, where a document of pure upside compresses to nothing distinguishable.

Before and after

Before. *Our engagement model accelerates time to value and delivers measurable transformation across the enterprise. Risks and dependencies are addressed in Section 4.2.*

After. *Three things sink projects like this one. The data is worse than anyone believes, so the first two weeks are an audit and we promise nothing before it's done. Your internal owner gets pulled onto something else around month three, so we name a backup at kickoff. Scope grows past budget, so any change over ten thousand dollars stops and comes back to you in writing. Doing none of this costs you another year of the process you're running now.*

What backfires

Naming a risk you have no answer for. Honest failure modes build Safety only when each one arrives with a response beside it. Without the response you've handed your champion a list of reasons to lose their own argument, in writing, with your logo on it.

A confused customer doesn't deliberate harder... they leave, landing somewhere that feels more certain.

Run this on your own material

Open the last proposal your firm sent. Find the first sentence that names something that could go wrong. Note the page number.

That number is roughly how long the buyer spent looking for it, and roughly how much of the document they read while wondering what you weren't saying.

Then check two more things. Whether that sentence has a response attached to it, and whether anything in the document names the cost of doing nothing. Both are usually missing.

Reordering material you already own takes an afternoon. Do it before the next proposal goes out rather than after the next debrief where somebody says the price was too high.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when the buyer starts repeating your failure modes back to you and adding one of their own. When someone asks which of the three is likeliest in their situation. When the conversation moves to safeguards, review points and who gets called when something slips.

Hold when the risk conversation keeps arriving from their side. Every question they have to ask about what could go wrong is a question your document should have answered first, and asking it costs them something. Hold too when the price is under discussion with no comparison in play. A number with no reference point gets measured against zero, and zero always looks cheaper.

Where this connects

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

Research Library · Entry 03, prospect theory and loss aversion (Kahneman and Tversky). Entry 04, regret theory (Loomes and Sugden).

Next move · Go to *How to help a buyer defend the decision*. That one-page defense is the document this ordering makes possible, and it can't do its job inside a proposal that keeps its risk on page eleven.