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The ask has a readiness signal

How to know when to make the ask

The signals that show up before a prospect is ready, and the ones firms mistake for them

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How to know when to make the ask

The signals that show up before a prospect is ready, and the ones firms mistake for them

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

Readiness shows up in the buyer's questions, never on the firm's calendar. Ask when the questions turn from whether to how, and make the first step small enough that agreeing to it costs the buyer almost nothing.

The symptom

The proposal went out after the second meeting, because the second meeting is when proposals go out.

It was thorough. It was fast. Scope, phasing, team bios, a fee table that took two people most of a day to build. And it landed on somebody who hadn't finished deciding whether they had a problem worth paying to solve.

Then nothing. A polite acknowledgment, a promise to circulate it internally, and a follow-up thread that goes quiet by the third message.

Inside the firm the diagnosis writes itself: the number was too high. So the next one comes in lower, or arrives with a phased option, or gets a discount attached to a decision date. None of that touches what went wrong, because the document was never rejected. It was received by someone who had no place to put it yet.

Why it keeps happening

The ask gets triggered by the firm's process rather than by the buyer's state.

A pipeline stage advances. A calendar reminder fires. A partner asks where the proposal is, and the question carries enough weight that somebody starts writing one that afternoon. None of those are observations about the prospect. They're observations about the firm, and the firm's own rhythm becomes the signal because it's the only signal the firm can see.

We've sent the proposal on the calendar's schedule rather than the buyer's, and called the silence a pricing problem. It's a comfortable mistake to make, because the calendar is legible and the buyer isn't, and because a firm that measures activity will always find something in its own behavior to measure.

The cost is easy to miss. The same information builds trust or destroys it depending entirely on when it arrives. Lead with engagement terms before relevance is established and every fact in the document may be correct while the timing eliminates any chance of it landing. Price then takes the blame, because price is the last thing anybody looked at.

What the buyer is doing at the Access gate

Working out what the next proportional step is. Proportional is the whole word.

A buyer who has cleared four gates has decided the firm is relevant, believable, capable of the work, and safe enough to choose. What they haven't decided is how much of themselves to commit right now, this week, at this level of certainty. They'll take one step. They're looking for a step that matches where they are.

Most firms answer by offering the largest thing they sell. Full engagement, twelve months, signature block on page nine. That's a good sequence dying in the last ten yards, and it happens after all the hard work is already done.

Access is also the gate a sorting model has no opinion about.

The correction

Two changes, and neither requires a new document.

Gate the proposal behind observed signals rather than elapsed stages. Write the signals down and require at least one before anything goes out.

From the field, these are what readiness looks like: the questions shift from whether to how. Somebody asks to speak with references without being offered them. The conversation turns to onboarding, timelines, and who would be on the account. Somebody asks a question that only matters if they've already imagined the work happening, which is the most reliable of the four and the easiest to talk past in the moment.

The counter-signals matter more, because they're the ones firms explain away. Continued requests for capability evidence. Questions about whether you've done this before. Any version of *send me something I can look at*. Those are earlier gates still open, and a proposal arriving on top of an open gate doesn't close it.

Then shrink the default ask. Replace the full engagement proposal with the smallest real first step the firm can sell, and keep the larger version on the shelf for the buyer who asks for it.

The ask works when the next step is almost insultingly small. Reach out your hand. No form, no appointment, no commitment beyond a dollar and a shelf.

Name what that step is for your firm. Most firms have never defined one, which is why the conversation goes straight from coffee to a fee table with nothing in between. A diagnostic. A single workstream. One month of the thing you'd otherwise sell in twelve. Small on your rate card doesn't count. It has to be small for the buyer, and a two-day workshop requiring six executive calendars isn't small no matter what you charge for it.

Before and after

Before. *Attached is our proposal for a twelve-month engagement, including scope, phasing, team assignments, and investment. Let us know if you'd like to discuss the terms.*

After. *Before anyone commits to a program, let's find out whether the problem is where we both think it is. Two weeks, one workstream, fixed fee. You keep the findings either way, and if you decide to stop there, nothing about that is awkward.*

What backfires

Treating *send me a proposal* as permission. It's the most flattering counter-signal there is, and it usually means the buyer wants material in hand while they keep thinking.

The other failure is shrinking the ask into something the buyer can't use. A step small enough to be free and vague enough to be worthless lowers the seriousness rather than the commitment, and buyers can tell the difference.

Run this on your own material

Pull the last five proposals your firm sent. Next to each one, write down what the prospect did immediately before it went out. Ignore whatever stage your CRM had them in. Use what the person said or did, in their own words, in a meeting or an email you can go back and read.

If the honest answer for most of them is "we had a second meeting," the trigger is the firm's calendar and it has been for a while.

Then take whichever of the five is still unresolved and ask what the smallest useful first step would have been. If nobody at the firm can name one in under a minute, that's the piece of your offer that doesn't exist yet.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when the questions are about how the work would run. When references get requested before anyone offers them. When somebody starts talking about onboarding, start dates, or which of your people would be on the account, and especially when a question only makes sense if they've already pictured the work underway.

Hold when they're still asking for evidence you can do this. Hold when the question is whether you've handled a situation like theirs before. Hold when somebody asks for something to look at, because that's a request for material. Those are earlier gates, still open, and putting a fee table in front of an open gate is how you turn a live prospect into a quiet one.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · *The Four Words That Defined a Good Mother*, on an ask small enough to be almost insulting.

Research Library · Entry 07, small commitments and the ladder of yeses.

Next move · Go to *How to write terms that don't undo the trust*.