THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

Lead with the question you hope they don't ask

How to answer the questions that don't flatter you

Why publishing the hard comparison reads as confidence

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How to answer the questions that don't flatter you

Why producing the hard comparison reads as confidence

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

Buyers arrive with two questions the firm would rather not print: why you instead of the obvious alternative, and what happens when the work disappoints. Answering either one in writing costs something. That cost is the proof.

The symptom

Read your FAQ page the way a stranger would.

What is your process. How long have you been in business. What industries do you serve. Ten questions, ten competent answers, and not one of them touches the thing the buyer was thinking about on the way to the site.

Nothing on that page explains why someone would pick this firm over the one down the road with the bigger name. Nothing says what happens when an engagement goes sideways, who they call, what it costs them to leave. The page is accurate. It's also a document written by people who never had to sit across from the person reading it.

Meanwhile the real questions are getting asked every week, in first meetings, out loud, by prospects who want to know before they commit. Those answers exist. They live in three partners' heads, in three different versions, and they have never once been written down.

Why it keeps happening

The FAQ gets built from what the firm wants to say. Somebody drafts it from the capability deck, marketing tidies it, a partner approves it in four minutes, and it goes live. Nobody consults the sales calendar, because the questions that matter arrived in conversations that nobody transcribed.

There's a reason the uncomfortable ones stay off the page. Answering live, you get to read the room. You can soften it, qualify it, tell the version that fits this particular prospect. Put it in writing and it's fixed, quotable, and visible to competitors. Avoiding it feels like keeping control of the message.

What it keeps is inconsistency. If the comparison question gets answered five different ways by five different partners, the firm has five improvisations standing in for a position, and the prospect who talks to two of them notices.

I've built the FAQ that answered ten questions nobody had while the real ones stayed in a partner's head. It read well. It also told an interested buyer that we either hadn't heard the hard question or had decided not to engage with it, and neither of those is a good look on a firm claiming to understand the problem.

What the buyer is doing at the Credibility gate

Deciding whether these people understand the problem well enough to be taken seriously.

The credentials rarely settle that question. Buyers get to it by noticing which questions a firm is willing to engage with in public. Anyone can answer the easy questions. A firm that answers a question costing it something has demonstrated, at almost no expense to the buyer, that it knows what the difficult part of this work is and isn't afraid of the conversation.

Watch what happens when you help a prospect build their own evaluation checklist, including the questions that could expose a weakness in your own firm. It reads as confidence. Dodging the comparison reads as evasion, and buyers are far better at spotting the second than firms assume.

There's a machine consequence too. Question-and-answer material is among the most directly extractable content a firm can publish, and an honest answer to a hard question is a specific claim that gets carried forward rather than averaged into everyone else's.

The correction

Go collect the real questions. Ask the three or four people who sit in first conversations to write down, verbatim, the ten questions they get asked most, in the buyer's own words, including the ones they hate.

Publish five of the uncomfortable ones.

Include the comparison question, phrased the way a buyer phrases it. *Why would we use you instead of a firm like X?* Answer it honestly, and say where another kind of firm would genuinely be the better choice. That last part is what makes the rest of the answer believable.

Organise the page by the categories buyers use rather than by internal preference: fit, process, cost, timing, risk, implementation, evidence, team, comparison, next steps. Not every category needs three questions. Some need one.

Each answer stays direct, specific, and calm. It shouldn't sound defensive, and it should acknowledge a legitimate concern where one exists. A strong FAQ often builds more trust by explaining a limitation clearly than by making every answer sound favourable. If your minimum engagement prices out half the people reading, say the number.

Then build the internal companion, which is the part firms skip. An objection library, one entry per concern, holding: the objection as prospects phrase it, what they may really mean by it, what evidence is useful in response, what language to avoid, and which asset goes next. That's what makes the partner in the room and the page on the site say the same thing.

The standard to hold it against: an answer that would embarrass the firm if a competitor read it is probably the honest one. If your competitor could publish your answer word for word without noticing, you haven't answered anything.

Failure modes inside a live engagement are a different job with different stakes (snippet 33). This is the buyer standing outside, deciding whether to walk in.

Before and after

Before. *What makes your firm different? We combine deep industry expertise with a collaborative, client-focused approach and a proven methodology refined over many engagements.*

After. *Why us instead of a national firm? If you need coverage in nine states and a team on site next month, use them, and we'll say so on the first call. Where we win is a single complicated problem that needs the same two people on it for a year. About a third of the people who ask us this should hire the other firm.*

What backfires

Publishing the hard question and then answering it like a press release. A buyer who reads three sentences of hedging under a direct heading learns something worse than if you'd left the question off entirely, which is that you saw it coming and decided to manage them.

Naming a limitation and then arguing it away in the same paragraph does the same damage. State it and stop.

Run this on your own material

Ask three people who sit in first meetings to write down the hardest question they got this quarter. Give them no prompts and don't let them confer. Then go look for those three questions on your website.

If none of them are there, you know what the next revision contains. If all three are there but answered differently than your colleagues answered them live, the problem is the objection library rather than the page.

Do this before the next pitch. It takes an afternoon, and the material already exists in the heads of people you employ.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when prospects reference an FAQ answer back to you in a first meeting, particularly an unflattering one. When someone says they read the part about who you're wrong for and wanted to check whether they were. When two partners answer the comparison question the same way without coordinating.

Hold when every answer on the page makes the firm look good. Hold when the comparison question is present but answered without naming a real alternative. Hold when your people are still improvising the hard answers in the room, because the page hasn't reached them yet and the buyer talking to two of them will find the seam.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · *The Decision You Could Survive*, on why the unfamiliar firm gets asked why this and the incumbent gets asked why not.

Research Library · Entry 21, identity, defensibility and social risk.

Next move · Go to *How to name what could go wrong*.