THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

Don’t confuse engagement with trust

How to measure whether trust is building

What opens and downloads can’t
tell you about a decision that has stopped moving

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How to measure the evolution of trust

What opens and downloads can’t tell you about a decision that has stopped moving

Gates. Relevance: secondary. Credibility: secondary. Proof: secondary. Safety: secondary. Access: secondary.

Every interaction either removes uncertainty, leaves it where it was, or adds to it. A dashboard counts all three the same way, which is why it can report a strong quarter for a pipeline that hasn’t moved an inch.

The symptom

Two reports land in the same week.

The marketing report is good news. Opens up. Downloads up. Time on page up, with an arrow on the slide pointing in the direction everybody wanted. Twenty minutes later the pipeline report shows the same three conversations sitting where they were last quarter. Same stage. Same contact. Same next step, which has been the next step since February.

Nobody in the room says the two documents contradict each other, because on paper they don’t. One of them counts what the firm did. The other shows where the buyer is standing. The agenda moves on to the campaign calendar, somebody approves another six assets, and the three conversations stay exactly where they are.

Why it keeps happening

Activity is what the tools measure, so activity is what gets reported. Call that plumbing before you call it laziness.

A prospect can open every email, download every asset and attend every webinar while never once moving closer to a decision. The platform has no way to tell the difference between a person circling and a person advancing, and neither does anyone reading the output. Both patterns arrive on the page as engagement. One of them is somebody who found the material mildly interesting on a Tuesday.

Engagement, defined honestly, is “the deliberate sequence of interactions that helps a decision maker remove friction, reduce uncertainty, and guide toward commitment.” Everything else already has a name: “Clicks, likes, impressions, foot traffic: all of that’s activity.” Two different things wearing the same word in the same meeting.

That definition sets a bar, and it’s the bar behind a line from *The Man Who Understood the Customer* worth standing behind again: *judged as uncertainty reduction, it was the most efficient engagement machine I’ve ever seen, and I’ve spent a career looking.*

Then there's the third category, the one nobody counts. Interactions that increase uncertainty. A capability deck answering a question the buyer never asked. A follow-up that proves nobody was listening. Those land in the report as engagement, with a number beside them, pointing up.

What the buyer is doing at the gates

Moving, or failing to move, through five questions in a rough order. Whether the firm is relevant to the problem. Whether it's credible. Whether the work is proven. Whether choosing it's survivable. Whether they're ready to let the firm in.

Buyers don't narrate any of this... but they leave evidence, and it's plainer than most firms expect.

A meeting request that references a specific piece of your prior thinking is a different animal from a generic "tell me more." A question that travels from whether the firm can do the work to who would be on the account is a gate clearing, and it's audible in the sentence. A request to forward something internally is a gate clearing, because someone has decided to spend a little of their own standing. A fourth request for capability evidence after the proposal has gone out is a gate that never cleared, and no seventh case study is going to close it.

The strongest single signal is unprompted contact. It costs the prospect something to initiate and costs the firm nothing to observe.

The correction

Build a one-page tracker. A row for every active opportunity, a column for each of the five gates, and in each cell two things: the date the gate visibly cleared and what the evidence was.

One rule governs the whole page. Nothing goes in a cell unless the prospect did something. Sending a case study doesn't clear Proof. The buyer's response to it might. Quote their language where you have it, because their words are the measurement and your summary of their words is an interpretation you'll want to argue with later.

Keep the existing dashboard. It answers real questions about reach and cost and which assets get read. Stop treating it as an answer to this one.

Then set the rule that gives the page teeth. When a gate has been open for two months, stop sending. Every instinct in a marketing department says the opposite, and the instinct is wrong, because the material clearly hasn't been the constraint for eight weeks. Go ask what's unresolved. That conversation is short and uncomfortable, and it's worth more than the next four assets on the calendar.

The page will be embarrassing the first time you fill it in. Rows with a date in the first column and nothing after it. Opportunities carried in the forecast for a year with no observable buyer movement behind them. That's the point of building it.

Before and after

Before. *Acme Manufacturing: 14 opens, 3 downloads, attended the March webinar, 6:40 average time on page. Engagement trending up. Recommend continued nurture.*

After. *Acme Manufacturing. Relevance cleared 3 March, described their own problem back to us using language from the second paper. Credibility cleared 19 March, asked who would be on the account. Proof* *open since 22 April, fourth request for similar-project evidence. Safety never tested. Nothing unprompted since 6 May.*

The hard call

Once a quarter, ask the confirmation question out loud. Is this matching what you expected. It’s uncomfortable exactly once, and after that it becomes the cheapest instrument the firm owns.

Run this on your own material

Pick three stalled opportunities. For each one, write down the last observable thing the prospect did that wasn’t a response to something you sent. Replies and opens are both disqualified. The thing you write down has to be something they started.

Give yourself ten minutes and your own inbox. If nothing comes to mind for any of the three, you’ve been measuring your own activity and calling it their interest, and the relationship has been running on your effort rather than their movement.

Do this before the next campaign is approved, not after the next forecast miss.

Signals you’ve cleared it

Advance when the prospect initiates. When their questions change category rather than repeating in new words. When something gets forwarded internally without you asking. When a request arrives that could only have come from someone who read the specific thing you sent, and who wants the next part of that thought.

Hold when the activity numbers are the only thing improving. Hold when the same gate has been open for two reporting cycles and the response is to send more material into it. Hold when nobody can name a single unprompted contact from the buyer in the last sixty days, no matter how good the open rate looks, because a relationship that only moves when the firm pushes it isn’t a relationship that’s going to close on its own.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · *The Man Who Understood the Customer*, on engagement as uncertainty reduction rather than activity.

Research Library · Entry 13, the buyer’s path and touchpoint sequencing.

Next move · Go to *How to respond when they ask for one more document*.