THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

Proof has a deadline

How to know when proof arrives too late

The failure nobody warns about,
and what it costs a buyer who had already decided

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

Proof belongs to a buyer who is still deciding. A client who chose you nine years ago has stopped comparing, and a fresh capabilities deck reopens the comparison you already won.

The symptom

The account team sent the refreshed capabilities deck. New design, new case studies, three pages on practice areas the client has never used and didn't ask about. It went out six weeks ahead of the renewal, which everyone agreed was the proactive thing to do.

The renewal call didn't sound like the previous eight. The client asked what the bench looked like now. Then asked, pleasantly, how the fees were running compared to what else is out there. Nobody could point at the moment it turned, because nothing went wrong. Service was fine. A relationship that had renewed on a twenty-minute phone call for nine straight years turned into an evaluation.

Somebody on that account team is going to get credit for being proactive.

Why it keeps happening

"Choosy Mothers Choose Jif" ran from 1966, built by Grey Advertising for Procter & Gamble. Around 1985 or 1986, P&G retired it and replaced it with "Taste the Jifference," a product-proof line. In 1988 the old platform came back as "Choosy Moms Choose Jif."

Everybody in this business has heard that proof offered too early reads as chest-beating. Nobody talks about the opposite failure, and "Taste the Jifference" is the cleanest example of it we know.

The old campaign put the customer at the center of the decision. The new one put the product there, and those aren't the same thing at all. They traded four words capable of making peanut butter part of a mother's identity for a pun asking her to taste it.

The public record confirms the switch and the return. It doesn't contain a verdict on how the replacement performed, and we aren't going to invent one. The argument here is structural.

Nobody at P&G was careless, either. Somebody sat in a room, looked at a line that had been running for twenty years, and concluded it was tired. It was tired to them. The company gets bored years before the market does, and then it mistakes its own boredom for a market signal.

Accumulated meaning is the one marketing asset that can’t be bought at any price and can’t be rebuilt on a schedule, and it’s the only kind that keeps working while nobody is spending against it.

What the buyer is doing at the Proof gate

Nothing. They cleared it, possibly years ago, and the gate closed behind them.

On April 23, 1985, Coca-Cola announced a reformulated Coke. Nearly two hundred thousand consumers had tasted it blind and preferred it. Seventy-nine days later, on July 11, the original formula came back as Coca-Cola classic.

Coca-Cola’s own account of the episode says what the tests didn’t show was the bond consumers felt with their Coca-Cola, something they didn’t want anyone, including The Coca-Cola Company, tampering with. Two hundred thousand people can tell you which one tastes better, and not one of them is answering the question that decides the purchase.

A buyer who has crossed their own threshold has stopped evaluating. They stopped comparing. That’s what commitment is, and the stopping isn’t a side effect of it.

So work out what your proof asset does when it lands on a buyer in that state. It reopens a decision the company spent twenty years and a great deal of money helping her close. She reads it and stays where she was. She reads it and wonders...There is no outcome on that branch that leaves the brand better off than saying nothing.

The correction

Before any proof asset goes to an existing relationship, establish which side of the threshold the recipient is on. That’s one field on the send list, filled in by somebody who has spoken to the client in the last month.

Here’s the trigger that should stop a send. Nothing has changed on the client’s side and they haven’t asked a comparison question. No new sponsor, no procurement review, no contract heading to committee, no conversation about fees they started themselves. If that describes the account, the capabilities asset doesn’t go out. Not in a shorter version, and not later in the quarter when somebody notices it’s still sitting in the queue.

For a settled client, the equivalent asset reinforces the decision they already made. Three things belong in it, and credentials aren’t among them.

What changed since they chose you. Something on your side that improves their situation. A capability they can use, a person added to their team, a process that got faster. Concrete enough that they’d notice its absence.

What you noticed on their account. Specific to them, from their data, from their last quarter. This is the one item a competitor pitching them cannot write.

What happens next. The plan for the coming period, in a sentence or two, with nothing required from them. Continuity reads as ownership.

None of that asks the client to compare anything. That’s the point of it.

The instinct behind the deck was a good one, aimed at the wrong gate, and we'd rather have an account team carrying it than not. Proof is a tool for the Proof gate, and a client nine years in isn't standing there.

Before and after

Before. *Attached is our updated capabilities overview, including the practice areas we've built out over the last two years. Ahead of the renewal, happy to walk you through how we stack up against others in the space.*

After. *Two things changed on your account this quarter. Reporting moved to the earlier cycle, which is why your March numbers landed a week ahead of schedule, and Dana is on your work full-time now instead of split across three accounts. Next quarter we're taking the intake backlog off your team. Nothing needed from you.*

When this doesn't apply

A buyer who has genuinely reopened the decision needs proof and needs it fast. The sponsor who hired you left. The contract is going to committee. In either case the credentials and the references should be in their hands inside a week. This rule governs unprompted proof. Requested proof is a different situation entirely.

Run this on your own material

List every asset scheduled to go to existing clients this quarter. The newsletter, the capabilities update, the year in review, the invitation to a webinar about a service line they don't buy. Mark each one as reinforcing a decision or re-arguing it.

Anything in the second column, check who's receiving it. If the list includes clients who have renewed without discussion for more than two cycles, you've found a send that can only cost you something.

Do this before the next batch goes out. It takes an afternoon and you already own every input.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when long-tenured clients bring you problems before deciding whether the problem is yours to solve. When the renewal conversation is about scope for next year instead of scope in general. When somebody mentions you to a peer without being asked to.

Hold when a client who has renewed quietly for years suddenly wants to know what else is available, or asks a comparison question they've never asked before. Something you sent put them back at a gate they'd already walked through, and more proof at that point compounds it. Hold too when the person pushing to send the deck can't tell you what the client asked for.

Where this connects

Story from the Field · *The Four Words That Defined a Good Mother*, on what P&G traded away and then bought back.

Research Library · Entry 07, commitment and consistency.

Next move · Go to *How to write a case study.*