THE DECISION SEQUENCE
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

ORGANIZED AROUND A DECISION

How The Decision Sequence is different from the marketing philosophy that came before it.

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Questions this paper answers

- What should we examine when more marketing activity does not improve results?
- Why can a strong message still arrive at the wrong time?
- How do we tell whether our marketing is organized around the buyer or our deliverables?

IDEA IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM

Marketing philosophies organize around the firm: what to say, how to look, where to appear. That question worked while geography, networks, and track records earned trust automatically. Those engines stalled.

THE SHIFT

Buyers decide in private, validate through research, and meet firms through AI models that infer credibility from the published record. Marketing inherited a job it was never designed for: earning belief from scratch, in order, for a skeptical stranger.

WHAT FIRMS MUST DO

Invert the organizing question from the firm to the buyer's decision. Analyze beliefs instead of messages, reorder before adding volume, and use sequence to make the reasoning clearer for people and easier for search-enabled systems to interpret.

All the marketing philosophies I've worked under over the last thirty years have revolved around the same center of gravity. What should we say. How should we look. Where should we appear. How often should we show up. They disagree about the answers, sometimes vehemently, but all agree on the question.

The Decision Sequence approaches the same problem from a different center of gravity. What should this buyer believe, and in what order, before saying yes to a firm like this one feels safe.

That's the only difference. Everything else flows from that.

The instinct is older than this framework. Drucker was pointing at it half a century ago.

> *"The aim of marketing is to know and understand the customer so well the product or service fits him and sells itself."*
>
> Peter Drucker, Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices

Marketing mostly filed that line under inspiration and kept asking the firm question. The Decision Sequence takes it literally, and adds the part Drucker left open: the order the understanding happens in.

01 The old question earned its run

Fairness first. The firm-based question was the correct question for a long time, because the trust that decisions require was being earned someplace else. The geography. The network. The track record. The name on the building. Those trust engines did the believing work for us automatically. When trust arrives automatically, the remaining work of marketing is expression, and a philosophy built around expression is well suited to that work.

Those trust engines stalled. Today, buyers make decisions in private, validate their choices through research before any conversation, and send a growing share of their first impressions through AI models that infer credibility from the published record. Trust stopped arriving automatically, and in doing so quietly promoted marketing to a job it was never built to perform: earning belief from scratch, in the right order, for a skeptical stranger.

A philosophy built around expression confronted an ordering problem for which it had only one tool: more expression.

02 What the inversion changes

Four things shift when you invert the organizing question from the firm to the buyer's decision.

The thing you analyze changes. Under firm-based philosophy, the unit of analysis is messages, campaigns, and channels. Under decision-based philosophy, the unit of analysis is beliefs: what the buyer believes today, what they need to believe next, and what's blocking the path between.

What counts as a mistake changes. Under the old question, the classic marketing mistake is a weak message. Under this new question, the classic marketing mistake is a strong message at the wrong time: the proposal before belief, the case study before relevance, the ask before trust. Same content, wrong order, dead conversation. Decision research helps explain why that mistake matters. People make decisions quickly and emotionally, filter everything through their existing beliefs, and commit in increments. Sequence is how commitment compounds.

Here's the version I've watched most. A firm lands the first meeting, and by nine the next morning the prospect has a sixty-page proposal: credentials up front, methodology in the middle, fee schedule at the end. Then silence. The partners blame the fee. The fee was fine. The proposal asked a stranger to believe everything at once, and strangers don't.

What counts as improvement changes. When results disappoint, firm-based philosophy reaches for volume: more content, more channels, more frequency. Decision-based philosophy reorders before it adds, because the most common problem is a sequence problem, and no amount of volume addresses an asset that assumes belief it hasn't earned.

The second reader is accounted for. Today, firms are read by both people and machines, and machines analyze structure. A firm whose published record exhibits consistent positioning, verifiable claims, and a clear line of thought is legible to a model. A firm built from disconnected

campaigns reads like noise. Clear sequence makes the argument easier to follow, but it is not a proven ranking factor. The practical standard is the same for both readers: specific problems, visible reasoning and claims that can be checked.

> ***Same content, wrong order, dead conversation.***

03 The test

None of this requires taking a side in the marketing family feud. Most of the thinking out there is well suited to the question it was built to answer. The issue is which question your situation demands.

Run the test on your own marketing. Ask what the buyer needs to believe next and pay attention to the kind of answer that comes back. If the answer describes a belief, you're operating under a decision-based philosophy, whatever you choose to call it. If the answer describes a deliverable or channel, you're holding an expression philosophy, and it will keep delivering expression regardless of what the buyer is waiting to believe.

I've run that test in rooms for thirty years. Firms that can answer in beliefs are rarer than either of us would expect, and they're the ones the next decade is going to belong to.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Peter F. Drucker, Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices. Harper & Row, 1973. Source of the marketing definition quoted above; also collected in The Essential Drucker.

FOUNDATIONS

The behavioral research underneath this argument is documented in the Decision Architecture Research Library.

Related reading

Decision Science: Framing Sequence and Context Effects.

How-To: How to know when to make the ask.

Process: Journey Mapping.