What Compounds, and What Evaporates

RELEVANCE
CREDIBILITY
PROOF
SAFETY
ACCESS

Which B2B Marketing Investments Compound, and Which Expire

What has a decay curve on it,
what never will, and how to tell them apart

> What stays scarce is the thing the shape is imitating.

B2B MARKETING IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

THE DECISION SEQUENCE

MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

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What stays scarce is the thing the shape is imitating.

The database publishing company was a good business for about eight years.

We took information that existed but couldn't be used, structured it so a system could retrieve the right piece on demand, and sold access to the result. It was hard to do. It required judgment about how information should be organized, discipline about keeping it clean, and a tolerance for tedium that most people don't have. The barrier to entry was real, and we lived comfortably behind it.

Then the barrier stopped being a barrier.

Nobody outcompeted us. The capability just became free, and something we'd spent years being good at turned into a checkbox on somebody else's feature list. I've talked to a lot of people over the years about disruption, and almost all of them picture a competitor. In my experience it arrives as an assumption. The thing you were paid for becomes the thing everybody has, and the only question left is how much notice you get.

I got about eighteen months of notice, and I spent most of it arguing.

So I want to close this book by being honest about which parts of it have a shelf life.

The Window Is Real, and It Closes

Everything in chapter four, the mechanical work, the extraction discipline, the timestamps, the price on the page, the crawler settings, has a decay curve on it. And there's now a study that puts numbers on the decay, which is more than this field usually offers.

Xi Chu and YuPeng Hou, in a preprint published in June of 2026, ran an experiment they set up as a competition. They tested what happens to recommendation outcomes as increasing numbers of competing brands adopt authority-style optimization language while the incumbent stays neutral. Five scenarios, from nobody optimizing to everybody optimizing, run against live models.

The first mover did well, with an individual payoff of plus 0.802. At universal adoption, the payoff for doing the identical work fell to plus 0.007.

And the incumbent, the established brand that changed nothing, went from being recommended in roughly 19.8 percent of cases when facing a single optimized challenger, back up to 93.8 percent once every challenger had optimized. Claude 99.4, GPT-4o-mini 96.2, Gemini 84.9.

The authors describe the incentive structure as prisoner's-dilemma-like, and that's exactly right. Every individual firm gains by moving. The gains disappear once everyone moves. And the position everyone ends up in is roughly the position they started from, having spent the money.

It's a preprint, and the caveats matter. The challengers were invented brands; the incumbents were real ones like CeraVe. The whole thing ran in consumer skincare, so the transfer to professional services is an inference I'm making rather than a finding they published. And it's one unreplicated study, twenty to thirty runs per cell. Take the shape and leave the precision.

The shape says the advantage available here is temporary and the window is measured in a few years, not a few decades.

And You Should Do It Anyway

Here's the sentence in that study that decides the argument.

Once competitors had optimized, the brands that hadn't received zero recommendations. Not fewer. Zero, in their tests.

So the payoff for moving decays toward nothing as the market catches up, while the payoff for not moving sits at zero and stays there, because there's nothing underneath it to decay.

That's an insurance product. Call it that and price it accordingly. The premium is one afternoon with whoever owns the website and a handful of durable decisions about how your firm writes. What it protects against is a system that can't work out what you are, in a market where that system has become the front door.

Anybody selling this to you as a growth channel has misread the evidence, and I'd want to know what they're being paid.

Which is also the reason chapter four spends as much time debunking as building. The gap between what's genuinely mechanical and what's being sold as mechanical is where most of the money in this category is currently going, and closing that gap for you is worth more than any tactic I could have listed.

What Doesn't Decay

Now the other list, and it's the one this book was written for.

Nothing in chapters two, three, five and six has a decay curve, and the reason is worth stating plainly.

A machine can evaluate the shape of rigor and has no access to rigor itself. That was chapter four's asymmetry, and it cuts both directions. What's copyable is the shape, which is why the shape is going to be universal within a few years and worth nothing. What stays scarce is the thing the shape is imitating.

Purpose doesn't commoditize because naming a buyer's problem in the buyer's own words requires having sat with that buyer. Sixty seconds and no slides. A real person, not a category, and the worry stated the way they'd say it. Every competitor can generate a polished paragraph about your market. None of them can generate the sentence that makes a specific person feel seen, because that sentence comes out of a room.

People doesn't commoditize because judgment is what happens when the information runs out. Expertise is hearing a client describe a problem and recognizing the problem they didn't describe. That capability was never stored in the words, so it can't be extracted from them.

Process doesn't commoditize because almost nobody will do the boring part. Burry read the prospectuses. Everybody on Wall Street had the same pages and had decided the hard part was beneath them. That's still the arrangement, in every industry, and it's still available.

Product doesn't commoditize in the way firms fear, because by the time a buyer reaches your terms they've either decided they want you or they haven't, and the terms rarely change the answer.

And the gate with no letter never closes. Somebody on that committee has to be able to defend choosing you, out loud, in a meeting you're not in, to people who'll remember if it goes badly. Nothing about that changes when the technology changes. It's the oldest thing in the book and the most reliable.

Then there's the habit underneath all of it, which is the one I'd keep if I could only keep one.

Show up at mile eighteen with something useful and no invoice, and do it long enough that it stops looking like a tactic. That behavior has been working since before marketing had a name, it'll keep working after everything in chapter four is obsolete, and the reason is that it's the only signal a firm can send that costs something to fake.

The Title, Explained

Two things happened at the same time and most firms have only noticed one.

You became easier to find. The buyer who used to know four firms in your city now sees forty, including specialists three states away who'd never have been in the conversation twenty years ago. Distance stopped protecting anybody.

And you became harder to choose, though nothing happened to the quality of your work. The buyer now has more options than any human being can evaluate, less time than they had before, more people to answer to, and a machine in between that summarizes you in four sentences and gets one of them wrong.

More visibility, less differentiation. That's the whole condition, and every chapter in this series is about the second half of it, because the first half is already done and it was done to you rather than by you.

The firms that struggle from here won't be the ones nobody can find. Being found is solved. They'll be the ones nobody can tell apart, which is a harder problem, an older one, and the one your grandfather's firm would have recognized immediately.

The Sequence

One page, and then I'll stop.

The method is Trust-Sequenced Marketing: Purpose, People, Process, Product, in that order, because that's the order a buyer opens the five gates standing between them and a decision. Relevance, then credibility, then proof, then safety, then access. Four things supplied, five things formed, and the fifth is the one almost nobody builds for.

Past the last gate sits the Trust Gate, which is where uncertainty finally drops far enough that committing feels acceptable even though the risk is still sitting right there. Run the sequence backwards and every element can be true, well-produced, expensive, and still fail.

The philosophy behind it is Decision Architecture. Consequential decisions form in a sequence, and the sequence can be designed.

Three names, three jobs, and collapsing them costs you the thing that makes it work. Decision Architecture is the philosophy, and it earns the belief. Trust-Sequenced Marketing is the method, and it delivers the outcome. The Decision Sequence is where the thinking gets published in the open. A reader should meet the philosophy first and arrive at the method as a conclusion, which is exactly the courtesy the method asks you to extend to your own buyers.

And this book stops earlier than the architecture does. The full sequence runs need, uncertainty, exploration, affirmation, the Trust Gate, commitment, outcome, and reflection. Everything here has been about the stretch from need to commitment, because that's where firms lose work they should have won. What happens after the signature, and what a firm does with the result, is a different book and arguably a more important one.

Entry 20 carries the research trail for that second half of the sequence. Commitment closes one evaluation and opens another. The buyer begins comparing what arrives with what was promised, defending the decision internally and quietly deciding whether to continue making it. At the same time, the provider has to determine what the outcome taught, because experience does not become expertise merely by happening. It becomes expertise through reflection.

The signature does not end the sale. It moves the sale inside the client's organization, where the champion continues conducting it in meetings the provider may never attend. The decision continues even when the marketing stops.

That's the whole thesis. It was true when the sorting was done by a receptionist with a rolodex and it's true now that it's done by something reading twelve thousand words of your material in a fraction of a second. What changed is who does the first cut and how early it happens. The order the human needs didn't move at all.

Which means the work is the same work it always was, done earlier, in public, and written so a machine can carry it accurately to somebody you'll never meet.

Twenty-Six Floors

Back to the elevator, because that's where this started.

The executive steps on, smiles, and asks what you do. You've got about thirty seconds.

The answer that fails is the one about you. Services, results, credentials, the phrase *full-service* somewhere in the middle. That answer has always failed, and every one of us has given it.

The answer that works names their problem before it names your firm.

Here’s what’s changed, and it’s the only thing in this series you have to remember. That elevator conversation now happens without you in it. It happens on a Tuesday afternoon, on somebody’s laptop, months before anybody schedules anything, and the version of your firm that shows up is assembled out of whatever you published, whatever anyone else wrote about you, and whatever the system could work out from the two.

You don’t get to be in that elevator. You only get to have written what’s said in it.

So write it as though a stranger is going to read it aloud to the person you most want to work with, with no context, no chance for you to clarify, and no second run.

Because that’s precisely what’s going to happen.