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THE DECISION SEQUENCE
MARKETING BUILT AROUND HOW PEOPLE DECIDE

NINE COMPONENTS, ONE ORGANIZING QUESTION

What modern marketing is made of, and how The Decision Sequence accounts for every part.

By Joe Worden

IDEA IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM

Firms run all nine components of modern marketing and still produce activity instead of belief, because each component answers its own question about what to make, say, or run.

THE SHIFT

Buyers commit in increments, in order, and machines now read the record alongside them. A component that assumes unearned belief fails with both audiences, however well it's executed.

WHAT FIRMS MUST DO

Point every component at one organizing question: what must the buyer believe next? Research reads the trust environment, personas become decision profiles, campaigns become belief progressions, and the AI agents get a harness.

Modern marketing has a familiar anatomy: industry research, market opportunity identification, audience segments and personas, journey mapping, branding and positioning, asset creation, campaign design, technology wiring, and now dedicated agent oversight for the AI agents that will speak for your firm. Every serious operation has all nine.

The Decision Sequence accommodates all nine and changes one thing: what each component is answering. Conventionally, each component is answering some permutation of what we should make, say, or run. The Decision Sequence answers a single organizing question with all nine components: what must the buyer believe next, and what does this part of the machine do about it?

Here they are.

01 Industry research

Conventionally, industry research is about sizing the market and profiling the competition. Under the Decision Sequence, it's about reading the trust environment: how do buyers in this vertical decide, what must they believe before they're willing to have a conversation, where does credibility get inferred from, and what beliefs have incumbents earned automatically through engines that no longer run. Market size tells you what's there. Decision research tells you what it takes to get on the list.

02 Market opportunity identification

Conventionally, opportunity is whitespace: an under-served segment or an unmet need. Under the sequence, it's belief gaps: places where buyers need to believe something no competitor is helping them believe, or where incumbents assume a trust that stopped arriving years ago. A market where everyone claims and no one earns is an open door, and I've built practices by walking through just that kind of door.

03 Audience segments and personas

Conventionally, segments are groups of buyers with similar characteristics. Under the sequence, they're groups of buyers with similar decisions, because two firms can have the exact same demographics and still have wildly different belief sequences. A persona under the sequence is a decision profile: what does this buyer believe coming in, what must they believe coming out, what are their fears, who else gets a voice, and in what order the believing has to happen. A persona that can't answer those questions is just a demographic sketch with a name tag.

04 Journey mapping, strategy, and tactics

Where you start seeing the sequence is in journey mapping. Conventional maps are about touchpoints: where does the buyer touch the firm? Decision-sequenced maps are about belief milestones: what does the buyer believe at this point, and what does it take to get to the next belief? Strategy is the order of belief milestones. Tactics are whatever gets this particular buyer from one to the next.

> *Get the order right and you can get away with small tactics. Get the order wrong and even the best tactics are dead on contact.*

05 Branding and positioning

Positioning is the claim your firm will be checked on, and checking is no longer optional. A position under the sequence has a single job: to provide the buyer and the machines observing with a specific, verifiable answer to the question of who you're here for and why you're believable. Brand is what checking finds. A position that can't pass checking is a liability wearing an asset's face.

06 Asset creation and refinement

Every asset has a belief job: the website earns one thing, the proposal earns another, the outreach note earns a third, and each is audited against the same bar: what does this asset expect a stranger to already believe? Anything that assumes belief it hasn't earned is out of sequence, regardless of how polished it looks. Under this framework, refinement is mostly about reordering, and it's the cheapest performance improvement I've seen in thirty years of this work, because the material is already there. It's just usually in the wrong order.

The usual version of the fix is almost embarrassing. The client's situation moves to page one. The credentials move behind the thinking. The fee moves to the end.

Nothing new gets written, and the same proposal stops asking strangers to care about the firm before the firm has cared about them.

07 Campaign design and creation

A campaign is a belief progression at scale: a designed order of exposure that moves an audience from recognition to relevance to credibility to proof to readiness, with each piece building on the belief the one before it earned. Designed this way, a campaign compounds. Designed as a burst of simultaneous announcements, it's asking strangers for attention six ways at once and earning nothing cumulative.

08 Technology wiring

The technology stack either carries the sequence or it breaks the sequence. Routing, timing, follow-up, personalization: every automated decision either respects what the buyer currently believes or ignores it. A CRM that fires the case study before relevance has even been established is a sequencing error at machine speed. Technology wiring under this framework is about encoding the order into the systems, so the sequence still holds when no human is watching.

09 Dedicated agent oversight

The newest component, and the one with the stakes that rise the fastest. AI agents are now speaking for firms directly, answering prospects in real time, and an agent without doctrine will do whatever general models do: agree, flatter, claim, and hand commitment asks to strangers. Oversight is about building the harness that anchors the agent to the firm's philosophy behaviorally: its doctrine, its corpus, and its rules for what gets said and in what order, so the sequence gets wired in rather than hoped for in the output. An agent that earns trust in the right order is a force multiplier. An unsupervised agent is a brand risk with perfect availability.

The point

Deming saw the shape of this decades ago, teaching manufacturers, in Phoenix of all places.

> *“A bad system will beat a good person every time.”*
> W. Edwards Deming, Four Day Seminar, Phoenix, February 1993

Marketing's version of a bad system is a good asset in the wrong order. The anatomy of marketing is settled, and arguing with it is a waste of everyone's time. The edge is in the organizing question. Point all nine components at what the buyer must believe next, and the machine stops producing activity and starts producing belief, which is the only output that was ever going to become revenue.

I've rebuilt this machine inside firms for thirty years. The components were always there. The order was almost never.

PRIMARY SOURCES

W. Edwards Deming, remarks at the Deming Four Day Seminar, Phoenix, Arizona, February 1993. Attribution documented by The W. Edwards Deming Institute from the notes of attendee Mike Stoecklein.

FOUNDATIONS

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