

Marketing Can Win the First Sale. The Business Earns the Hundredth.

The customer does not remember which department served them. They remember whether the account added up.



UNPOLISHED TRUTHS
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I was awake before five this morning, coffee in one hand, phone in the other, c

thing most people now do in the grey light before the day officially starts, open LinkedIn with the specific hope that scrolling will feel like thinking.

It does not. At half past five in the morning, though, the distinction is easy to

The post that stopped my thumb was a carousel. Nine slides, one behavioural tip per slide, a small red cross beside the wrong way to do it and a small green tick beside the right way, the visual grammar of an industry that has grown supremely confident it can reduce a human decision to a well lit comparison. Frame the same fact as a loss rate or a success rate and watch the reaction change. Break a large figure into instalments and watch the resistance quietly disappear. Show three pricing tiers instead of two and watch people choose the middle one, gratefully, convinced they arrived there entirely on their own. Anchor a number high before revealing the real one, and the real one starts to look generous by comparison, regardless of what it actually costs. Let a customer personalise even one small detail of a product and watch them defend its price as though they built it themselves. Attach the word *free* to anything and watch people who did not want it five minutes earlier suddenly find room for it in the budget, which is either brilliant behavioural science or simply the entire business model of the hotel minibar, and nobody has ever fully settled with

You already recognise every technique on that carousel, even if nobody in the industry has ever called it marketing theory. Anyone who has sat across a negotiating table long enough has watched a supplier try at least one of them, usually within the first few minutes of the first meeting.

What none of the nine slides mentioned, not once in nine attempts, is the detail that the customer actually decides whether any of it works.

Every single one of those techniques is built for a stranger.

There is a term for the kind of interaction those nine slides are quietly assuming

it did not come from a marketing textbook. It came from game theory, decades ago, before anyone thought to illustrate it with a gym membership and a red cross. Economists call it a one-shot game. One interaction. No history behind it, no future in front of it, no memory carried by either side into the next conversation, because for the purpose of that transaction there is no next conversation. The shopper buying the coat has no record of what that coat cost last month. The gym member joining in January has no data on what the membership cost the customer standing next in the queue. The version of themselves who joined with real conviction and quietly stopped attending by March.

Strip away the illustrations and every one of those nine techniques is doing the same thing. It is optimising the one data point a stranger will ever give you, because a stranger is, structurally, the only kind of customer for whom perception is the game. There is nothing else for it to compete against. No last quote. No last deal. No memory of whether the number on the sign this time roughly resembled the number on the sign last time.

I say this with no contempt for the discipline. Retail, e-commerce, and consumer marketing spend enormous intelligence solving a genuinely hard problem, which is how to earn a decision from someone who owes you nothing and met you nine seconds ago. Done well, that is a real craft, and it deserves real credit rather than the mild condescension it usually receives from people who have never had to do it.

The first sale is often earned before the room. The hundredth is earned in everything that happens after everyone leaves it.

The Second Order

Somewhere on the other side of a first transaction, if the relationship survives

second one appears. And the moment it does, every technique on that carousel

Anchor the price high and slash it in front of a first time buyer and you have created excitement. Do the same thing in front of a contractor who keeps the last three in the same folder, and you have created a question they will never ask you directly because the polite version of that question is simply choosing not to call you again. Offer a free gift with the first order and a returning customer receives generosity. Offer it again on the fifth order and it stops looking like generosity and starts looking like an admission that the price was always negotiable, which it was, which is the information the first four orders were designed to protect. Frame urgency with a decision, a closing window, a limited allocation, and a stranger feels compelled to move. A buyer who has watched that window close and magically reopen twice simply waits you out, because they have learned, correctly, that the window was never decorative, in much the same spirit as a website countdown timer that has not worked itself for the third consecutive Tuesday.

None of this is a moral failing in the technique. **It is arithmetic.** Every one of the nine tools was built to extract the maximum decision from a sample size of one. The same tool against a buyer who has become, over years, a sample size in the hundreds, and it does not merely stop working. It becomes evidence, filed carefully and produced against you the next time someone above that buyer asks whether the relationship still deserves the benefit of the doubt.

This plays out the same way far beyond retail, in long-term commercial relationships and major programmes where institutional memory stretches across years rather than one transaction. A supplier who runs a stranger's trick on a buyer with institutional memory is not making a small mistake. They are demonstrating, in a single move, exactly how they intend to behave across the next fifty transactions, and the buyer takes note accordingly, usually in writing, usually before the next renewal.

The suppliers who earn the right to renegotiate under pressure, the ones a buyer stretches to protect when a market tightens and everyone suddenly has options, earn that position with a cleverer opening offer. They earned it the unglamorous way. The number quoted in March was still the number on the invoice in September. It stayed that way for enough consecutive years that memory turned into expectation and expectation turned into the only form of leverage that survives a second order.

Before the first sale, your promise competes with perception. After the first sale, your promise competes with memory.

The Ledger Has No Department

Here is the part that moves this past a marketing conversation, and it is the part that most businesses never quite arrive at.

The repeated game described above is not being played by marketing against a customer, or by procurement against a supplier. It is being played by the whole business, whether the business has organised itself to notice or not.

The buyer holding the memory of every previous transaction does not sort that memory by department. Somewhere in every experienced buyer's head there is a private, unglamorous spreadsheet that nobody printed and nobody ever named. It has been running quietly the entire time. When an invoice matches the quote from months earlier, the ledger does not care whether that consistency belongs to the estimator who quoted it honestly or the finance team who billed it faithfully. When delivery is late, the ledger does not care whether the fault sat with a supplier too far from time zones away, a planner who over-promised capacity, or a salesperson who promised to a date nobody had checked. *The customer's account has exactly one balance*, and any person who ever touches it, in any function, on any day, is either adding to it or

spending it down.

The customer does not remember which department served them. They remember whether the account added up.

Most businesses have never organised themselves around that fact, because most businesses organise themselves around functions instead. Marketing owns the impression. Sales owns the promise. Operations owns the delivery. Finance owns the invoice. Each of those functions can perform its own role with genuine excellence, but the account can still, somehow, run into deficit, because nobody in the building is ever actually responsible for the balance itself. Only for their own entry in it.

This is where leadership actually enters the ledger. The job was never simply to make each function excellent on its own, most good people in most businesses are already trying hard to do exactly that. The harder job, the one that rarely shows up on anybody's performance review, is making sure the excellence survives the handoff from one hand on the ledger to the next. A customer rarely leaves in the middle of a department. They leave in the gap between one department finishing its part and the next one picking it up, the gap where the promise either survives the handoff or, quietly, invisibly, does not.

That single balance is also where trust stops being a sentiment and becomes an economic fact. A buyer who has watched the account stay level for years is not *fond* of the relationship. They are pricing risk, whether they would ever use that language or not. Every consistent invoice removes a small amount of uncertainty about what happens next time. Every problem that was owned rather than argued away reduces their private estimate of what could still go wrong. Eventually the question they are actually asking stops being *is this the lowest price available* and quietly becomes *what would changing suppliers put at risk*. That second question is worth considering more than almost any single negotiation, and it is never won inside one. It

accumulates, one ordinary transaction at a time, the same way the account itself accumulates.

What a Repeated Game Actually Rewards

Robert Axelrod spent part of the twentieth century testing exactly this question in a more controlled setting, running computer tournaments built around a version of the same repeated game, open to any strategy anyone cared to submit. The winner of the tournaments, entered by a mathematician with a background in peace research, was almost embarrassingly simple to describe. Cooperate first. After that, do exactly what the other side did last time. Nothing more sophisticated than a reliable memory and a refusal to be the one who breaks the pattern first.

Later researchers have since shown that the result depends somewhat on how the tournament is built, which feels like the correct amount of humility for any such experiment to carry. What has held up rather better than the specific result is the underlying logic. In an encounter with no future, the aggressive strategy has no reason to lose by taking everything available. In an encounter that repeats, the aggressive strategy meets the same opponent again, with a very long memory, and loses time and over, in ways a single encounter would never reveal.

One of marketing's hardest jobs is creating enough confidence for a stranger to give a business its first yes. That is a genuine achievement, and it deserves real credit rather than the mild condescension it usually receives from people who have never had it. What decides whether a business earns a hundredth "yes" is a separate question, entirely, and it belongs to nobody in particular, which is precisely why it so often ends up belonging to nobody at all.

The trouble begins when the logic that wins a first transaction becomes the

used to manage a long relationship. That is not a marketing failure or an operational failure. It is a *sequencing* failure, and it is usually nobody's job to notice it happen.

That is the actual competitive advantage sitting underneath phrases like discipline, pricing and confident negotiation, language that appears in almost every executive description written this year and is almost never defined. **It is not the discount, not the clever framing.** It is whether the number, the delivery date, and the quality standard promised in the first conversation are still recognisably true in the final one. That is a considerably harder thing to build than a carousel, and it happens to be the *only form of persuasion that compounds instead of expiring.*

Cassie, who arrived in this household roughly seven years ago and has always had an undocumented mix of opinions, has never once fallen for a marketing technique in her life, largely because nobody has worked out how to run one on her. She is immune to urgency. A ball held aloft with great dramatic flair produces exactly the same response as a ball offered calmly, which is complete indifference unless she has decided, on her own schedule, that the ball currently matters. She cannot be persuaded. Show her a large piece of cheese followed by a modest one and she does not exchange the modest piece as a bargain. She experiences it as the cheese currently on offer, judged entirely on its own merits. Try the two-for-one technique on her and you will fail completely, since she has access to exactly one bowl and has never once been persuaded that a second one exists simply because somebody announced it with enthusiasm. Announce a *last chance* on her evening walk, in whatever tone of voice usually works on humans, and watch her decline to hurry, having heard the identical announcement, delivered with the identical urgency, on approximately two thousand five hundred consecutive evenings.

What she cannot resist, what has never once failed to move her in seven years,

memory. She remembers, with an accuracy that continues to embarrass every
in this house, exactly who fed her on which day, who left without saying good
came back when they said they would. No discount moves her and no framing
her. There is only the long, boring, entirely unmarketable habit of showing up
same way, on time, for years, until showing up became the only pitch that ever

Companies call that customer loyalty. Cassie calls it Tuesday.

She has never read a carousel in her life.

She has never needed to. She already understood the whole argument, and she
once needed a department to help her keep it.

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Inspiring Me. I Have Work To Do and The Supply Chain of Life: Lessons in Leadership
Laughter, and Becoming. Cassie has never once been persuaded by anything and remains
this day, the most reliable negotiator in the family.*