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Research Brief

The SiriusDecisions B-to-B Buying Decision Process Framework

The SiriusDecisions B-to-B Buying Decision Process Framework illustrates three common phases and decision gates that buyers pass through when making a b-to-b purchasing decision

Portfolio marketers (product, solution, industry and segment) must internalize their target personas' buying behavior

Our framework provides guidance on how to design messaging, content strategy and campaign architectures to enable buying decisions

Decisionmaking is a cognitive process defined by psychologists as the selection of a course of action from multiple alternatives (e.g. what to eat, where to shop). John Dewey, the pragmatic philosopher and psychologist, introduced the first decision process framework for consumer buying in his book *How We Think*, which was published in 1910. Since then, Dewey's framework has been adapted many times, but the five basic stages of consumer decisions remain the same: problem/need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behavior.

The decisionmaking process also can be observed when organizations buy from other organizations. In this brief, we define the three phases of a b-to-b buying decisionmaking process and present findings from the SiriusDecisions 2015 B-to-B Buying Study that identify patterns of buyer behavior during each phase that should be reflected in campaign and content strategies.
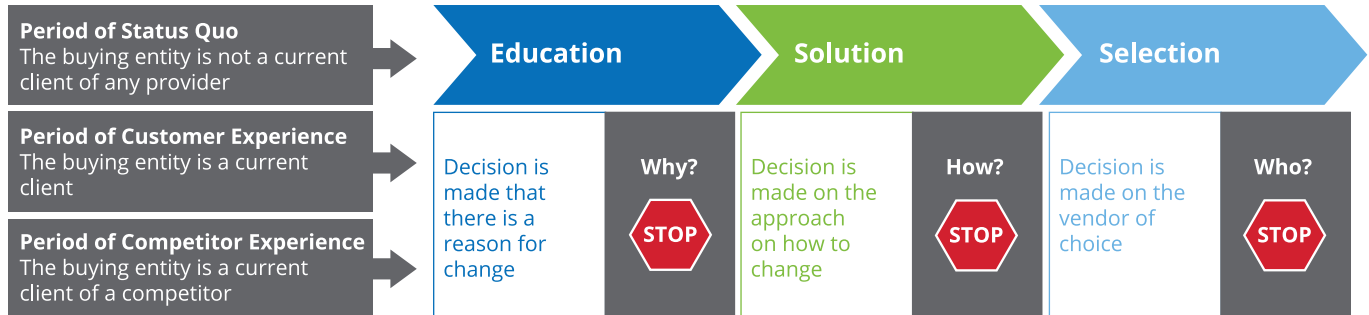
Education Phase
During the education phase, the buyer tries to understand a business problem or learn more about an opportunity. If buyers fail to recognize a need, they remain in a non-active pre-purchasing decisionmaking phase called the "period of status quo." Need can be instigated by internal triggers (e.g. a system breaks, a process fails, a new initiative is born). External triggers include regulatory mandates or laws and external stimuli (e.g. advertising, content, sales promotion).

- **Decision process gate.** The observable outcome at the end of this phase is the buyer(s) stating the business objective, identifying the business issue (buyer need) and prioritizing the business issue as a pain point that the organization needs to solve. At this decision gate, there is a conscious internal recognition that the individual(s) is in a formal and active decisionmaking process, signified by approval to move forward with the initiative, request or investigation on how to solve the problem. In more consensus-driven and committee-type buying scenarios, individuals and buying centers are identified or the initiative is formed by the development of a project team or allocation of budget.

- **Human-to-human interactions.** A human-to-human interaction is an exchange of information between a buyer and a provider. Examples include an exchange of information at an industry event, online chat, virtual sales meeting or executive briefing. Buyers report that they leverage handshake

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Period of Status Quo The buying entity is not a current client of any provider		
Period of Customer Experience The buying entity is a current client		
Period of Competitor Experience The buying entity is a current client of a competitor		

Education → **Solution** → **Selection**

Education		Solution		Selection	
Decision is made that there is a reason for change	**Why?** STOP	Decision is made on the approach on how to change	**How?** STOP	Decision is made on the vendor of choice	**Who?** STOP

interactions such as industry conferences and sales events as key activities that the vendor can provide to fuel the education process. As reported by our study respondents, the most impactful interaction type for the education phase across all types of buying scenarios is attending a live vendor-hosted webinar. Representatives of the vendor organization must be highly knowledgeable about the topics the buyer audience cares about in order to conduct these interactions.

- **Non-human interactions.** A non-human interaction is an exchange of information between a buyer and a provider that does not involve human beings; examples include an online trial or exploring content on a vendor Web site. The number-one non-human interaction that buyers use to understand a topic or business issue is an Internet search. Portfolio marketers need to pay special attention to search engine marketing and optimization: Do you know the keywords and phrases buyer personas search on and the lexicon that specific buyer personas use to describe the business issue or topic? Furthermore, once that search is performed, do you have content assets engineered in the appropriate language for each buyer persona that will show up in the results? We recommend examining long-tail search phrases that can be mined for buyer intent. During this phase, we observe the project sponsor within the buyer organization leveraging online demos, trials and tours and value actualization tools to internally sell and justify further investigation. Pay special attention to self-guided interactions that can be engineered to facilitate these internal consensus-building conversations.

- **Content preferences.** While interactions are conduits of information exchange between the vendor and buyer, the content asset type is the format in which the information is exchanged. The content asset type reported to have the most weight during this phase is analyst reports, which enable buyers to understand how to solve a business issue and get context for how others are doing it.

Solution Phase

During the solution phase, buyers examine alternative ways to solve a problem or satisfy a need. This phase is not about determining the specific offering or solution, but instead determining the offering category or type – the best approach to fulfill the need and the appropriate pathway (e.g. build vs. buy). Buyers are focused on comparing all available options to find the one that will deliver the best result.

- **Decision process gate.** Observable outcomes at the end of this phase include the identification by the buyer of the solution type that fulfills the need and the creation of a short list of vendors.

- **Human-to-human interactions.** Dialogue with a vendor sales representative is the human-to-human interaction ranked highest by buyers for this phase. Second highest was dialogue with a subject matter expert (SME) from the vendor organization (e.g. product manager, vendor consultant, customer service representative, executive).

- **Non-human interactions.** During the solution phase, in addition to searching the Internet, buyers go directly to an organization's Web site to gather information. The user

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experience, navigation, metadata and content on the Web site must support a persona-based architecture to ensure that information is aligned to buyer personas and answers their questions. Free trials and online demos are also important self-guided interactions during this phase.

- **Content preferences.** The content format that buyers find most useful during this phase is a sales presentation in slide form (e.g. PowerPoint, PDF, SlideShare). Buyers also prefer static brochures during this phase, indicating their usage of various forms of product collateral to learn about offerings (e.g. battlecards, specification sheets), as well as case studies.

Selection Phase

During this phase, the buying decision is made. This involves financial justification (RFP, business case, approval process) and the decision to choose a final vendor. The buyer is focused on getting final approval of the business case or financial justification in order to approve the budget release. Final vendor selection usually requires a ratification process by purchasing, procurement, legal, IT or finance.

- **Decision gate.** The observable outcomes at the end of this phase include the selection of the vendor and the completion of the purchase.

- **Human-to-human interactions.** Buyers participating in our survey reported that dialogue with a vendor sales rep is the most significant interaction during this phase, followed by dialogue with a vendor executive. Face-to-face conversations with vendor SMEs (e.g. product managers, consultants, customer service reps) are also weighted as more significant than other interactions.

The SiriusDecisions 2015 B-to-B Buying Study: Key Findings

Respondents were asked to weight each content type and interaction type that they selected as utilized in the phase by the significance it had on informing their decision during that phase (n=1,005).

Content Asset Types	Buying Decision Process Phases		
	Education	Solution	Selection
1. Analyst report	20%	17%	18%
2. Articles/publications	13%	11%	7%
3. Blog post	3%	3%	4%
4. Case study	12%	13%	8%
5. E-book	3%	2%	3%
6. Infographic	4%	4%	4%
7. Interactive brochure	5%	5%	6%
8. Podcast	1%	2%	3%
9. Promotional video	6%	6%	5%
10. Sales presentation	16%	17%	21%
11. Static brochure	6%	7%	7%
12. Webinar replay	2%	4%	3%
13. White paper	7%	6%	6%
14. None of the above	0%	0%	0%
15. Other	2%	2%	4%
Non-Human Interaction Types	Buying Decision Process Phases		
	Education	Solution	Selection
1. Accessed free trial	16%	16%	15%
2. Attended a virtual event	7%	7%	5%
3. Explored a virtual tour	8%	7%	5%
4. Explored Facebook	3%	3%	3%
5. Explored Linkedin	4%	4%	3%
6. Explored online community	5%	6%	4%
7. Explored Pinterest	1%	2%	2%
8. Explored provider Web site	17%	17%	17%
9. Explored syndicated content sites	2%	3%	2%
10. Explored Twitter	1%	1%	2%
11. Explored YouTube	3%	2%	3%
12. Searched on the Internet	20%	17%	14%
13. Toured an online demo	7%	8%	9%
14. Used a value actualization tool	3%	5%	9%
15. Used vendor's mobile app	2%	2%	4%
16. None of the above	0%	0%	0%
17. Other	1%	1%	2%

- **Non-human interactions.** The use of value actualization tools is a top-ranked interaction during the decision phase. Value actualization tools (e.g. ROI calculator) help buyers quantify the potential value that can be realized from the purchase in order to justify the decision.

- **Content preferences.** During this phase, buyers rely less on articles, publications and case studies. Content preferences shift more strongly to sales presentations, which communicate the business value to be realized and can be used to support the internal business case for the purchase.

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The SiriusDecisions 2015 B-to-B Buying Study: Key Findings (continued)

Human-to-Human Interaction Types	Buying Decision Process Phases		
	Education	Solution	Selection
1. Attended a live vendor-hosted webinar	14%	7%	6%
2. Attended a peer networking event	5%	5%	3%
3. Attended a sales event	7%	6%	6%
4. Attended a vendor-hosted conference	6%	6%	4%
5. Attended an industry conference	8%	6%	6%
6. Conducted an inquiry with an industry analyst	6%	6%	4%
7. Conversation with a customer reference (buyer sourced)	6%	6%	7%
8. Conversation with a customer reference (vendor sourced)	5%	7%	7%
9. Dialogue with a reseller or distributor	5%	6%	6%
10. Dialogue with a thought leader or expert	4%	5%	5%
11. Dialogue with a vendor customer service representative	7%	8%	8%
12. Dialogue with a vendor executive	5%	7%	9%
13. Dialogue with a vendor product manager or consultant	7%	8%	8%
14. Dialogue with a vendor sales representative	9%	10%	13%
15. Participated in an executive briefing	3%	3%	5%
16. Participated in online forum or discussion	2%	2%	1%
17. Used online chat feature on vendor Web site	2%	2%	2%
18. None of the above	0%	0%	0%
19. Other	0%	0%	1%

The Three Pre-Buying Periods

To create appropriate content and nurture streams, marketers need to understand three types of relationship that may exist before the start of a buying process:

• **Period of status quo.** Buying entities that do not have the offering and have little or no knowledge of the vendor (even if they have purchased other offerings from it) exist in this period. Nurture streams during this period require interactions and content that have a heavy overlay of both branding and relationship building.

• **Period of customer experience.** A customer can enter into a new purchasing decision process at any time during the customer lifecycle. During the period of customer experience, a buying entity is already a customer of the offering or a related offering, which gives it enough experience to have a perception of the brand and its competencies and weaknesses. Nurture streams during this period require content and interactions designed to facilitate future upsell, cross-sell and renewals, based on knowledge of specific accounts (see the brief "Account-Based Marketing: A Foundation").

- **Period of competitor experience.** A buying entity that is a customer of a competitor's offering and has enough experience with the competitor to have a perception of its brand and competencies exists in this period. This pre-existing relationship must be considered and challenged during the buying process. Content and interactions need to include competitive insights, positioning and comparisons.

The Sirius Decision

Although decisionmaking is a linear process, human beings are capable of processing multiple variables simultaneously and consuming information in bursts that may inform one or all of the phases. Buyers do not need to go through every phase of the buying cycle in order to make a decision to buy. For example, a single Google search or sales meeting with a vendor can supply a buyer enough information to move through multiple phases of the buying process. In the case of a repeat purchase, buyers may skip phases, since they already know their need and how to solve it. Buyers choose how and when to perform self-guided interactions as well as how and when to consume content and interact with representatives from the vendor organization. Apply the buying decision process framework to ensure that the information needs and interaction preferences of each buyer persona are fulfilled, whether or not each step is followed in sequence.