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MEDDIC into the Dark Funnel

Buyers Research Independently

Decoding the hidden
decision process

Charles Bartlett | May 2026

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Introduction

Part 2 identified MEDDIC's breakdown as structural. The three shifts in how buyers behave: information democratization, committee expansion, and the emergence of the dark funnel, dismantled the assumptions the framework was built on. Identifying what broke is only part of the problem. The more pressing question is what is actually happening instead.

Part 3 answers that question. It maps the hidden pre-engagement journey that buyers complete before any seller enters the picture, examines why the modern Decision Making Unit (DMU) has made the traditional Economic Buyer and Champion models inadequate, and explores the psychological dynamics, particularly the pull toward indecision, that now determine whether qualified deals close or quietly stall. The patterns described here recur across deal reviews, win/loss interviews, and post-mortems on opportunities that were fully qualified on paper and still collapsed without warning.

Part 4, "Where Deals Are Won and Lost Invisibly," builds on what this part uncovers by examining the specific channels through which the hidden decision process plays out, and why the Dark Funnel has become the primary competitive battleground in modern B2B selling.

Buyers Research Independently

Decoding the Hidden Decision Process

The Invisible Game

Part 2 closed with an uncomfortable truth. By the time a rep schedules a discovery call, the buyer has typically already ranked their preferred vendors, quietly built internal support around a front-runner, and largely settled on the problem and the solution they need.

MEDDIC's Decision Process pillar assumes the seller enters early enough to map that process. The Champion pillar assumes there is a single, accessible individual who can navigate it. Both assumptions fail in the same way: they presuppose visibility into a sequence that, in most cases, has already been substantially completed.

This part attempts to make that invisible sequence visible. And what follows is not theoretical. Every pattern described here shows up repeatedly in deal reviews, win/loss interviews, and post-mortems on opportunities that were fully qualified on paper and still collapsed without warning. Understanding the sequence may not make it easier to interrupt. It does, however, make it far less mysterious and provides you the opportunity to consider other strategies. It reframes the core challenge of selling in 2026, from qualifying and discovering to influencing, timing, and what might be called consensus architecture.

B2B buyers get through 70 percent of their buying process without ever talking to a salesperson.

What Actually Happens Before the First Call

Keenan, in *Gap Selling*, offers a premise that anchors everything that follows in this part: “In every sale there’s a gap. It’s a gap between what buyers have now and what they believe they want in the future... Without it, there is no sale... Every selling challenge we salespeople face can be traced to the gap; every solution stems from identifying it, properly assessing its value, and selling to it.” [54] The observation is not new. But its implications have become dramatically more complicated in an era where buyers have learned to diagnose and quantify that gap themselves, long before any seller is involved.

Ask most sales managers when a deal starts and they will say: when a prospect fills out a demo request form, responds to an outreach sequence, or picks up the phone. Ask a modern B2B buyer the same question, and they will describe something that happened weeks or months earlier, in a context the seller will never see and, realistically, cannot reconstruct. Latané Conant put a specific number on the scale of this disconnect: “B2B buyers get through 70 percent of their buying process without ever talking to a salesperson.” [53] The figure has been cited widely enough to feel familiar. But its implications for sales methodology, for what MEDDIC was designed to do and when it assumes it can do it, are still not fully absorbed.

The hidden buying journey has a structure. It is not random. Research across thousands of B2B purchase decisions points to a consistent five-phase sequence that precedes formal vendor engagement. MEDDIC was never designed to address it, partly because the framework was built in 1996 by PTC reps operating in a world where that pre-engagement phase was much shorter and far less consequential.

Many stakeholders, especially in B2B sales, have the luxury of being able to do a great deal of research while remaining anonymous.

Phase 1: Anonymous Problem Exploration

It begins not with a vendor search, but with a problem. A VP of Revenue Operations notices that her team spends two days a month manually reconciling data. A Head of Engineering realizes that his team is shipping features more slowly than a direct competitor. A CFO reads an industry benchmark report and starts wondering whether his company is under-investing in a specific capability. The problem gets named, usually vaguely, and the search that follows is a problem search, not a vendor search.

What makes this phase so consequential for sellers is not just its existence. It is the conditions under which it occurs. As Burgess and Munn observe in *Account-Based Marketing*, “Many stakeholders, especially in B2B sales, have the luxury of being able to do a great deal of research while remaining anonymous. They review blogs, LinkedIn, articles, and forum threads with peers. By the time they get to a company’s website, they know what they’re looking for.” [56] That anonymity is not incidental. It is structural. Google searches leave no traceable footprint that the seller can access. Podcast consumption is invisible. Reddit threads and private Slack communities are pseudonymous at best. An analyst report downloaded from a gated site produces a lead record for one firm but tells that firm nothing about what the reader concluded, which other sources they consulted, or which mental model they carried forward.

The practical consequence is significant. The buyer’s framing of the problem, including its definition, scope, urgency, and implied solution category, forms here, in a phase where no seller has any input at all. When a rep later asks in discovery, “What’s driving the urgency on this?”, they are not uncovering new information. They are asking the buyer to narrate a conclusion reached weeks ago, in language shaped by sources the rep cannot see and may never know existed.

91%
*of B2B purchases are
influenced by word of mouth.*

Phase 2: Peer Validation

Once the problem has been named, modern buyers do something their counterparts in 2005 largely could not: they ask their peers. Not through formal channels. Through the informal networks that now form the backbone of B2B intelligence gathering.

A message dropped in a private Slack community for RevOps professionals. A post in a LinkedIn group asking whether anyone has solved a specific workflow problem. A direct message to a former colleague who works at a company that deployed a similar tool last year. A question raised at an industry dinner, or a side conversation that runs long after a conference panel wraps.

Peer validation serves two functions at once. It narrows the problem definition. Peers who have navigated similar challenges often reframe the question in ways that meaningfully redirect the evaluation. And it begins to form the vendor shortlist. When a former colleague mentions the platform her current team uses, or when three people in the same Slack community independently name the same vendor, a preference takes shape. It has not been earned through a sales process. It has been borrowed from a trusted network, and that borrowed preference tends to be more durable than anything a rep can build in a structured discovery conversation.

The scale of this dynamic is difficult to overstate. Vajre and Spett, writing in 'ABM is B2B', report that "91% of B2B purchases are influenced by word of mouth." [55] That figure reframes the entire competitive landscape. It suggests that the most consequential selling activity happening around any given deal is not occurring in any conversation the rep is part of. It is occurring in Slack groups, over coffee, at industry events, and in private messages between people who trust each other more than they trust any vendor representative. The rep who enters the picture in Phase 5 is not opening a blank slate. They are working against a story that has already

The seller who built MEDDIC was operating in a world where product knowledge was genuinely scarce, and the rep was a primary source of market intelligence. That world no longer exists for most enterprise SaaS categories.

been partially written by people they will probably never meet.

Phase 3: Stealth Vendor Research

With a problem framed and a shortlist forming, the buyer moves into active but anonymous vendor research. This is likely the phase that has changed most dramatically over the last five years, and it appears to be the one that most directly dismantles MEDDIC's foundational assumptions about information asymmetry.

The nature of that shift is worth pausing on. Keenan captures the underlying dynamic precisely: "During the tell-me economy, before the internet, it made sense to ingratiate ourselves with our customers by starting a meeting with a chatty introduction... Today, social platforms allow us to show the world the value we provide. We don't need to tell them about ourselves face-to-face; they know before we meet them." [54] The seller who built MEDDIC was operating in a world where product knowledge was genuinely scarce, and the rep was a primary source of market intelligence. That world no longer exists for most enterprise SaaS categories.

The modern buyer in Phase 3 is methodical. They read G2, TrustRadius, and Capterra profiles. Not the vendor-curated summary pages, but the granular reviews left by practitioners in similar roles at similar companies, filtering specifically for implementation complaints, support responsiveness, and use cases that mirror their own. They pull analyst reports. They find podcast episodes where someone at a comparable company talks candidly about what they deployed and why. And increasingly, they run their requirements through AI tools, feeding their specific criteria into

95%

of the time, the vendor who ultimately wins the deal is already on the buyer's Day One shortlist

The Validation Phase, everything involving demos, proposals, and formal evaluations, exists primarily to confirm a preference already formed, not to build a new one.

ChatGPT or Gemini to generate comparative analyses, stress-test vendor claims, and surface questions they had not yet thought to ask.

The AI dimension is worth pausing on. 6sense's 2025 Buyer Experience Report found that 94% of B2B buyers now use large language models at some point during their purchasing process [7]. Those interactions produce no attribution data for vendors. A buyer who has spent two hours querying an AI assistant about the comparative strengths of three platforms arrives at the first discovery call with settled opinions rather than open questions. By the end of Phase 3, most buyers have a working shortlist of three or four vendors and a fairly clear sense of which one they prefer. 6sense's research finds that 95% of the time, the vendor who ultimately wins the deal is already on the buyer's Day One shortlist [7]. As Burgess and Munn put it: "By the time prospects are on your site, they've formed a lot of opinions." [56] The Validation Phase, everything involving demos, proposals, and formal evaluations, exists primarily to confirm a preference already formed, not to build a new one.

"No one gives a shit about you, your company, or your product." The bluntness is intentional.

Phase 4: Internal Soft Consensus Building

Before any vendor is formally contacted, the buyer who initiated the search must begin building internal support. This is where the real complexity of modern B2B purchasing becomes visible, and where MEDDIC's single-threaded Champion model appears most poorly suited to what actually happens inside a buying organization.

The initiating stakeholder, often a department head, a senior individual contributor, or an operations leader, knows they cannot move forward alone. The cross-functional approval structures that expanded during the SaaS era (covered in Part 2) mean that a mid-market software purchase can easily require sign-off from IT, Finance, Legal, and end-user management, even when the budget technically belongs

to a single executive.

So the informal lobbying begins. The initiator shares the problem narrative with a peer in Finance, quietly testing whether the budget conversation is winnable. They brief their manager, framing the initiative in terms of whatever the organization is currently focused on strategically. They check with the IT lead, not formally, just to get a read on whether technical objections are likely. None of this is a formal process. It produces no documentation. Nothing surfaces in the CRM. But it determines whether the deal will have organizational momentum when it eventually becomes a formal vendor engagement, or whether it will stall the moment it meets the first friction point.

Vendors are discussed in these conversations. Opinions form. Objections surface. And sometimes a stakeholder who had a bad experience with one of the shortlisted vendors, perhaps at a previous company, perhaps through a colleague's secondhand account, quietly poisons a preference before the vendor has had a single interaction with the account.

Budget authority in modern mid-market and commercial SaaS organizations has been distributed across functions in ways that make the traditional Economic Buyer genuinely difficult to locate.

Phase 5: Formal Engagement

This is where MEDDIC traditionally starts. The demo request arrives. The inbound lead populates the CRM. The rep gets assigned and begins qualification. From the buyer's perspective, this is the Validation Phase. The formal process of confirming a preference already formed. From the rep's perspective, it can feel like the deal is just beginning. That mismatch in perceived position within the journey may be one of the most consequential misalignments in modern B2B sales.

Keenan, again in Gap Selling, offers an observation that cuts to the core of why this misalignment is so costly: "No one gives a shit about you, your company,

or your product.” [54] The bluntness is intentional. The buyer who arrives at a demo having spent weeks in anonymous research, peer consultation, and AI-assisted comparative analysis is not waiting to be educated. They have already decided what problem they have, which solution category addresses it, and which vendors deserve consideration. The rep who arrives with a qualification checklist, a discovery script, and a genuine readiness to educate is not meeting the buyer where they are. They are meeting a version of the buyer that no longer exists.

Neither party is wrong about their own situation. But they are operating on different assumptions about what the conversation is for, and that gap tends to produce the friction, the stalled deals, and the unexpected losses that are so frustratingly common in enterprise selling today.

The New Decision-Making Unit Reality

MEDDIC’s Economic Buyer element rested on a clean premise: find the person with budget authority, build the business case around their priorities, and secure their commitment. It was not a naive premise in its time. Through the late 1990s and into the 2000s, that person often genuinely existed. A VP or CIO who could authorize a significant software purchase without needing extensive cross-functional coordination was a reasonable expectation. The PTC reps who built MEDDIC navigated real organizational hierarchies, and those hierarchies had clearer authority structures than what most sellers encounter today.

The modern Decision Making Unit bears little resemblance to that model. It is not a hierarchy. It is a network, and navigating it requires a different kind of map entirely.

26%

in the past two years, the number of stakeholders involved in the purchase decision has increased

The Diffusion of Budget Authority

Budget authority in modern mid-market and commercial SaaS organizations has been distributed across functions in ways that make the traditional Economic Buyer genuinely difficult to locate. Conant describes the new reality plainly: “B2B buyers are no longer individual decision-makers. They’re buying teams of 10 people or more. Each member of this dispersed team may own a small part of the transaction, with no one person owning the whole process. It’s decision-making by consensus, and it completely changes how sales and marketing teams need to understand and speak to their buyers.” [53] That shift did not happen overnight. It is the accumulated result of procurement governance reforms, SaaS-era security and compliance requirements, and a corporate risk culture that has consistently moved decision authority outward from individual executives into cross-functional review processes.

The pace of that expansion has itself accelerated. Vajre and Spett note that “in the past two years, the number of stakeholders involved in the purchase decision has increased 26%. The game, now played in inches rather than feet, is no longer about selling to an individual buyer. It’s about building relationships with the entire organization.” [55] Consider what that looks like from the rep’s side. Six weeks building a relationship with a Champion, perhaps a Senior Director of Operations who has been enthusiastic, responsive, and internally vocal about the solution. Then, in the final stage, the CFO surfaces concerns the rep has never heard. Legal flags a data processing clause that needs a three-week review. The IT security team sends over a vendor questionnaire that runs to forty pages. None of these stakeholders were in the discovery call. None of them attended the demo. The Champion was real. The enthusiasm was genuine. The deal, though, was never actually qualified against the full network of decision authority.

Mobilizers tend to be the rep’s most important relationship in any account, and also the hardest to identify, because they do not typically self-select.

A purchase that required a single VP signature in 2005 now routinely requires a CFO sign-off (TrustRadius research suggests 79% of B2B purchases now involve CFO approval [8]), an IT security review, Legal contract approval, and end-user management acceptance, before it ever reaches the final approving executive, who may never have participated in a single vendor conversation.

Mobilizers, Talkers, and Blockers: A More Useful Map

In 2015, Adamson, Dixon, Spenner, and Toman published *The Challenger Customer*, which offered a more practically useful taxonomy for navigating buying committees than the traditional Champion model [39]. Drawing on surveys of 700 customer stakeholders across hundreds of organizations, the research identified seven distinct buyer archetypes that cluster into three operationally meaningful categories.

Mobilizers

This group includes the Go-Getter, the Teacher, and the Skeptic, are the stakeholders capable of driving organizational change. They are not necessarily enthusiastic about vendors. The Skeptic in particular may come across as an obstacle. What sets Mobilizers apart is that they operate in the organization's interest rather than personal convenience or vendor relationships. They ask hard questions, push for specificity, and carry the organizational credibility to bring a committee to genuine consensus. Mobilizers tend to be the rep's most important relationship in any account, and also the hardest to identify, because they do not typically self-select. The easiest person to get a meeting with is rarely the Mobilizer.

Talkers

Talkers are the Guide, the Friend, and the Climber, are the stakeholders who create the illusion of access.

The practical implication is this: MEDDIC's Champion is a Mobilizer. But not every person who behaves like a Champion actually is one.

They return calls promptly, attend demos enthusiastically, and share internal information freely. They are the contacts less experienced reps mistake for Champions. But Talkers lack the organizational standing or the drive toward change to bring a committee to consensus. A deal built entirely on Talker relationships will almost certainly stall at the moment it requires someone to take real internal political risk.

Blockers

This group is the stakeholders who actively resist change, often for entirely rational reasons. A Head of IT who has managed three failed software implementations in four years is not being obstructionist when he scrutinizes a new vendor's security architecture. He is being prudent. The rep who treats him as an obstacle to route around will likely have the deal quietly killed in procurement. The rep who engages him as a legitimate decision-maker with legitimate concerns may find, once those concerns are addressed, a stakeholder who becomes one of the deal's more reliable supporters.

The practical implication is this: MEDDIC's Champion is a Mobilizer. But not every person who behaves like a Champion actually is one. The question that matters is not "Who will sell this for us internally?" It is "Who in this organization has both the motivation and the credibility to drive consensus?" Those are different questions, and the gap between them is where a surprising number of well-qualified deals come apart.

Consensus Is Non-Linear

One of the most consequential and least discussed aspects of modern B2B decision-making is that consensus within a buying committee does not build in a straight line. It does not accumulate like votes. It forms through a series of micro-commitments, each of which has to occur within specific stakeholder relationships, in roughly the right sequence, for the

74%

of B2B buyer teams demonstrate what they describe as "unhealthy conflict" during the decision process.

momentum to hold.

A Finance stakeholder who agrees in principle that the ROI case is sound may not commit until the IT security review is complete. The IT security lead will not prioritize the review until their manager signals it is strategically relevant. The manager will not send that signal until the Economic Buyer has indicated the initiative is funded. And the Economic Buyer may be waiting to see whether the departmental champion has built enough cross-functional support before putting their name on a budget request. None of these dependencies are visible to the seller. All of them can block the deal.

The stakes here are real and measurable. Gartner research finds that 74% of B2B buyer teams demonstrate what they describe as “unhealthy conflict” during the decision process [12]. Yet the same research suggests a meaningful upside to navigating that conflict well: buying groups that reach genuine consensus are 2.5 times more likely to describe the outcome as a high-quality decision [12]. Consensus is not simply a political box to check. It appears to be the mechanism through which preference converts to purchase, and through which a customer converts from buyer to advocate.

The Fox concept extends and deepens the Mobilizer archetype from the Challenger research, but adds a crucial dimension: temporal priority.

The Shadow Org Chart

Every formal organizational chart has an informal counterpart, a map of actual influence that often bears little relationship to reporting lines. Holden and Kubacki, in *The New Power Base Selling*, offer a precise description of this structure: “The Power Base is a network of individuals within an organization who all have one thing in common: influence. It may come from authority or via association with authority; either way, they are powerful people who communicate and collaborate within the network.” [57] The Power Base is not the org chart. It is the map that experienced

sellers spend months attempting to reconstruct from indirect signals, and that buyers navigate naturally from the inside.

A Senior Engineer who has been at the company for fifteen years and has the CTO's ear on every technology decision does not appear on the org chart in a way that reflects her real authority. A VP of Finance who is widely respected but who recently lost a political battle with the COO may nominally hold budget approval authority, but practically has limited influence over how a buying committee moves. Understanding these distinctions requires the kind of attentiveness that comes from multi-threaded engagement, such as noticing who gets deferred to in group calls, tracking whose name surfaces repeatedly when asking about past technology decisions, paying attention to who a Champion references when describing internal risk.

Holden and Kubacki give a name to the most consequential actors within this informal network: "Certain people in organizations have practical reasons for working quietly, behind the scenes, while less skillful fighters engage in noisy, public confrontations. In the world of selling, we call these understated achievers Foxes... They work with a sense of elegance and style." [57] The Fox is not necessarily a senior person. They are not always the most approachable. What distinguishes them is their orientation toward organizational outcomes rather than personal visibility, and their ability to move people and decisions without appearing to do so.

The Fox concept extends and deepens the Mobilizer archetype from the Challenger research, but adds a crucial dimension: temporal priority. As Holden and Kubacki note, "Foxes work behind the scenes to pre-wire or shape decisions, often long before they are made." [57] This is the dynamic that most confounds sellers who rely on formal process mapping. By the time a decision enters the official approval workflow, the Foxes in the account have often already determined its direction. MEDDIC's Decision Process ele-

40%

of B2B buyers report second-guessing their decision after the sale is complete

ment was designed to capture the approval workflow. In practice, though, the formal approval workflow is often a post-hoc ratification of a decision already made through informal channels. The question that actually matters is not who signs the contract. It is who needs to say yes before the contract gets sent to Legal. In the modern DMU, those people are rarely the same, and identifying the difference is one of the more underrated skills in enterprise sales.

The Psychological Dimension

Understanding the structure of the hidden decision process (i.e., the five phases, the DMU archetypes, and the non-linear consensus mechanics) is necessary but probably not enough on its own. Underneath the organizational dynamics is a psychological layer that shapes how buyers actually experience the decision. That experience may matter as much as any structural factor in determining whether a deal closes or quietly collapses.

The Twin Fears of Modern B2B Buyers

Buyers enter formal vendor engagement with two fears that are roughly equal in intensity and nearly opposite in their implications for action.

“Customer indecision accounts for more of the deals lost to inaction than any preference for the status quo. Customers, it turns out, are much less worried about missing out than they are about messing up.”

Dixon and McKenna, The JOLT Effect: How High Performers Overcome Customer Indecision

Dixon and McKenna, drawing on large-scale win/loss research for The JOLT Effect, describe the problem

precisely: “Losing to the status quo is actually one of two possible reasons a deal can be lost to inaction... there is a second, more challenging obstacle that remains even after the status quo has been defeated: the customer’s own inability to make a decision.” [58] Sales methodology has spent decades focused on the first obstacle: the preference for the status quo. The cost-of-inaction argument, the urgency-building, the ROI case are all designed to defeat the status quo. What that approach does not address is the second obstacle, which Dixon and McKenna’s research suggests is actually the more powerful one.

The first is the fear of choosing the wrong solution. The range of available options, the complexity of integration requirements, and the horror stories that circulate through peer networks about failed implementations all make the cost of a poor decision feel viscerally real. A buyer who champions a platform that fails to deliver has not just made a bad business decision. They have exposed themselves to personal reputational risk within their organization, and in some cases, to genuine career consequences. Research on post-purchase buyer behavior suggests the weight of this fear is not imagined. More than 40% of B2B buyers report second-guessing their decision after the sale is complete [39].

The second is the fear of doing nothing. Status quo carries its own cost. The competitive disadvantage that accumulates while a problem goes unaddressed. Team members who leave because their tools are inadequate. Revenue not captured because the process stays broken. Most buyers can articulate this cost intellectually. But it lives at a distance that is abstract and deferrable, unlike the concrete risk of a bad purchase decision. As Dixon and McKenna put it: “Customer indecision accounts for more of the deals lost to inaction than any preference for the status quo. Customers, it turns out, are much less worried about missing out than they are about messing up.” [58]

The interplay between these two fears helps explain

86%
of B2B purchases stall during
the buying process

a pattern that regularly puzzles sales teams. When a fully qualified deal simply stops moving, from the rep's perspective, a competitor has not intervened. There is no budget freeze. But behind the scenes, the buyer has reached the decision threshold and found that the fear of being wrong slightly outweighs the fear of standing still. In that psychological state, the rational response is to request more information, schedule another reference call, or commission an internal evaluation. Anything that defers commitment while maintaining the appearance of forward progress. The conclusion Dixon and McKenna draw from their research is unambiguous: "Indecision has a more powerful grip on the customer's mind than any preference they may have for the status quo." [58]

Jobs to Be Done: What Buyers Are Actually Hiring a Vendor to Do

The Jobs to Be Done framework, developed by Clayton Christensen and colleagues at Harvard Business School, offers a useful way of thinking about what buyers in this psychological state actually need from a vendor engagement. The core premise is that buyers do not purchase products or solutions in the abstract. They hire solutions to help them make progress on a specific job. And the job is rarely purely functional.

In a B2B context, the job a buyer hires a vendor to perform almost always has three dimensions. There is a functional job to deploy a platform that solves my workflow problem, reduces costs, or accelerates my output. There is an organizational job to help me make a credible case to my stakeholders, give me something that will survive CFO scrutiny, and equip me to build the internal consensus I need to actually move this forward. And there is a personal job to make me look competent, protect me from the reputational risk of championing a failure, and give me enough confidence to commit without feeling exposed.

MEDDIC's Identify Pain pillar addresses the functional job. Its Metrics element addresses one facet of the organizational job. Neither touches the personal job.

Dixon and McKenna are direct on this point: "What buyers fear most is their own personal role in taking action... Pain reduction is a very personal activity. It is perhaps the most human of things a sales rep does." [58] In the modern buying environment, where buyers arrive already informed about functional capabilities, the personal job appears to be what often determines whether a deal closes. A buyer who trusts that the vendor will make them look good, protect them through implementation, and support their internal selling process is a buyer who can make a decision. A buyer who doubts any of that will keep finding reasons to delay.

The Social Proof Imperative

The shift in what buyers accept as credible evidence has been one of the quietest and most consequential changes in B2B selling over the past decade. Vendor-produced claims (e.g., case studies, ROI calculators, analyst-endorsed white papers) have lost credibility not because they are false, but because buyers now expect them to be optimistic. Every vendor has a compelling case study. Every ROI model returns a positive number. Buyers have been exposed to enough of these materials to discount this category of sales and marketing collateral.

What has not lost credibility is peer testimony. A candid review from someone in the same role at a comparable company, posted on G2 or TrustRadius without vendor involvement, carries a weight that polished vendor content simply cannot replicate. A reference call with a practitioner who had a real implementation struggle and worked through it carries more persuasive force than a glossy customer success story on a vendor's website. A comment in a private Slack community, where the commenter has no incentive to shade their opinion,

There is a final psychological dynamic worth addressing directly, because it may be the one that most thoroughly undermines the assumption at the heart of MEDDIC's qualification logic: that a sufficiently well-qualified deal will close.

gets treated as closer to ground truth than anything a rep says in a meeting.

For the rep navigating a modern B2B deal, the implication is significant. The vendor who wins the social proof battle, who has the most credible, most accessible, most role-specific peer validation, will likely win deals at the margin with buyers who are informationally saturated and primed to discount vendor claims. It's worth noting that this is not purely a marketing problem. It is a sales problem because the rep's job now includes actively facilitating the buyer's access to relevant peer evidence, not just making a better pitch.

Decision Fatigue and the Pull Toward No Decision

There is a final psychological dynamic worth addressing directly, because it may be the one that most thoroughly undermines the assumption at the heart of MEDDIC's qualification logic: that a sufficiently well-qualified deal will close.

Dixon and McKenna's research identified three distinct fears underneath the broad category of buyer indecision: "Their indecision could be traced back to three specific fears: (1) they are worried about choosing the wrong option, (2) they are concerned that they haven't done enough homework, or (3) they fear they won't get what they're paying for." [58] Each of these fears has a behavioral signature that sellers regularly misread as a qualification problem rather than a psychological one.

The second fear, not enough homework, is particularly instructive. Buyers experiencing it do not announce uncertainty. They generate activity. As Dixon and McKenna observe, "They ask their reps to send more and more information to support their decision-making process. They ask them to have additional calls to address new questions... They enlist the help of third-party purchasing consultants... And they invite

From the outside, this looks like a deal progressing through careful evaluation. From the inside, it is a buyer trying to reduce fear by accumulating information.

more colleagues to weigh in on the purchase before making a decision." [58] From the outside, this looks like a deal progressing through careful evaluation. From the inside, it is a buyer trying to reduce fear by accumulating information. A strategy that tends to compound the original problem rather than resolve it.

Modern B2B buyers are operating under sustained information overload. They have read vendor content, parsed analyst reports, consulted peer recommendations, run AI-assisted comparisons, and sat through multiple vendor demonstrations. Each input was designed to reduce uncertainty. Cumulatively, they often appear to do the opposite. Not because the information is bad, but because sheer volume makes the decision feel more consequential, more complex, and more reversible than it needs to be. The scale of this is not small: Dixon and McKenna's research found that "nearly 87 percent of sales opportunities contain either moderate or high levels of indecision. And it is toxic: as indecision increases, win rates plummet." [58]

Behavioral research on decision-making uncertainty consistently finds that when cognitive burden exceeds a threshold, deferring the decision becomes the path of least resistance. In a B2B context, deferral rarely means cancellation. It means the deal enters a limbo state. Still alive in the CRM, still generating activity, but no longer moving toward a commitment date. Forrester's State of Business Buying research found that 86% of B2B purchases stall at some point in the buying process [8]. The most common cause is not a loss due to competition. A buyer arrived informed and motivated, was subjected to a qualification and discovery process designed for a different era, accumulated more uncertainty than they resolved, and found that the status quo, imperfect as it was, felt safer than the decision in front of them.

What makes this pattern so difficult to interrupt is what happens when a seller tries. Dixon and McKenna's research is unambiguous on this point: "The way

80%

win rate that the pre-contact front-runner typically enjoys is not 100%

most sellers handle indecision — relitigating the status quo — backfires, in large part because it actually increases customer effort... As sellers increase their use of JOLT behaviors, customer effort levels decline precipitously.” [58] A rep using a traditional MEDDIC framework will typically diagnose the stall as a qualification problem. The Champion is not strong enough. The pain is not urgent enough. The Metrics are not compelling enough. So they do more discovery, present more ROI analysis, and schedule more meetings. Each of which adds to the cognitive load that caused the stall in the first place. What the buyer may actually need at that point is something different: a credible and concrete path through implementation risk, a framework for building internal consensus, and a rep willing to reduce complexity rather than generate more of it. None of that is in the MEDDIC playbook.

What This Means for Sellers

Taken together, the five-phase pre-engagement sequence, the non-linear DMU (decision-making unit) structure, and the psychological dynamics of modern buyer decision-making point in a consistent direction. That the decision has largely been made before the rep arrives. Not finally. Not irreversibly. But directionally, the buyer has a front-runner. The committee has informal alignments. The fears have already been activated. The social proof has been consulted.

That is not a counsel of despair. The Validation Phase, the formal vendor engagement that begins when a rep enters the picture, still matters. And preferences can shift. Mobilizers can be identified and properly equipped. Consensus can be actively facilitated rather than passively awaited. That high win rate that the pre-contact front-runner typically enjoys is not 100%. There is room to compete. But competing effectively appears to require a fundamentally different approach than the one MEDDIC prescribes.

It requires operating less like a diagnostician asking questions to surface pain the buyer already understands, and more like a consensus architect. Some-

one who maps the informal decision network, distinguishes Mobilizers from Talkers, actively reduces the cognitive burden of the decision, and gives buyers the organizational cover they need to move from preference to commitment.

Before examining what that evolved framework looks like in practice, which is the subject of Part 5, it is worth spending one more part in the dark, exploring the specific channels through which the hidden decision process plays out. And why the Dark Funnel has become the primary battleground for competition in B2B selling. That is where we turn next.

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