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Understanding Buying Decisions and the People Who Make Them

In some marketing courses and websites, Buyer Personas are defined as something similar to Figure 1.1.

Here we see John, a fictional archetype who is meant to represent a typical Operations Manager. The graphic outline gives us information about John's education, age, to whom he reports, his skills, the incentives and rewards from his job (keeping his job and an occasional raise), and how he spends his free time (family, church, a weekly poker game with his friends); plus, how he stays current on the latest trends in his industry, broken down into four categories. This is a Buyer Profile that is heavy on data that could be readily gleaned from online research, social media, artificial intelligence (AI), and other sources.

The Buyer Profile has gained a lot of traction because it is a useful tool to help you think about your target buyers as real people, with actual families, typical bosses, and human concerns. For the same reason

John



Operations Manager

Personal

Age 38-42
Married with two kids
Bachelors degree
Loves to play poker, attends church regularly

Company

Industry: Wholesale manufacturing
Revenue: \$500M
Geography: North America

Role

Reports to: General Manager
Success measures: Productivity, System Uptime, Product Quality
Skills required: Teamwork, general management skills (I have 15 direct reports)

Goals and Challenges

Success means: Keeping my job, a raise every year if we make our profit goals
Biggest challenge: I have lots of balls in the air, but it's mostly keeping everything up and running, especially during peak seasons

How I Stay Connected

Peers
Trade associations and magazines
Internet research
LinkedIn
I am not on Facebook or Twitter

Figure 1.1 Example Buyer Profile.

that we find it far easier to communicate via social media when we have a photograph of a person we have never met in person, the Buyer Profile creates a sense of the human connection with people whom we have never met face-to-face. If you've ever built a relationship with someone through social media, you may have noticed that your first in-person encounter feels a lot like running into an old friend. The photograph and details of this person's job or personal life have likely shaped your interactions and created a sense of intimacy despite the fact that you live and work in very different circumstances.

Where Buyer Profiles Fall Short

While a Buyer Profile has value for marketers – and it should be *part* of your Buyer Persona – it tells us nothing about how buyers make a buying decision. We see John reads industry publications, belongs to industry trade groups, and uses the Internet when searching for solutions. Alas, the same could be said for about 99% of other business professionals working at a comparable managerial level.

Let's say John is looking for a new logistics management supplier. From this template, what do we know about what's motivating John to find a new supplier? What does he expect to be different once he makes

this switch? What is very important to John about the appearance of the packaging and enclosures in the shipments sent to retailers? What does John dislike about a lot of the providers he has used in the past?

Marketers hoping to interest John in their logistics services using just his Buyer Profile template won't find much useful intelligence here. Instead, they would need to use this profile to imagine (guess?) how John would respond to their messaging when sitting at his desk.

It's difficult to imagine how this approach to Buyer Personas will help marketers of logistics solutions know what they need to do to help John see their solution as a perfect fit for his needs. Further, it is unlikely that this company's marketers will use this tool to persuade their internal stakeholders that a different approach to their messaging and marketing activities will set their merchandise or services apart from their competition.

Buyer Profiles will not transform this marketer's ability to think like John. But suppose you knew what John is looking for when he is considering signing a contract with a new provider, why he has been dissatisfied with other providers in the past, and a score of other specific details about how John makes his decision. And suppose that these actionable details are things that neither you, nor your own salespeople, nor the competition has ever heard before. These are the types of *Buying Insights* that will give you clear guidance for the decisions you need to make to win John's business.

What a Family Vacation Can Teach Us About the Buying Decision

For the remainder of this chapter, we are going to take you through a first-person account of an actual buying decision I recently went through. Doing so will:

- Show you why it's so important for marketers to understand the mindset and steps that buyers take when making a buying decision, and
- Introduce you to the types of Buying Insights that should be part of your Buyer Persona.

Some Background

Every year, my extended family and I go on vacation together. Everyone goes – spouses, kids, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents. I think someone even brought their pet turtle one year. Point is, there's a lot of us and it's a trip everyone looks forward to and plans their schedules around. We always have a great time and return home relaxed, refreshed, and grateful for the time together.

To keep things interesting, we pick a different location each year and one member of the family is randomly chosen as the “Squad Leader” for that trip. He or she chooses the destination, a place to stay, and some fun activities we can all do together. Once we get back from a trip, planning for the next one starts shortly after.

Such was the case early last year when we had just returned from one of these trips and it was time to randomly select the Squad Leader for our next adventure. I won't divulge the scientific way we do this, but there's a hat and pieces of paper involved.

Now, I can't speak for other members of my family, but my thinking at that exact moment went something like this:

- *Super – we had such a great time on the last trip, I can't wait to see where we go next!*
- *I hope we go to Europe, or maybe some place more tropical, or even a part of the U.S. where we've never been.*
- *Maybe we can try Yellowstone, Zion or one of the other National Parks. We've never done that before.*
- *Please, oh please, oh please, don't pick me as the Squad Leader!*

I think I make reasonably good decisions most of the time, but organizing a trip like this for so many people is not exactly in my wheelhouse, particularly when our past trips have been so successful. And, since I've perfected my role as a benign and supportive attendee, I didn't see any reason to mess with leadership responsibilities now.

By my telling this story, you can probably guess that my name *did* come out of that hat, which meant I needed to start planning for our next trip right away. I figured my chances of pulling this off were at least

fifty-fifty. I mean, if humankind can put a person on the moon, split the atom, and raise pyramids from the sand, I can certainly plan a week's vacation for one eager, if not occasionally judgmental family!

My Mindset

Since every Squad Leader needs a clear set of objectives, I started thinking about what I wanted out of this trip. I envisioned new adventures where everyone had a great time and experienced a few things they had never done before. I pictured a lot of family-time together, talking, laughing, and catching up on each other's lives. I also wanted everyone to have a chance to relax and recharge from the day-to-day pressures of life.

These were broad aspirations, and I was a bit anxious, so I took a minute to jot down a few specific requirements that I thought would help me focus – see Figure 1.2.

The Initial Search

To reduce the initial ocean of possibilities, I decided to focus on warm, tropical locations. We had been to a colder climate on our last trip, so a warmer venue would be a welcome change. And, since we roughed it a bit last time – camping, hiking, kayaking – I decided to focus on resort hotels where we could all relax at a more leisurely pace and enjoy some of the finer amenities that these destinations offer.

Family Vacation Requirements

- Nice weather
- Beautiful destination in a safe environment
- Clean accommodations with modern amenities
- Fun activities and new adventures
- Downtime to relax and do nothing
- Good, local cuisine
- Great guest service - friendly, attentive, helpful
- Reasonable price that's within our budget

Figure 1.2 Family vacation requirements.

From there, I asked for advice from friends and did a little online research – mainly visiting different travel and resort websites. The websites gave me an initial feel for what each resort offered, including rooms, dining options, beachfront property, pools, activities, excursions, and spa facilities. I also got a preliminary sense of price for each one.

Based on these inputs, I narrowed it down to three resorts that had the main things I was looking for and were within the budget range my family had agreed upon.

On a scale of 1 (panicked) to 10 (very confident), my comfort level was about 3 at that point. I realize that's a low level of confidence, but this is an important trip for my family, and I didn't want to be THE ONE to mess it up!

Evaluating Options

My next step was to dig in and investigate each resort more closely. I never expressly stated this to anyone (maybe not even myself!), but my two overarching questions at that point were:

- Which resort has the best chance of providing us with all the things *we* want?
- Which resort has the least likelihood of failing *me* in some way?

The first question was impersonal and objective. All I needed to do was investigate the resorts one-by-one to see what each of them offered and make my assessment.

The second question was highly personal. I needed to eliminate any chance of something falling short of expectations (that I would be blamed for!). Things like dirty rooms, bad service, poor food quality, and unanticipated expenses were all top of mind.

With those two questions lurking in my mind, I moved to the next phase of my search where I visited each resort's website again, read more online reviews from prior guests, and contacted each hotel directly to get more information and ask questions.

Here's a summary of my experience with each of the three resorts that I'll call *Coconut Palms*, *Coral Breeze*, and *Lagoon Oasis* (all pseudonyms).

Coconut Palms The Coconut Palms website had a few stock images of pools, restaurants, and outdoor activities in a resort setting – none were of the *actual* resort itself.

I found a handful of online reviews that ranged from very negative to somewhat positive. No one gave glowing marks. When a prior guest gave a negative review, the resort did not apologize, offer an explanation, or even seek additional information. In fact, there was no reply at all.

When I called the resort directly, it went to voicemail. Someone did call me back a few minutes later, but they weren't able to answer several basic questions I had about their rooms and dining options.

Coral Breeze Coral Breeze's website had beautiful photos of the actual resort including the rooms, restaurants, pools, beaches, golf course, and the spa. It even had a panoramic video of their entire property that I could zoom in and out of.

Online reviews were plentiful and included mostly positive ratings along with a few negative comments that Coral Breeze addressed by responding to each reviewer quickly and directly.

When I called the resort, someone picked up immediately and patiently answered most of the questions I had.

Lagoon Oasis Like Coral Breeze, I had a similarly good experience with Lagoon Oasis in terms of the quality of their website, photos, videos, and online reviews. Their website also had a simple, one-page overview of the key features and amenities of their hotel compared to other resorts in the area, including Coconut Palms and Coral Breeze.

When I called Lagoon Oasis directly, I was quickly routed to a Guest Relations Representative ("Rep") who:

- Asked me how many people were in my party, the purpose of our trip, the types of activities we enjoy, and what a "perfect vacation" might look like for us.
- Answered all my questions patiently along with his personal suggestions about the activities he thought we would enjoy based on our preferences.

- Arranged a time to call me back later in the day so he could give me more specific recommendations and details about the rooms, restaurants, activities, and excursions that were tailored to everything we spoke about.
- Left his direct number in case I had any additional questions.
- Offered to book the entire vacation for me if we decided to stay with them or alternatively book online if I preferred.

The Decision

After all of this, I ultimately chose Lagoon Oasis. I suspect, you would too. Unless you're a member of my family, my choosing Lagoon Oasis isn't important. But, for marketers trying to influence prospective buyers, understanding WHY I chose Lagoon Oasis is important. Let's dig into this a bit more, as Lagoon Oasis understood several things better than the other resorts I was considering.

First, Lagoon Oasis recognized that this was a *high-consideration buying decision* for me – not life or death, but these vacations are important to my family and there is a keen interest in making them as enjoyable as possible for everyone. I wasn't going to just pick a resort willy-nilly. I needed to take some time and really investigate my options.

Second, they realized that I didn't want to disappoint my family *by making a bad choice*. I was actually more fearful of making the "wrong" choice than I was excited about making the "right" one. High-consideration buying decisions are often like that. You want the upside benefits, but you also want to minimize the risks that something could go wrong or fall short of expectations.

Third, Lagoon Oasis understood that although I was the person they were interacting with, there were *multiple people influencing the buying decision* – my entire family in this case. My needs and preferences were important (got to take care of #1, right!), but my entire family was going to be impacted by this decision and they were on my mind throughout the process.

Finally, Lagoon Oasis recognized that I was going to consider other resorts and *comparing my options would be difficult*. They were right. I never

searched for a resort before. I never stayed at the ones I was considering. And, on the surface, they all seemed pretty similar. Trying to compare them was difficult and stressful.

Looking across these factors, what Lagoon Oasis really understood better than the others is this fundamental buying truth:

The organization that does the best job of making a buyer feel **CONFIDENT** and **SECURE** in their buying decision usually wins the business.

How Lagoon Oasis Earned My Business

So, what did Lagoon Oasis actually say and do to make me confident in choosing them? And where did Coconut Palms and Coral Breeze miss the mark in comparison?

It's useful to examine this at both the early and later stages of my buying journey.

In the **EARLY** stages:

Lagoon Oasis recognized that I'd do some of my own research before contacting them to figure out what their resort looked like, what they offered, and what prior guests were saying. To meet my buying needs at this early stage, they provided photos and videos on their website of everything on and around their property. By the sheer number and quality of online reviews, I could tell that past guests went out of their way to share their great experiences. By directly responding to the few negative reviews they received, Lagoon Oasis also showed me that they cared about the guest experience. As a result, my confidence and sense of security to trust Lagoon Oasis with our vacation took root.

Coral Breeze also gave me some confidence early on. Like Lagoon Oasis, their website had lots of appealing photos of the property, they offered a wide variety of activities, and most of the online reviews were positive. Although Lagoon Oasis had an edge, Coral Breeze was still in the running at this early stage.

Although I did end up contacting Coconut Palms, they fell out of consideration almost immediately. A poor website with only stock photos told me they weren't proud of their property (and that they might even be hiding something!). Poor guest reviews reinforced my uneasiness to trust them.

In the **LATER** stages of my buying journey:

Lagoon Oasis took the time to ask what a “perfect vacation” looked like for my family and kept asking me questions to ensure that any lingering concerns I had were fully addressed. I didn't need to guess or hope they would – Lagoon Oasis **SHOWED** me by providing the information and details I needed to feel confident on my own. They even suggested activities we should skip and provided a buying experience that made it easy to book with them. Most importantly, once they understood what I wanted, it became less about everything **THEY** offered and more about how their resort could best meet **MY** family's needs. Consequently, my confidence and sense of security choosing Lagoon Oasis grew rapidly and it's *the* reason that I ultimately chose them.

My interactions with Coral Breeze were also good – they were friendly, attentive, and helpful overall. But unlike Lagoon Oasis, they didn't take the time to really understand my family's interests and preferences, or address some of the questions I had. I also didn't get a clear vision of how Coral Breeze would meet our specific needs – we'd have to figure some of that out on our own. Consequently, they seemed like a riskier option, so I didn't choose them.

Focus Your Buyer Personas on the Buying Decision

At this point, you may be asking yourself, so what? There's some nice lessons in this story that most marketers can relate to, but what's the point in the context of Buyer Personas – both the title and focus of this book?

The point is, rather than assuming or accepting the notion that a Buyer Persona is simply a fictional avatar of an individual or role involved in the buying decision – the more traditional, but limiting view of what

a Buyer Persona is – Lagoon Oasis stopped and asked themselves: ***what Buying Insights do we need that will enable us to better influence prospective buyers and give them the confidence they need to choose us?*** Let's take a minute and really think about that question. Put yourself in the shoes of someone in Lagoon Oasis's marketing department and ask yourself, what types of insights would you need to have to develop strategies, messaging, and experiences that:

- Increase buyer awareness of the resort,
- Drive consideration once prospective buyers become aware of the resort, and
- Convert more business as prospective buyers weigh their options and make a choice.

Lagoon Oasis didn't settle, and neither should you. Think about insights that you would need to eliminate all the guesswork in marketing, allowing you to focus on strategies that break through the clutter and have the desired effect on the buying decision.

If you answered the question honestly, you'd acknowledge that knowing a few things about me as an individual isn't going to help that much. Clayton Christensen, the renowned academic, consultant, and author of *The Innovator's Dilemma*, once said:

I'm 6-feet-8-inches tall. My shoe size is 16. My wife and I have sent all our children off to college. I live in a suburb of Boston and drive a Honda minivan to work. I have a lot of other characteristics and attributes. But these characteristics have not yet caused me to go out and buy *The New York Times* today. There might be a correlation between some of these characteristics and the propensity of customers to purchase the Times. But those attributes don't cause me to buy that paper – or any product.

Point taken! Rather than a profile of an individual or role in the buying decision, what you really need is ***insight into the buying decision***

they are making. Let's consider three things that Lagoon Oasis understood about the buying decision I was making and how they used that knowledge to win my business. In Chapter 2, we'll use these observations to create a framework for Buyer Personas that will inform nearly every marketing and sales decision you make (teaser alert!)

High-consideration Buying Decisions

The first thing Lagoon Oasis realized is that searching for and selecting a resort destination is a *high-consideration buying decision*. A high-consideration decision means:

- Prospective buyers consider multiple options to fulfill their needs.
- Buyers haven't made this decision before or have done so infrequently.
- Multiple individuals are involved in the decision directly or indirectly.
- There is a lot at stake for the individuals and organizations (if B2B) involved in the buying decision.

Since this was a high-consideration buying decision, Lagoon Oasis knew I'd be anxious about making the best choice possible and that I'd need certain things to feel confident, including lots of details about the resort, expert guidance during my buying journey, and evidence that Lagoon Oasis cared about my family's needs and could fulfill them.

If you look back at all the things Lagoon Oasis did throughout my buying journey, you'll see that they understood all of this and delivered the information and evaluation experience I needed.

Multiple Stages in the Buying Journey

Lagoon Oasis also recognized that my buying needs would evolve as I got deeper into my search and that I'd want different types of information and interactions with them as things progressed.

Early on, I didn't want a lot of information about each resort because it made me more anxious and confused. All I needed was enough

information to help me decide who I was going to initially consider. Website photos of the resorts and online reviews from prior guests were the right amount of information to make that judgment.

Later in my buying journey, when I started to evaluate my options more closely, I was ready for the details. Now I wanted to see *exactly* how each resort was going to deliver the experience we wanted. It was at that point that Lagoon Oasis took time to understand my family's important needs and showed me exactly how they'd meet them. They also listened to my concerns and fully addressed each one. Consequently, my confidence in Lagoon Oasis grew.

Types of Buying Insights Needed

Lagoon Oasis also realized that they needed five different types of Buying Insights to develop strategies that would resonate with me throughout my buying journey, including:

- 1. What caused me to start looking for a resort destination in the first place?** It was clear that Lagoon Oasis had done their homework and knew there were certain buyers, like me, that would be looking for a destination that catered to large families. Consequently, their website had lots of photos of families relaxing together and participating in fun activities and excursions. Later on, their Guest Relations Rep asked me about the purpose of our trip. Once I told him, he recommended activities and property features that were geared toward a large family vacation and all the experiences we wanted to have. At that moment, my perception of Lagoon Oasis went from a nameless resort – no better or worse than any of the others – to an actual place where my family and I could have a great time.
- 2. What were the most important outcomes and experiences we wanted from the trip?** We sought new adventures, a lot of family time, and a chance to relax and recharge. Lagoon Oasis's website, online reviews, and my interactions with Guest Relations showed me that we'd get all of these things by staying with them.

The images on their website were enticing and included photos and information about zip-lining, four-wheeling, and snorkeling – all things we were interested in. Online reviews backed up the promise that these activities were both fun and safe. The Guest Relations Rep recommended which activities made the most sense for us and when to schedule them throughout our stay. By interspersing these activities with sufficient downtime in between, I knew we'd also have plenty of time to relax. After all of these interactions, did I feel confident that we'd get the outcomes we wanted? You bet!

3. What worries did I have about something going wrong or not meeting expectations? I had four primary concerns, and Lagoon Oasis alleviated each of them:

- **Dirty rooms:** Photos of pristine rooms and glowing guest reviews eliminated any trepidations I had about cleanliness.
- **Bad service:** The Guest Relations Rep was knowledgeable, attentive, and responsive. Prior guests went out of their way to write positive reviews about specific members of the resort staff. I was confident the service would be top-notch.
- **Poor food quality:** Diverse restaurant options available inside and outside of the resort, along with beautiful images of delicious food and positive guest reviews, squashed any concerns I had.
- **Higher costs than anticipated:** Costs for accommodations, transport to and from the resort, activities, excursions, and food were all included, itemized, and transparent. Guest Relations took time to review all of them with me so I was confident that no hidden expenses would pop up unexpectedly.

4. What were the requirements I'd use to evaluate my options and make a decision? Recall that early on, I jotted down eight things on a piece of paper that I was looking for – nice weather, safe environment, clean accommodations, modern amenities, etc. I went back to these notes several times as I investigated each of

the three resorts. It kept me on track and enabled me to make a thorough and objective decision. Coconut Palms and Coral Breeze addressed some of these requirements. Lagoon Oasis fulfilled all of them.

- 5. What did my buying journey look like – steps taken, resources used, and people involved?** Lagoon Oasis clearly understood the major steps I'd take during the time I searched for resort options, weighed the pros and cons of each property, and made a final decision. They knew their website and guest reviews would be critical touchpoints early on if I was going to initially consider them. Once I dug into a few of the resorts more closely, Lagoon Oasis shrewdly leveraged their Guest Relations Reps as the primary means for educating me about everything their resort had to offer and aligning that with my family's needs and preferences. They also made it easy for me to compare what they had to offer versus other options I was considering (recall the comparison information they made available on their website).

Taken together, these five Buying Insights gave Lagoon Oasis everything they needed to provide me with the right type and amount of information, in the right way, at the right time. As a result, they earned my trust and differentiated themselves from the other options I was considering.

Next Steps

We've had a chance to consider the types of Buying Insights that marketers need to influence prospective buyers. When it comes to high-consideration buying decisions, a Buyer Persona that only provides descriptive characteristics of a particular individual or role is not enough. We can do better!

However, there is still one important buying predicament that we need to address directly to ensure that our Buyer Personas are as valuable

as they can be to BOTH marketing and sales. That is, what happens when a prospective buyer starts looking for a solution to a need that they have, expresses interest in buying it, but then does nothing? They stick with the status quo. Talk to any salesperson and they will tell you that “customer inaction” is one of the toughest challenges they face, particularly considering how much time and energy is expended getting buyers to the precipice of making a buying decision. An impactful Buyer Persona will help them overcome this challenge and, in doing so, elevate the value of marketing.

In the next chapter we’ll examine some compelling new evidence that shows why understanding the buying decision is critical to helping sales professionals overcome *customer inaction*. Then we’ll lay out a logical framework for Buyer Personas that will provide you with the Buying Insights you need to influence buyers, so they choose you rather than your competitors or the status quo. Hundreds of companies and thousands of marketers have used this exact same approach to take all the guesswork out of their marketing and sales activities – you can too!

Summary

In this chapter, we covered the following points:

- High-consideration buying decisions typically involve multiple decision influencers, a competitive search and evaluation process, and some level of risk.
- These can be business-to-consumer (B2C) buying decisions, such as the resort example, or business-to-business (B2B), such as buying enterprise software, a piece of equipment, or engaging in a professional services contract.
- Buyers are often anxious – they have likely never made this type of buying decision before, or only infrequently, and there is confusion about the different options available.

- Consequently, whoever does the best job of making a buyer feel confident and secure in their buying decision usually wins the business.
- To do this, you need more than just a Buyer Profile (a fictional archetype of an individual or role involved in the buying decision). You need insight into why and how prospective buyers make the buying decisions that they do. Only then can you align with a buyer's needs and differentiate yourself throughout their buying journey.
- A Buyer Persona reveals everything a prospective buyer wants to know and experience before they buy from you and will inform nearly every marketing and sales decision that you make.

