

SECRET SAUCE SALES

No Is Better Than Maybe

THE COMMERCIAL QUESTION

Why is discovering that there is no worthwhile deal sometimes one of the most valuable outcomes of discovery?

THE ANSWER

Stay curious about possibility. Be ruthless about evidence.

What the evidence says

Professional selling research provides unusually direct evidence for a problem early-stage companies can ill afford: sellers keep investing in opportunities after the evidence has deteriorated. Experimental research with practising salespeople found an escalation-of-commitment effect in the allocation of selling time. Prior investment, confidence in selling ability and internal disclosure of an opportunity can all affect the willingness to keep pursuing it even as the odds change.

A later field study in a large multinational industrial salesforce found the same underlying danger in live selling: faced with sunk investments over long sales cycles, salespeople can continue committing effort to opportunities with little or no chance of being won, displacing effort that could have gone to viable opportunities. Separate research comparing salesperson and manager opportunity assessments found salespeople to be more optimistic, confident and overconfident than managers.

The evidence does not say that uncertain opportunities should be abandoned quickly simply because budget, process or requirements are absent. That would contradict what FIND established about genuinely new ideas. It says something subtler: prior effort is not evidence of future value. Discovery should continually improve the evidence for continuing - or make stopping easier.

EVIDENCE BASE

Established sales research, including experiments with practising salespeople and a field study of industrial salesforces.

SECRET SAUCE INGREDIENT

The precise operating rule below is a Secret Sauce ingredient.

What this challenges

- Pipeline as reassurance. A large pipeline can feel safer while actually concealing scarce time inside opportunities that are not moving.
- Sunk-cost selling. Time already spent, senior attention already invested and forecasts already shared are reasons to reassess an opportunity - not reasons to keep it alive.
- Confusing uncertainty with promise. An opportunity can remain possible for a very long time. Possible is not the same as progressing.
- Treating a no as failure. A well-founded early no can release time, attention and emotional energy for a better opportunity.

What early-stage companies should do

Make every meaningful discovery interaction improve the evidence. What has changed? What did the customer do? What did they commit to? What became clearer about the problem, value, people or path to action?

Use explicit continuation tests. Not rigid qualification gates, but evidence that justifies the next investment of scarce selling time. If the evidence weakens, say so. If there is no credible path to movement, stop.

Reward clean exits. In an early-stage company, learning quickly that an opportunity is not real is commercially useful information. The mistake is not losing a deal that never existed. It is carrying it for six months because nobody wanted to confront the answer.

The Secret Sauce

SECRET SAUCE INGREDIENT

Stay curious about possibility. Be ruthless about evidence.

Finding there is no deal is not failed discovery. Finding it six months later might be.

Academic sources

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