ARCHITECTURE NOTES · RESOURCE

Retire or iterate: the retention flow decision

Iterating a flow that should have been retired is the most expensive mistake in retention. The signal is in the cohort decay curve.

Companion to: When to retire a retention flow vs iterate it.

Why this deck exists

The article draws a hard line. Some retention flows decay because the audience changed. Others were never tuned for the audience to begin with. The fix for each is different and iterating the wrong one wastes a quarter. This deck takes the diagnostic the article names, segment-level cohort retention plotted against time-since-flow-shipped, and turns it into a decision a retention lead can run on Monday morning. It is built for the operator who has already iterated the offer twice and the curve has not moved.

- The two decay shapes and what each means
- The diagnostic plot you actually need
- Iteration order when the audience shifted
- When to stop iterating and rebuild from the segment up

The two decay shapes

01 **Audience-shift decay**

A smooth curve down across all segments. The flow used to convert at six percent across all cohorts and now converts at four. The flow worked; the audience moved. The fix is iteration, in a specific order.

02 **Mistuned-flow decay**

Conversion is highly skewed by segment from day one. The segments that convert are the ones that did not need persuading. The flow is doing nothing for the segments that needed it. The fix is retirement, not iteration.

03 **The diagnostic plot**

Segment-level cohort retention plotted against time-since-flow-shipped. One line per segment, x-axis is weeks since the flow went live. The shape of the lines, not their level, is the answer.

04 **The iteration order**

When the audience shifted, iterate the offer first, then the language, then the visual register. Most teams jump straight to visual changes because they are the most visible, and they are the lowest-leverage of the three.

How to read the cohort plot

Iterate (audience shift)

- All segment lines decline together
- Decline is smooth across the time axis
- Conversion ratio between segments is stable
- The flow used to work for everyone
- The market or audience composition has moved

Retire (mistuned)

- Segment lines are far apart from day one
- Top-converting segments did not need the flow
- Bottom-converting segments are flat near zero
- Average performance hides the gap
- The flow was tuned to a different ICP than ships now

Reading the curve (using the article numbers)

ORIGINAL CONVERSION

6%

Across all cohorts, when the flow originally shipped against the ICP it was tuned for

CURRENT CONVERSION

4%

Across all cohorts, the smooth-decline audience-shift signature where every segment

DROP

2 points

Smooth across segments, the article-named iterate signal. Test offer first, then language, then

MISTUNED SIGNATURE

wide spread

High-converters and near-zero side by side, the wide-spread mistuned signature that calls for retirement,

The decision runbook

- **Pull cohort retention by segment**
  One line per segment, weekly cohorts since the flow went live. Do not aggregate.
- **Read the shape of the lines**
  Smooth parallel decline is audience shift. Wide spread from day one is mistuned.
- **If audience shift, iterate offer first**
  The offer is the heaviest variable. Test before language or visual changes.
- **If audience shift, language second**
  Tighten claims to what the current audience says back to you. Listen before writing.
- **If audience shift, visual register third**
  Lowest leverage. Run only after offer and language are settled.
- **If mistuned, retire the flow**
  Do not iterate. Rebuild from the segment up so the flow exists for the segments that need it.
- **Document the decision and date**
  So the next quarter inherits the reasoning, not just the result.

Anti-patterns we see in audits

01 **Iterating average conversion**

The average hides the segment spread. Teams that watch the average iterate flows that should have been retired and conclude their offer is broken. The offer was fine. The flow targeted the wrong segments.

02 **Reordering iteration to start with visuals**

Visuals are the most visible variable, so they get touched first. They are the lowest-leverage of the three. The article order is offer, language, visual. Skip a step and the iteration is noise.

03 **Retiring a flow without rebuilding from the segment**

Retirement is not deletion. It is acknowledgement that the next version starts from a segment definition and works backwards to the flow, not the other way around.

04 **Calling a quarter mid-iteration**

Iteration cycles need cohorts to mature. Calling success or failure on a four-week cohort is reading noise. Plan iteration windows in cohort-weeks, not calendar quarters.

Signals you are running the right play

COHORT SPREAD

narrowing

After iteration in offer-language-visual order, segments converge toward a

TIME TO DECISION

one plot

Not a quarter of A/B tests

ITERATION ORDER

offer first

Heaviest variable in the article order, tested first because language and visual changes inside a wrong

RETIRED FLOWS

documented

With segment-level reasoning, not blame

NEXT STEP

Read the cohort plot before you iterate.

Audience-shift decay rewards iteration. Mistuned flows reward retirement. Same curve from far away. Different fixes.

Read the full architecture note ->