Brief & Brilliant

How to simplify complex deals
and sell through the chaos
of modern life.

Nate Nasralla

Brief & Brilliant

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ISBN for Hardcover: 9798296427526
ISBN for Paperback: 9798296269607

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For questions or requests, email Nate at nate@fluint.io.

To E.

Thank you for always lifting me up
with your words.

Context

A short note to you, the reader:

First, thank you.

You can spend your minutes today in a lot of different ways, and you're spending them reading this. I'm honored. So I made it my goal to give you back as much life, energy, and calm as I possibly could while writing these words for you.

Second, there's a lot I won't cover in this book.

Points that are absolutely essential to building a modern, high-performing sales process. Designing buying journeys. Developing champions. Deep, thoughtful discovery. If you'd like to go deeper on these practices, consider my first book: *Selling With: The art of selling with champions to shape internal buying conversations.*

Third, you don't need to rush.

The point of reading isn't to get through a book. It's to get the book *through to you*. So that you don't just know but do what I'm writing about. That's why all the stories and skills, frameworks and phrases I share relate to one core idea. An idea I'm increasingly convinced is *the* skill you'll need to sell and thrive in your next decade of sales:

Selling with simplicity.

Foreword

After 25 years in sales, I've pretty much read it all. And while running revenue for a half-billion dollar public company, people are constantly sending me the latest books and posts, promising to sharpen what we're doing. Most of it's noise.

But sometimes, something clicks.

When I came across Nate's first book, the title was intriguing, so I ordered it. Then I finished it in 24 hours, and immediately started evangelizing it—even in my board slides.

That was the fall of 2023. By our sales kickoff in 2024, I was showing our entire team. By the end of 2024, we'd operationalized it, company-wide. Today, it's baked into our go-to-market. We've quite literally made co-creating the business case a requirement: you can't exit certain stages (let alone get into our forecast), without involving the customer.

No doubt, not everyone completely adopted it. It's hard work, because simple doesn't mean easy. But the hard things are usually worth it, and the beauty of Nate's approach is it's practical:

It's rooted in the fact executives have 17 other priorities, which often have nothing to do with your deal—and that's why deals stall. So, how do you enable your champions with short soundbites that create and keep executive attention?

Brief and Brilliant will teach you.

For any CRO or sales leader looking to build their process around *their customers*—with change that sticks and gets results—keep reading.

Ken Hohenstein
Chief Revenue Officer, OneStream Software

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Your #1 Job

We're all distracted, busy, and overwhelmed with notifications, alerts, requests, and nonstop emails. Every day, we **create** more to dos, but they never actually get checked off our lists. So while we try to manage all our competing "priorities," doing our best not to fall **short** on deadlines, nobody's got the time for long meetings, emails, and decks with noise. All we need and want are **soundbites**. Sharp, specific sentences focused on the must-dos. Otherwise, with all **that** chaos, our messaging won't **stick**—let alone get shared with the buying team executive.

Prologue: The $10M Sentence

"They're paying $10 million for this?" I stared at Jeff, slightly confused.

"Pretty much," Jeff nodded.

"So this sentence, *this one sentence*, is worth $10 million?"

"More, actually," Jeff corrected me.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, but what we're billing them isn't the point. This isn't just a sentence. It's the *right sentence*—the sentence they'll cash in for hundreds of millions."

I didn't realize it then, but Jeff's point forever shaped the way I write and work.

At the time, I had just started as a consultant. I was young, green, and hired by a firm that specialized in financial valuation. Jeff was the senior consultant assigned to show me the ropes, and our first project together was working on the largest bankruptcy in Canadian history.

Our team had built a massive valuation model—think hundreds of tabs in a tangled web of Excel files—to measure how valuable each of the company's subsidiaries' contributions to their technology patents were. The groups who created the most valuable intellectual property (IP) got the biggest slices of the pie. (The pie was $7 billion in cash.)

So basically, our job was to turn hundreds of thousands of pages of corporate documents into a sentence, like this:

"The UK subsidiary's contributed IP is worth $XXX million."

One sentence, distilling a few decades into a few words.

Their entire company history—the slavishly long hours in the lab, contentious debates in the boardroom, mundane secretarial work—all compressed into 10 words.

Ten words their legal counsel would replay over and over in court, to determine the payout for every creditor and pensioner asking, *"What's it all worth?"*

That's exactly what this book is about:

Compressing your deals into a sentence or two that are worth their weight in gold (or bitcoin, if you prefer).

I use the word "compression" intentionally here because compression is the process of shrinking your message down to a brief yet brilliant soundbite. Kind of like compressing a 100 MB file down to 10 MB. It's how you'll make sure your message gets delivered, without losing any context, quality, or clarity.

This is *the* skill for anyone selling through the noise, chaos, and overwhelming complexity that is life in the 21st century. It's also the counterintuitive reality about getting a big, complex deal done in B2B:

Saying less actually brings *more* meaning to your message.

Just like a movie studio that edits hundreds of hours of film into a series of short clips people watch, remember, share, and rave about. You can do the same. You *need* to do the same.

Because your career is becoming increasingly dependent on it. This book will show you why and teach you how.

PART 1

Complexity

The New Go-to-Market Metric: Mindshare

We could start with the data. How win rates are hovering below 20% and quota attainment around 40%, with an average CRO tenure dropping below two years.

But I don't think you need more numbers. Because something's changed from five, let alone 10 years ago, and I think you can *feel* it. We all can. Here's what I mean:

I drive a decade-old Audi. It's a diesel. Audi doesn't sell diesels in the US anymore, so I'll drive this beauty 'til she dies. As the years go on, it falls further behind on the technology curve. So when I took it in for service last month, the dealer saw my iPod of a car, took pity on me, and put me in a brand new Audi e-tron with top-of-the-line tech. I have a toddler, so I switched her car seat over to the loaner, turned on my new spaceship, and zoomed off the lot. I hopped out when I got home, and as I started to walk away, an alarm started ringing. *What in the world?* I thought.

Can you guess what that alarm was?

The car had detected a car seat but noticed I hadn't checked the backseat. So it said, *Hey you, did you forget a small human sitting in here?*

At first, I was like, "That's crazy! Who'd forget a child?!" And then, much to my own horror, I realized, *me.*

Later that night, I was feverishly typing out an email, completely

distracted, only to look up and see my daughter patiently stuffing her crayon into a power outlet.

My daughter's fine and safe. But here's my point: that Audi's alarm is a *necessary* piece of tech, and it was created to counter the side effects of other tech: digital distraction, and the all-around feeling of chaos that is life right now.

It's a feeling and a reality that Hartmut Rosa calls *social acceleration*. Our lives get busier, and our attention spans get shorter every year that our tech lets us do and achieve more in less time.

And this is why simplicity wins in complex sales. It's why everything you read and apply in this book is like investing in Apple in 1976, then rolling all your profit into Amazon's stock in 1994. Your value's only going up over time. Your skills are only going to get more valuable. Regardless of how AI (or any other type of technology) develops.

You can *feel* what I'm talking about here, right?

Our lives are accelerating faster than our brains can cope. Unless you're Elon Musk plotting humanity's escape to Mars for 100 hours a week, you might feel a little overloaded. A little overwhelmed. And some days, just plain *done*.

Spending a day on a digital detox—no Netflix, no music, no phone, no conversation—is kind of like snow in the Bahamas. It just doesn't happen. Because even when we do get a few minutes of quiet, we hardly spend it in deep thought. Our minds end up like confetti, with dozens of fragmented thoughts scattered in every direction.

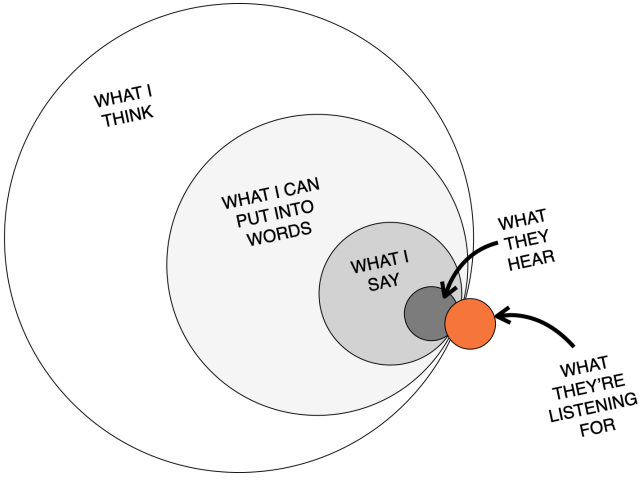
This is the reality you sell in. Every day, in every deal.

People only hear a fraction of what you say, because you're actively competing for mindshare with noise like:

> *I shouldn't have eaten that chocolate. It's only 9am. And swimsuit season's almost here… but what's for lunch? Did*

> *Annie get that catering order in? Oh yeah, kids have practice tonight, so Chipotle again I guess. Speaking of practice, why is Kary late with my keynote deck? I have to practice. Maybe I'll look in the car with the kids later?*

A customer can stare right at you, smiling in their little box on Zoom, while thinking about 1,000 other things—none of which are what you're trying to tell them.



And here's the rub:

That's a big problem, because *mindshare* is now your main go-to-market metric. We live and work in an Attention Economy. Your buyers' budget flows where their mindshare goes. For example, pick any top-funnel metric:

- How often do people read from you?
- How long do they spend when they do?
- How long does it stick with them afterwards?

Metrics like impressions, readers, opens, and clicks are all, in essence, proxies for mindshare. Further down the funnel:

- How many follow-up meetings did you book?

- How many different contacts were threaded in?
- How's usage trending? Are we adding more seats?
- Are customers telling their friends about us?

Multithreading, net revenue retention, referrals—they're all forms of driving up mindshare, to drive up revenue.

So the question, then, is: how do you create and keep mindshare?

1. First, by becoming the type of person who *can* keep it simple, without creating more chaos. This isn't something that comes naturally. It's hard.

2. Second, by understanding what *already* has your buyers' attention. By crawling into the mind of an executive and getting comfortable with how high-level buyers think.

3. Third, by speaking to that topic while building a bridge back to your point of view, through brief-yet-brilliant soundbites.

Keep reading, and you'll master all three.

Simplicity Defined

I know, it's a little ironic. I wrote and you're reading a *book*. About *brevity*. Aren't those two things opposites?

If we're trying to simplify complex deals, and sell more by saying *less*, isn't a book by definition the *last way* we should go about it?

Not at all. Actually, it's the *only* way we can go about it.

Because here's the funny thing about selling with brevity: it's really hard to do. It's not natural. By default, we make everything longer and more complex than it needs to be because it's *easier.*

We think brevity should be easy. Because when it's done well, it *looks* easy. When you see someone deliver a punchy keynote with ease and grace, it looks like anyone could do it. But we never see the days of practice that went into it. (It's said that for every one minute Steve Jobs spent on stage delivering a keynote, he spent another hour offstage practicing.)

It takes deep thought, uninterrupted focus, and gallons of creativity to craft a message that's both brief and brilliant—the foundation to every complex sale. Which makes this about the hard work *you'll do for your audience*, so they don't have to.

Here's a short story about what I mean:

> *One day, a friend of Winston Churchill asked, "How long does it take to prepare one of your speeches?"*

> *"That depends on the length," Churchill replied. "If you want me to speak for two minutes, it will take me three weeks of preparation. If you want me to speak for thirty minutes, it will take me a week to prepare. If you want me to speak for an hour, I am ready now."*

Sellers force buyers to suffer through rambling meetings and fluffy messaging because they think, in Churchill's words, *"I'm ready now."* But they're not. Because they didn't spend the time and energy to simplify what they're about to say.

Instead, they "think talk" their way into what they're trying to communicate, forcing their audience to sort through a tangle of words, while they work out their point of view on the fly. Kind of like handing someone an old pair of corded headphones you had stuffed in your pocket, then saying, "Here, untangle all this."

This word, "simplify," is going to come up a lot in the next pages. So let's run through a quick definition of simplicity:

Complexity resolved, not ignored.

Selling with simplicity is about resolving complexity with and for your buyers. To keep it from shattering the deal you're working to develop—especially in the early stages, when it's most fragile.

I'm borrowing that definition from the painter and sculptor Constantin Brâncusi, who created simple, beautiful work because he became the type of person—an artist—who's capable of conquering complexity.

There are two very important points in that paragraph. So let me break down each of them.

1. Simplicity is a combination of both brevity and brilliance.

When we're talking about art, we'll call a piece of work with both depth and meaning "beautiful." In the context of B2B sales, we call something like a point of view, a use case, or a project plan with

both depth and meaning "brilliant."

But brilliant, meaningful work goes unnoticed *all the time*.

Sellers solving big problems with worldclass products get flat-out ignored by buying team executives. Why? Because their brilliance is buried inside 50-slide decks, fumbled during wandering pitches from the executive's own team, or drowned out by everyone needing something "ASAP."

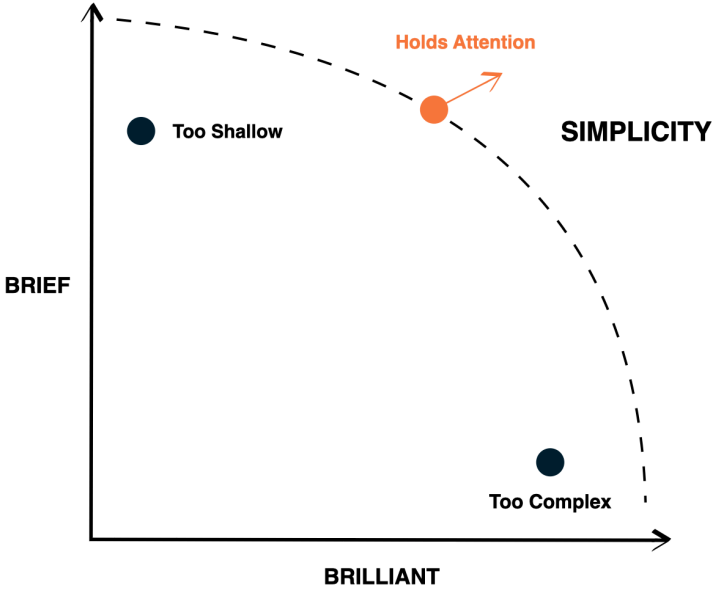
That's when your deals slip, stall, and end in a quick email that says, *Sorry, we're just gonna stick with what we got*.

In short, brilliance goes unnoticed—unless it's brief.

But, we can't just *ignore* complexity for sake of a shorter word count. This leaves our message too hollow to carry any decision weight. Too shallow to make a splash. And we need to make waves, not ripples, if we're trying to grab mindshare at an executive level.

Plus, let's be real. Big enterprises with billions of dollars of revenue, millions of customers, thousands of employees, hundreds of products, and dozens of business units *are* complex. We can't escape that. Which means we have to find a way to *resolve* it.

Take a look at the visual on the next page. When we simplify a deal, we push past the dotted line on this graph. Otherwise, when we're operating inside this line, brevity without brilliance is just noise. It's shallow entertainment. But brilliance without brevity is too complex for an audience to track with.



2. We must become capable of simplifying our work.

Just as you wouldn't pick up a brush and expect to paint like Picasso, you can't pick up the craft of selling and expect to communicate with thoughtful, strategic intent right away.

You have to become an artist. Which happens slowly, over a long period of time. Until one day, you begin to embody the skillsets, thought patterns, and movements an artist does.

As the legend goes, a woman once approached Picasso in a cafe and asked him to scribble something on a napkin, saying she would pay whatever he felt it was worth.

Picasso agreed, then said, "That'll be $10,000."

"But you did that in 30 seconds!" she cried.

"Oh no, my dear," Picasso smiled. "It took me 30 *years* to learn to do that."

So like we've been saying, this ain't easy. It's not natural.

In fact, the digital milieu we've lived in over the last decade has *deformed* us. Reducing our capacity for simplicity by moving us toward what Jeff Bezos calls "information snacking." So I guess you can say what you and I are doing here is a type of counter-formation. A type of resistance, to take back our attention and ability for deep, creative work.

You can probably tell we'll get a little more "heady" before we get practical. So you're welcome to skip to the next chapter, if you'd like. But if you choose to stick around, now that you understand what simplicity requires—brevity, brilliance, and the process of *becoming*—we can answer the question we started with: *Why in the world is this a book, not a blog or a tweet?* Well, Jeff Bezos was asked by Slate magazine if he thought there was any merit to Steve Jobs' prediction that the Kindle would fail because "nobody reads anymore" (Lyons).

> *This is a really important point—that we humans co-evolve with our tools. We change the tools, and the tools change us, and that cycle repeats.*
>
> *For the last 20 years, network-connected tools like smart phones, BlackBerrys, and desktop PCs… have been shifting us as a civilization toward short-form reading. I love my BlackBerry. It's great for reading emails. Same thing with my desktop computer. I'm very happy to read short articles, blog posts.*
>
> *But I don't want to read a 300-page book on my computer. And so what Kindle is doing is it's bringing the convenience of wireless connectivity to long form.*
>
> *I believe that we learn different things from long form than we learn from short form.*
>
> *Both are important. If you read The Remains of the Day, which is one of my favorite books, you can't help but come*

> *away and think, I just spent 10 hours living an alternate life and I learned something about life and about regret. You can't do that in a blog post.*

That's why. That's why this book can't be a set of tweets, texts, or TikToks.

We've evolved in one direction, and now, we're trying to go in the other direction. So the tool we pick—a book, in this case—has to fit the job.

Andy Crouch's take on how we evolve with our technology is just as good. He draws a distinction between the idea of a tool, or an "instrument," and a piece of technology, or a "device," by saying instruments require us to become something. Devices don't. Devices let us create change, without having to change.

For example, a guitar lets us play music. But it also requires us to develop a new talent, to practice a handful of songs for a long time, and eventually, to become a musician. On the other hand, Spotify lets us play music, and it requires nothing from us. We can skip, shuffle, and fly through any song, any time, without any real effort.

This leads to what Crouch calls the "Innovation Bargain." Every time we pick up a device instead of an instrument, we're trading something. The Bargain goes like this:

> *Now you can…*
>
> *You'll no longer have to…*

You can insert anything you want here. Take cooking:

> ***Now, you can** get food delivered the minute you're hungry.*
>
> ***You'll no longer have to** go to your garden, then wash, chop, prep, and cook a meal for yourself.*

This is the upside of The Bargain. But that upside also has a

downside, which goes like this:

> *You'll no longer be able to…*
>
> *Now you'll have to…*

In the case of cooking, we'd say:

> ***You'll no longer be able to*** *cook a delicious, gourmet meal for friends.*
>
> ***Now you'll have to*** *order out when you want to host.*

In the case of the digital age, we could say something like:

> ***Now you can*** *distract yourself with engaging and high-quality content anytime.*
>
> ***You'll no longer have to*** *feel bored or lonely.*

But:

> ***You'll no longer be able to*** *focus on creating meaningful, engaging content.*
>
> ***Now you'll have to*** *feel ignored when others don't connect with your message.*

So at this point, you have a choice.

What side of The Bargain are you going to take? Do you want to become the type of person who's both brief and brilliant? Who does the hard work of resolving complexity, and producing something *simple?* Or… not?

PART 2

Simplicity

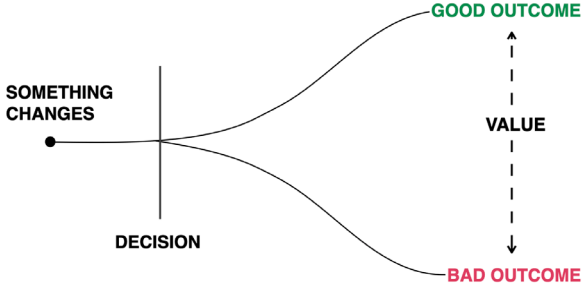
The 4-Sentence Soundbite

Here's the rest of this book in four sentences.

Together, they create a single soundbite that captures the entire customer journey. Like tree sap becoming maple syrup, the outcome's distilled, sweet, and leaves you wanting more:

> ***Because of*** *[1] a large, unaddressed change in the customer's world:*
>
> ***Now's the time to*** *[2] respond with a specific approach you uniquely enable, by a certain date.*
>
> ***If we do****, [3] we'll create good outcomes that align with our priority.*
>
> ***If we don't****, [4] bad outcomes will continue, and get worse.*

It works, because it captures the archetype of every story ever told across time: Something changes, which creates a choice. A decision about what to do next. A decision that creates one of two possible futures: good or bad.



Another important reason this structure works is because our brains love contrast. We can't see "value" in isolation. Only when things stand in comparison to each other. Our messaging is clear in **black and white,** but it fades away in shades of gray. So we'll define "value" in this book as:

> *Value = good outcomes (-) bad outcomes*

As the gap between these two futures grows, so does your value. Which is a function of your *messaging*—not your product or service. You can deliver incredible amounts of customer value that nobody knows about, because it was never messaged. So in practice, it's like it never happened at all.

This also means you have three jobs we'll cover from here:

1. Create a strong point of view on what's changing
2. Develop an approach that guides a response
3. Clearly message what's at stake

How Executives Think

Have you ever peeked inside an executive's inbox?

Most sellers haven't. So just YouTube "Walmart on Black Friday," and you'll get the idea. Everyone's throwing elbows, pushing up to the front of the line, trying to grab something for themselves. A "quick" chat, feedback, approvals, signoff.

When I brought up this idea with the top payments executive at Mastercard, she laughed and said:

> *I'd like to think I'm on top of requests. But I have such a long backlog of requests, people will wait outside my door to pitch me on their project as I walk down the halls between meetings. Seriously. There's one guy on my team who has no problem following me into my next meeting, and he'll just keep going. He's relentless. And to be honest, he has to be. I just don't have the time to review everything. I never will.*

Did you catch that?

An internal employee, *on her own team*, has to literally track her down, then fit his entire project pitch into the space between her office and the conference room. All while making sure he generates enough interest inside that hallway-length "presentation" to get the verbal go-ahead.

So if that's the case for an insider, how much harder is it for an outsider to get "a quick 30 minutes" scheduled?

This is why it's rare for a seller to spend more than an hour or two

with a C-level executive across an entire sales cycle. But on the flipside, every minute together plays an outsized role in a deal's outcome.

(For you math nerds: the Pareto Principle says if you spend 20% of your time with the contacts who hold 80% of the decision weight, then each minute with them works out to be 16x more valuable.)

This combination of limited time plus large influence sets up high anxiety and low confidence. An inner voice whispering, *"Don't screw this up. Stick the landing, otherwise you're not gonna get more minutes together."*

The logical question, then, is how do you make sure your message sticks after they've left "the hallway?"

There are two principles we'll start with. Both relate to how executives think and the soundbite framework from the last chapter. You can capture the first principle in a single word:

1. Priorities.

Priorities are mental filters.

And they're how executives survive.

More specifically, a priority is something specific an executive is *already sold on* and actively investing in. Almost always as a result of answering one question: "What's changing?" In the customer's operating environment, business model, and company, *what's changing?*

They're also the reason internal issues go unsolved all the time. In short: they don't matter (enough). Even truly costly issues get ignored unless they're blocking a priority, which then and only then upgrades them to true "problem" status.

So any type of messaging that's not framed around a priority is at a *massive* disadvantage. Your words have to swim upstream,

instead of flowing with the current. Think of it like flying inside the jet stream. Pan Am was the first airliner to fly inside it during a trip from Tokyo to Honolulu, and it cut their flight time from 18 hours to just 11.5 hours.

A few weeks back, I rode inside that jet stream, during a rollout I'm working on with one of our customers.

They're a public company. One of the fastest growing finance platforms, leaping from $100M to $450M ARR in just three years. So I'm on a call with the project team, reviewing dates for each milestone in our rollout. (We're guiding how their team writes business cases now.)

This was late August. The initial rollout plan had everyone live and onboarded by Christmas. When their SVP of Global Revenue Operations saw it, you know what he said?

"Too slow. Has to be done in October to hit our Q4."

The project team went silent. I knew they were all thinking something like, *Yeah, and I want front row tickets to the Taylor Swift concert. Not happening.*

Then, someone spoke up.

> *"IT says they've got a backlog at least a month long. So they're not even going to start this until October."*
>
> *SVP: "You created a ticket with IT already?"*
>
> *"Yeah, we did."*
>
> *SVP: "Send it to me."*
>
> *"Now?"*
>
> *SVP: "Yeah, right now. Put it in Teams."*

> *As he leaned back in his chair and opened up Teams on his phone to copy the ticket, we all sat in silence, watching his thumbs go to work.*
>
> *SVP: "There, I told them this starts tomorrow. It'll get done, keep moving."*

I smiled.

So the next question is, how do you know when you've tapped into an exec-level priority? Aside from the fact you can feel it, and you'll see that wall of ServiceNow tickets parting like the Red Sea, here's the single best signal I've found:

Codenames.

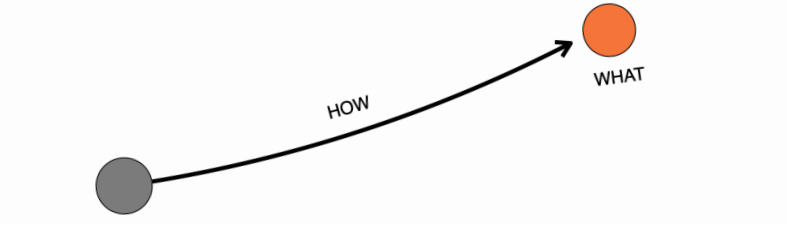
When internal projects become named initiatives, they get their own shorthand phrases. Sometimes they literally have the word project in them: "Project Sundrop." Other times it'll be a tagline. "Race to 66" is another project I worked on last year with a public company. When you hear these, you'll know what you've tapped into is *a big deal*.

(Yes, that was a dad joke.)

Once you've found your codename, you've answered *what*. But you've still got to influence the *how*.

2. "Deciding how" is the executive's job description.

Selecting the right "what" only matters if it becomes a reality. That's where the *how*—the approach—comes in. This is the second sentence in the soundbite.



Here's how Jeff Bezos puts this:

> *As a senior executive, what do you really get paid to do? You get paid to make a small number of high-quality decisions. Your job is not to make thousands of decisions every day… and all of our senior executives operate the same way I do. They work in the future. They live in the future. None of the people who report to me should really be focused on the current quarter.*
>
> *When I have a good quarterly conference call with Wall Street, people will stop me and say, "Congratulations on your quarter," and I say, "Thank you," but what I'm really thinking is that quarter was baked three years ago (Bezos).*

As an example, let's take a newly hired CRO. Say her company just raised a Series C. Now, she's got to deliver on the happy ending they promised investors. So the CRO's going to ask herself:

What's my biggest revenue opportunity?

Acquiring new logos? Boosting revenue retention (NRR)?

Let's say it's NRR. Investors were talking a lot about that. Getting from 98% to 105%. Now, we've got the "what."

But does she...

...hire more account managers in the enterprise segment?
...focus on cross-sells in the small business segment?
...take an altogether different path?

Turns out, there are lots of ways to "expand revenue." So when you work with an executive who owns a high-level metric, they'll always have lots of choices, trade-offs, and competing priorities. That's why most deals die in silence.

"No decision," as it's called.

Which means your job is to simplify the path forward, and build confidence they're moving in the right direction—a direction only you can enable.

How you guide the "how" is the next chapter.

Big Deals Grow on (Driver) Trees

I looked down at my phone. Kishan texted me:

"You got a few minutes? This one could be big. Want to bounce a couple things off you."

By *big*, he meant $30 million, big.

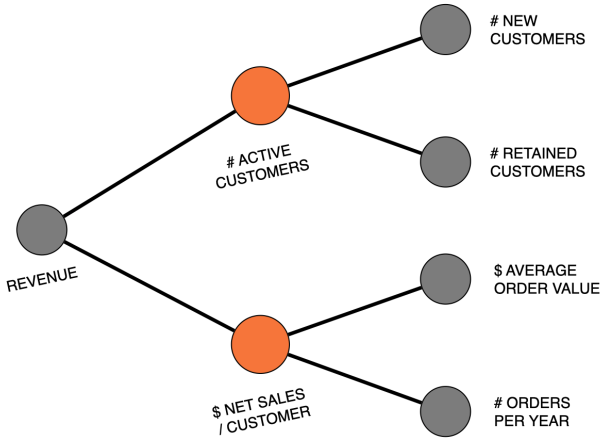
He went right into it: "I just have this feeling it'll come down to what they tell Wall Street. Like, if I can get their execs excited about that narrative, we'll get it done."

"Let's work on it," I said. "In a sentence, what do they say?"

That was the goal. To reverse-engineer a sentence-long soundbite that'd play on repeat in future earnings calls.

The account we were talking about is one of the largest e-commerce sites in the US market. They'd been getting hammered by analysts, who thought they wouldn't be able to add enough new customers in the coming years to justify a price target above $40 per share. Especially with a few competitive brands moving into their market.

To break down the sentence they'd say—and just to state the obvious here, the answer is never, "We just bought new software!"—we talked through what *drives* their business:

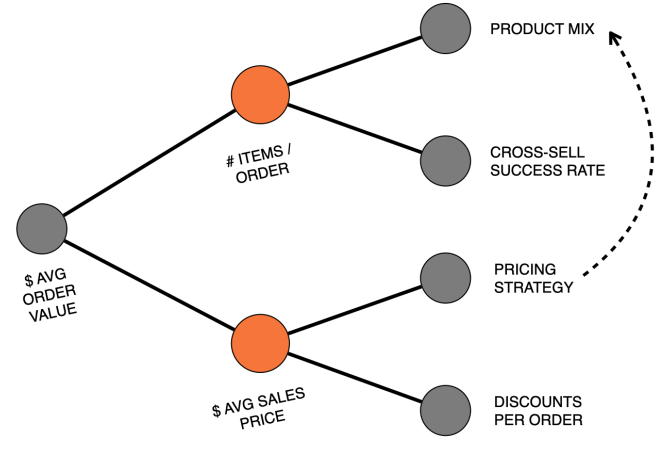


This is a simplified version of their business model.

What you're looking at is a driver tree. It links "outcome" metrics to a series of related "input" metrics, simplifying complex goals into a set of cause-and-effect relationships.

The left side is *what* you'd like to influence. The right side is *how* you'll drive that change.

You can follow the roots of a driver tree even deeper, too. For example, what drives average order value? Well, that has its own set of inputs:



For example, if revenue's down, is that because:

- Their customer base shrank year-over-year?
- They have the same base, but they're spending less?

Let's say they're spending less. Now let's say the CEO talks with their CFO and SVP about why net-sales-per-customer is down and finds declining order values (AOV).

What's been trending there? How are they gonna fix it?

Kishan used this to walk through his hypothesis. He didn't think the company *really* had 28 million customers. Instead, he thought they had tons of duplicates and fake customer records—but they didn't have a good handle on stitching together customer identities (what his platform does).

For example, I have an Amazon account, my wife has another from before we were married, and I have a work account. So we're one household, with three accounts. To make things worse, fraud attacks were flooding their systems with fake accounts every week.

"Okay then, say the number of active accounts drops, how's that good? Why would they *want* to tell the Street?" I asked.

Kishan went back to the driver tree and broke it down:

> *If we find 23M instead of 28M unique customers, that means Net Sales jumps to $1,300 per customer from $1,100. So there's not only more market still available to capture—each customer is worth far more.*

He was giving their executives an almost magical ability to bring analysts on the Street good news overnight. Showing they had *both* bigger wallet share, plus more future market available, increases investor confidence about the future.

Now, what's somewhat rare about this scenario is that Kishan could credibly speak to *directly* changing their second-level metrics. Total

customers and net sales per customer are just one branch away from "revenue."

Which makes it an easy example to teach the concept. But in practice, most deals involve aligning on why the drivers sitting a few levels "to the right" on the tree are the *right* path to drive a first-level outcome. Since your message becomes more indirect, and therefore more complex, the further right you go, the more you need to establish a clear and specific link that's *believable*.

If you say: *Better website UX drives cross-sells!* Well, sure, that's probably true.

But it's less clear why *that* path gets you to the outcome better, faster, and more reliably than another approach. Like adding more product inventory to match what top-spending customers are leaving your site to buy from a competitor, because you don't carry it.

To link this back to our soundbite framework, here's how you'll make a strategic recommendation that guides your customer's approach to responding to change:

Actually draw out their business model.

Use the practice of creating a driver tree to align your thinking with the executive's. Try to trace the approach they're already investing in. From there, you can either align your message to their approach or show them a new path.

When you do this, you'll avoid the top mistake most sellers make while creating messaging for executives:

They hear a problem and match it to their solution, while skipping past the "approach." Which means they're ignoring *project* risk (prioritizing an altogether different driver path), by focusing too narrowly on *product* risk (walking down that specific path with another vendor).

So before you speak to a specific set of features, confirm everyone's first aligned on the higher-order questions of:

What's the right driver to focus on? What must be true about how we impact that driver?

So I say again, this is less "use our content automation." It's more "shift your mix of leads from paid to organic sources."

And always ask, "What's the story this exec wants to tell?" followed by, "How can I make sure they'll get to?"

How Executives Talk

There's a point in our careers where we start interacting with C-level executives more often, but we don't actually know how to talk with executives yet. So a lot of us do this weird thing:

We stop acting like ourselves, and we start talking in long sentences with big words. Like a BBC show with a bunch of characters from the 1800s.

This is semi-embarrassing to admit, but the CRO at one of our customers (at the time, they were still a prospect), whose second language is English, stopped a meeting between him, me, and his CEO because I used the word "analogous." He told me straight up, "I have no idea what you're saying to me right now."

We pick complex words because it *seems* like what we say to the top brass has to match the weight of a big title.

But that's the exact opposite of how executives operate, because complexity is a weight. Weights sink to the bottom. Simplicity is what's light enough to float to the top.

This is never truer than when the stakes are highest.

When the story's going to end in either serious tragedy or comedy. Which is the second half of the soundbite we've been unpacking:

> ***Because of*** *[1] a large, unaddressed change in the customer's world:*

> ***Now's the time to*** *[2] respond with a specific approach you uniquely enable, by a certain date.*
>
> ***If we do****, [3] we'll create good outcomes that align with our priority.*
>
> ***If we don't****, [4] bad outcomes will continue, and get worse.*

One of the best examples here is in the movie *Margin Call*.

Have you seen it?

If not, there's this scene you *have* to watch if, like me, you can sometimes trip over your own words, and you want to learn to message "what's at stake" in a clear and direct way.

It's about the 2008 financial crisis. Around the time when big banks and investment firms realized they were sitting on a ticking timebomb: subprime mortgages.

During this scene, an investment team gathers inside a long, luxurious conference room for an emergency meeting. Dark wood, leather chairs, commanding view of the city—all of it. The firm's CEO, John Tuld, strides in with an intense look and takes his seat at the head of the table. As he looks around the room, someone hands him a printout. Dozens of slides of financial projections. Then, someone says:

> *Jared: Well, Mr. Tuld, as I mentioned earlier, if you look here at the top page of this printout...*
>
> *Mr. Tuld: Jared, it's a little early for all that, how bout in English? Actually I'd like to hear from the guy who put this thing together... Mr. Sullivan is it? Does he speak English?*
>
> *Jared: Sir?*
>
> *Mr. Tuld: I'd like to speak to the analyst who seems to have stumbled across this mess.*

> *Jared: Well, that's Peter Sullivan here.*
>
> *(Jared looks at Peter and nods.)*
>
> *Peter: Sir.*
>
> *Mr. Tuld: Ah, there he is.*
>
> *Peter: Yes, sir.*
>
> *Mr. Tuld: How old are you, Mr. Sullivan?*
>
> *Peter: I'm 27, sir.*
>
> *Mr. Tuld: Please, call me John. So, Mr. Sullivan, why don't you tell me what you think is going on here, and please, speak as you might to a young child or a golden retriever. It wasn't brains that brought me here; I assure you that (Chandor).*

Think about that last line. *Is my message so simple a child could understand it?*

Mr. Tuld's point is he can't risk misunderstanding. He needs everyone to know exactly what's at stake. The scene continues, and they start to talk about the stakes:

> *Mr. Tuld: And Mr. Sullivan, what does your model say that means for us here?*
>
> *Peter: Well, that's where it becomes a projection... But… if those assets were to decrease by just 25 percent and remain on our books... well... that loss would be greater than the current market capitalization of this entire company.*
>
> *Mr. Tuld: So what you're telling me, Mr. Sullivan, is that the music appears to be about to stop, and we are going to be holding the biggest bag of stinking s**t ever assembled in the history of capitalism?*

> *… Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Sullivan. Do you want to know why I'm sitting here in this chair with you all, why I get the big bucks, so to speak?*
>
> *… I'm here for one reason and one reason only. I'm here to guess what the music is gonna do a week, month, a year from now. That's it, nothing more, and I'm afraid... standing here tonight... that I don't hear a thing. Just silence.*

Again, it's kind of hard to misread what Mr. Tuld is saying here, because he's *not hedging at all*.

Which just might be the trickiest part of messaging "the stakes." Clear, direct language requires courage. Courage to get off the fence, to pick a side, and to present a strong point of view. And while I can't hand you a few decades of operating experience to ground that courage, what I *can* do is give you a framework to help message what's at stake.

That's the next chapter.

What's at Stake?

In 2011, Nokia's former CEO, Stephen Elop, wrote a memo to his executive team describing their future. At the time, they had been the top cell phone producer for years, but they lost massive market share to the iPhone and Android:

> *There is a pertinent story about a man who was working on an oil platform in the North Sea. He woke up one night from a loud explosion, which suddenly set his entire oil platform on fire. In mere moments, he was surrounded by flames. Through the smoke and heat, he barely made his way out of the chaos to the platform's edge. When he looked down over the edge, all he could see were the dark, cold, foreboding Atlantic waters.*
>
> *As the fire approached him, the man had mere seconds to react. He could stand on the platform, and inevitably be consumed by the burning flames. Or, he could plunge 30 meters into the freezing waters. The man was standing upon a "burning platform," and he needed to make a choice… He decided to jump. It was unexpected. In ordinary circumstances, the man would never consider plunging into icy waters. But these were not ordinary times—his platform was on fire. The man survived the fall and the waters. After he was rescued, he noted that a "burning platform" caused a radical change in his behaviour.*

Elop continues his memo by saying Nokia's burning, too:

> *How did we get to this point? Why did we fall behind when the world around us evolved?*

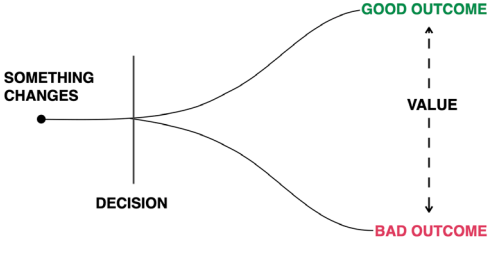
> *This is what I have been trying to understand. I believe at least some of it has been due to our attitude inside Nokia. We poured gasoline on our own burning platform. I believe we have lacked accountability and leadership to align and direct the company through these disruptive times. We had a series of misses. We haven't been delivering innovation fast enough. We're not collaborating internally.*
>
> *Nokia, our platform is burning.*
>
> *We are working on a path forward—a path to rebuild our market leadership. When we share the new strategy on February 11, it will be a huge effort to transform our company. But, I believe that together, we can face the challenges ahead of us. Together, we can choose to define our future.*
>
> *The burning platform, upon which the man found himself, caused the man to shift his behaviour, and take a bold and brave step into an uncertain future. He was able to tell his story. Now, we have a great opportunity to do the same (Arthur).*

The visual here is pretty striking.

It's like you're standing there with the man, looking out over the ledge, peering into the sea.

What's more, if we go back to the soundbite framework we started with, Elop's story is almost a perfect match:

- Something changes.
- That change forces a decision.
- That decision creates one of two futures: good or bad.



Nokia wakes up to Apple and Android eating their lunch. They're rapidly losing market share and must change the way they operate, in a pretty radical way. To *own* their future, instead of continuing to backslide into irrelevance.

So the question is, "If your customer doesn't believe they're standing on a burning platform, why would they jump?"

Elop felt the flames. But at the time, everyone else inside Nokia didn't necessarily feel the same way. Elop had to *message* their reality to his executives and, eventually, the entire company. We can look at Nokia now and say, *How did they not get it?! Obviously they were in big, big trouble.*

But the fact is *every* large enterprise you work with has a little Nokia in them.

Life's comfortable in big companies. Inertia, status quo, same 'ol same 'ol. It's easy to coast, so that's what most big companies do. Plus, when we're directly accountable for a problem, the Ostrich Effect takes over. It's easier to put our heads in the sand and ignore the situation than to admit we're accountable for it. Admitting the problem exists is often more painful than living with the consequences.

So it's our job to put language to the situation. Messaging makes it real, by bringing us to the ledge and showing us what's at stake. Which you'll do by:

Framing a high-cost, high-priority problem in writing.

Every single word in that sentence is important.

Let's shift to another company to break each part down.

This time, we'll look at Expedia's high volume of customer support requests through a story from Ryan O'Neill, their former Head of Customer Experience (Heath).

While looking at data from their call center, he found that for every 100 customers booking travel, 58 contacted support for help after. Added up over the year, support fielded 20M customer calls, at a cost of roughly $5 per call.

Which left them with a $100M/year issue and growing, as more and more customers opted to book travel online.

Naturally, support leaders were asking, "How do we cut time-to-resolution from 10 minutes to 2 minutes?" Which would cut their cost per call from $5 to $1, shrinking their total cost by fighting an inefficient call center operation.

But what if that wasn't the problem? What if there was an altogether different problem to solve? Turns out, there was:

Why was Expedia getting so many calls in the first place?

The challenge is nobody actually owned *that* problem.

Expedia was aware of the massive call volumes, for sure. But everyone was tasked with a different problem: Marketing generated leads, product turned them into bookings, and support answered calls after booking. But nobody was working to prevent calls in the first place. Until O'Neill took his data to Dara Khosrowshahi, Expedia's CEO, who made preventing customer calls his top priority.

As they looked into what drove call volumes, they realized most requests came from people needing their itinerary. It wasn't getting through to their email, and there wasn't an easy way to download it from their account dashboard.

After framing and then fixing the *right* problem, call volumes plummeted from 58% to 15%.

Now, notice how these two different ways of framing the problem set up two different approaches:

> *(Problem #1) Slow resolution means high cost-per-call*
>
> *(Approach #1) Faster call resolution reduces costs*

Versus:

> *(Problem #2) High call volume from itinerary requests*
>
> *(Approach #2) Cut call volume by making itineraries accessible*

Along with O'Neill's work to frame the problem around a company-level priority—stopping calls from happening in the first place, not just handling them faster—he did the work to *measure* the problem. Raising the stakes to a point where Expedia had to "jump."

Here's a simple, two-part framework for writing this out:

> *Every [frequency], at least [reach] are experiencing [pain], costing us [loss]. If it's not addressed by [timeline], that means [consequence].*

Applied to Expedia, this reads like:

> *Every month, at least 1.67M customers can't find their itinerary and have to call support, costing $8.35M to resolve these requests.*
>
> *If it's not addressed by the end of the year, that means we'll see another $500M in lost, repeat purchase revenue from frustrated customers opting out of our loyalty program.*

This is the "bad" outcome. The not-so-happy ending, which is often called the "cost of inaction" (COI).

But notice something here. We're not just talking about the cost of support tickets. That's a 1st-order effect. We also need to connect this into the 2nd- and 3rd-order effects with customers:

1. **1st Level:** "We're paying $100M per year in support costs."

2. **2nd Level:** "Customers aren't enrolling into our loyalty program and even opting out because of their experience."

3. **3rd Level:** "Our customer lifetime value (CLTV) increases with loyalty members making repeat purchases, so now, we're missing out on $500M in additional revenue."

You can even play that out another level, saying that sales and marketing spend is inflating their cost to acquire more first-time customers (CAC), to offset lost loyalty revenue.

Which is *really* throwing off their unit economics: paying even more for customers who will spend even less.

Now, back to what we said earlier:

> *Value = good outcomes (-) bad outcomes*

So, if you're measuring a problem through Support Cost, CLTV, and CAC, then your next step is to flip those numbers upside down to message the good outcomes (after solving the problem) using the *exact same metrics*.

Which sets up a clear before versus after comparison.

If Expedia dropped call volumes from 58% to 15% of bookings, they're saving almost $75M per year in support costs. Plus, they're saving an estimated $500M in future, repeat loyalty purchases.

Altogether, this creates a total project value of roughly $575M.

So if you're ever wondering, "What's more effective? To sell the ROI or the COI?" In short, it's both. Think of it like this:

If I hand you a quarter, am I handing you "heads" or "tails?"

Well, it's both. You can't separate the two from each other. ROI and

COI are two sides of the exact same coin. As the problem's cost increases, so does the return of solving it.

Here's the big difference, though:

- ROI is a *maybe* amount that's far off in future.
- COI is a *certain* amount that customers are losing today.

So if you're only talking about the good outcomes (the ROI), then your message will fall flat. The value of a change will be unclear, and the stakes will never feel high enough to jump.