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Before the Offer

How judgement is formed in industrial buying — and why many manufacturers arrive when only price is left to discuss.



Ángel Pacheco

Senior Audit

The Bid Begins Too Late

When an industrial manufacturer receives an invitation to quote, it tends to read it as the start of an opportunity. The customer is looking for a supplier, opens a competitive process, defines criteria, listens to alternatives. That is what the documentation says. But the documentation rarely captures what matters most.

Before the brief was ever drafted, someone inside the buyer had already decided what kind of solution looked acceptable. Someone had spoken to a counterpart at another company who had been through something similar. Someone had called the engineering firm they trust. Someone had searched for two or three specific names and read their profiles. **Judgement had already taken shape.**

The RFQ that reaches the manufacturer is the visible phase of a process that, for the most part, took place without it.

To the manufacturer, the RFQ looks like the beginning. To the buyer, it is often **the administrative record of a preference already in place.**

The question, then, is not whether the opportunity is real. It is when it stopped being one. For a substantial share of meaningful industrial purchases, the decision already has an owner before the official envelope is opened. The bid is not the opening of the process. It is its administrative close.

Formal Buying and Informal Deciding

Any meaningful industrial purchase advances along two parallel planes that are rarely distinguished with the awareness they require.

The formal plane — brief, RFQ, approval committee, contract — leaves a documentary trail. It is what shows up in the ERP, in procurement, in the file. It is auditable. Read after the fact, it looks impeccably linear. It is also, in a far from trivial share of cases, a retroactive construction: the elegant justification of a decision that was made elsewhere.

The informal plane — the prior conversation, the call to a peer, the question put to engineering, the repeated online search, the visit to a plant where someone is already running the solution, the offhand remark from the usual integrator — leaves almost no trace. It lives in personal emails, in mobile calls, in cafés and corridors. But it is there that judgement is formed.

The formal plane records. The informal plane decides.

Forrester estimates that around **two out of every three B2B buyers** begin the process with a preferred supplier in mind, and that this favourite goes on to win in the order of **eighty percent** of cases. Gartner has quantified that the total time a buying committee spends interacting with potential suppliers amounts to only around **seventeen percent** of the process. The rest — the bulk of it — happens with no suppliers in the room.

The manufacturer that turns up only in the formal phase does not enter the decision. It enters the file.

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Known Is Not Considered

The distinction industrial leadership finds hardest to internalise is not the one between known and unknown supplier. It is the one between known and considered.

Being known is being in the market. Showing up when someone runs through the existing brands. Adding to the count. Being considered is something else: showing up when someone is about to put budget, reputation and plant time at risk. It is making the short, cold mental list a buyer draws up when the problem starts to feel concrete.

Being known is being in the market. Being considered is **being inside the buyer's risk**.

The gap between the two is wider than most manufacturers imagine. There are companies that show up in awareness surveys and, at the same time, do not appear on real short-lists. Their logo is recognised. Their name is associated with a generic capability. But when the buyer asks themselves who they would invite tomorrow — without filters, without institutional caution, with the operating honesty of someone who knows the problem will land on their desk — the brand does not come to mind. Consideration has a concrete quality to it. Awareness can live without it for years, and frequently does.

The diagnostic error is predictable. The company reads strong recognition as a sign of commercial health. It invests in continuing to be known. It thinks in terms of presence. But no volume of generic presence, on its own, produces specific consideration.

Alongside the considered supplier sits another profile that is rarely named. **The comparison supplier**. The one that receives the invitation but without a real chance. They are there to satisfy procedure, to put pressure on price, to make someone else win on better terms. They occupy a chair. Not a seat at the table. The difference between the considered and the comparison supplier is not one of technical quality. It almost never is. It is one of prior position. And prior position is built before the offer.

The Invisible Architecture of Influence

The mid-sized industrial manufacturer tends to think of its buyer as an organisation with a single decision point. The reality is otherwise. A meaningful industrial purchase is decided, in different proportions depending on the sector, by several simultaneous layers that almost never appear in the same room together.

Three internal planes

The **technical plane** — technical director, plant manager, internal engineering — assesses execution risk, compatibility and the hidden cost of getting it wrong. The **cost plane** — procurement, finance — watches total price and contractual terms. The **strategic plane** — general management — weighs fit, reputational risk and continuity. Anyone who speaks only with one of the three is shortlisted by one and quietly vetoed by the other two.

External influencers

Layered on top of those three internal planes are the external influencers, whose weight varies by sector and is usually underestimated by the manufacturer. In technical construction and project HVAC, the architect and the design office specify the solution before the end buyer has even started reading offers. In automation and robotics, the integrator decides the architecture — and, with it, the brands — seeking to minimise the risk of failure at start-up. In the electrical channel and parts of residential HVAC, the professional distributor proposes, recommends and, in practice, decides what the installer fits. In chemicals and energy, specialist trade media legitimise the manufacturers that bring documented evidence to the table.

The manufacturer typically sells to the formal buyer. But the criterion has been formed, in substantial part, outside that buyer. The earlier conversation has been held by others. Discovering, too late, that one was speaking to the least influential actor in the process is one of the most expensive lessons in industrial sales.

The RFQ That Isn't an Opportunity

Not every invitation to quote is an invitation to compete.

In complex industrial purchases, an RFQ can perform very different functions, with radically different close rates and margins. There is the **open-search RFQ** — the buyer has no preference and is genuinely exploring candidates. There is the **comparison-among-viables RFQ** — two or three candidates compete with a real chance, and the rest are there to fulfil procedure. There is the **favourite-validation RFQ** — the preferred supplier already exists, and those invited serve to legitimise the decision internally. And there is the **price-pressure RFQ** — the incumbent remains the real candidate, and the others are present to tighten the negotiation.

All four look the same on paper. Only the first and the second are opportunities. The other two are stagecraft.

An RFQ can be an invitation to compete or **an invitation to legitimise someone else's choice.**

The signal almost always appears in the first contact. A closed and unmodifiable specification, a response window shorter than is reasonable, no access to the technical conversation, a first question about price or about an «equivalent to a specific brand» — these are reliable indicators that the decision has already been oriented. By contrast, a buyer who asks about the problem and the constraints before talking numbers is a buyer still forming their judgement — and that is the closest thing to a real opportunity that exists in the formal phase of the process.

The manufacturer that puts the same commercial effort into all four categories of RFQ works, by default, with a high opportunity cost. Commercial effort is not an unlimited resource. Allocating it without distinguishing the type of invitation is, in effect, structurally signing up to play the comparison supplier — and, without realising it, learning to compete by discount.

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The Discount Began Earlier

Arriving late to an industrial decision is not just a matter of probability. It is an economic matter with a predictable mechanism.

When the manufacturer does not take part in shaping the criterion, it does not define the problem. When it does not define the problem, it does not influence the evaluation criteria. When it does not influence the criteria, it competes inside a frame someone else built. And when it competes inside someone else's frame, price becomes the only language left to it.

The discount is not born in the negotiation. **It is born months earlier, when the buyer learned to compare without you.**

The consequence is not just lost opportunities. It is winning the ones it does win on worse terms. Closes with concessions the organisation had not anticipated. Ambiguous scopes that resurface as cost overruns in execution. Promises on lead time and service that compromise the contract's profitability after the fact. And a cumulative pattern in which the company comes to expect entering with a discount before it has even discussed the problem.

The most serious damage is structural. When a manufacturer positions itself as the habitual comparison supplier in its market, its price stops being a variable and becomes an expectation. The conversation shifts axis without the company deciding it has. And when it tries to defend its position, it discovers that it is no longer being bought on preference: **it is being bought on equivalence.**

The distance between being known and being considered ends up translating, year after year, into whole points of margin that appear in no internal report — because no one is looking for them. Prior consideration is not a reputational metric. It is an economic condition. Treating it as a communications problem is, probably, the most expensive misreading the mid-sized industrial manufacturer makes.

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The Conversation Your Company Is Missing

A management committee that wants to diagnose its pre-offer position honestly does not need a new dashboard. It needs to answer, in order and with candour, a small number of questions that are rarely framed with the necessary precision.

Six questions for the committee

At what real moment does the company enter the important decisions? If most new business arrives in the RFQ phase, with no prior technical contact, the company is taking part only in the last quarter of the buyer's process.

How many RFQs are comparison RFQs? When they exceed half, commercial effort is structurally misallocated.

What share of new business depends on a single individual's relationships? The transferability of the book measures the difference between brand and personal dependency. Many companies believe they have a commercial network. In reality they have one person with a network — and the difference becomes visible only on the day that person leaves.

Who shapes the buyer's judgement in the sector — and where are we not? The answer changes the strategy. Selling to the prescriber without educating them is structurally a losing bet over three to five years.

Are we known or are we considered? The distinction is operational. Showing up in aided-recall surveys measures awareness. Showing up when the buyer asks themselves who they would invite tomorrow measures consideration.

Which of our materials helps the buyer specify, compare or justify? If the published content does not enter their decision work, it does not build authority. It informs, it decorates, it accompanies — but it does not decide.

There is a final question, more uncomfortable than the others, that every committee should be able to answer with figures. **Which conversations happening in your market right now is your company not part of? How many important decisions are starting without you?**

In industry, arriving on time does not mean replying quickly to an RFQ. It means being present while the buyer is still forming their judgement. The offer is not the beginning of the process. In most cases, it is the photograph of the moment when nothing remains to be decided.

NOTES

The figures cited are drawn from Forrester (*State of Business Buying 2026*) and from Gartner's public research on the B2B buying cycle. The interpretation applied to mid-sized European industry combines those data with established academic literature on organisational buying behaviour (Webster & Wind, 1972; Sheth, 1973; Robinson, Faris & Wind, 1967; Bunn, 1993).



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