



# Decision Friction: The Hidden Reason Strong Sell-In Stories Don't Convert.

The Unlock to Getting to  
**YES** More Consistently

# Strong Stories. Partial yESes.

In a recent line review, a national brand walked a retailer through a well-constructed 40-slide deck, with a tight story, strong performance, and a logical recommendation. The meeting itself felt productive.

And yet, the outcome was partial at best: a few items moved forward, others were deferred, and several were left for “follow-up.”

Nothing was overtly rejected. But nothing fully landed either.

This is a familiar pattern across line reviews, joint business planning meetings, and innovation pitches. Brands bring increasingly sophisticated stories that are grounded in data, supported by insights, and aligned across internal teams, but still struggle to secure clear decisions in the room.

For an industry that has significantly advanced its capabilities in storytelling, analytics, and design, this gap is worth examining.

## The Real Breakdown Isn't the Story, It's the Decision

Buyers hesitate, not always explicitly, but in ways that are widely recognized: “Let me take this back,” “We need to evaluate this further,” or “This is interesting, but...”

In a fast-moving retail environment, that hesitation has real consequences. It delays implementation, reduces the scope of what is approved, and, in many cases, prevents otherwise viable ideas from moving forward.

This hesitation is not random. It is a predictable response to what can be described as

**Decision Friction.**

### KEY TAKEAWAY

**Most sell-in presentations do not fail in an obvious way. They lose momentum at the point where a decision should be made.**



# Understanding Decision Friction in Retail Contexts

Decision friction arises when a recommendation is not easy to say “yes” to, whether due to perceived risk, lack of clarity, or weak alignment with category priorities.

Importantly, this does not imply that the underlying idea is flawed. Rather, it indicates that the decision itself requires too much effort or carries too much uncertainty for the buyer to act with confidence. Their response is rooted in behavioral science—when faced with complexity, our brain’s initial response is to stop, not to think harder.

In an environment where merchants are overburdened, balancing competing priorities, compressed timelines, and multiple vendor proposals, ease of decision-making becomes a critical factor and leads to “no” more often.

## An industry optimized for story, not decision.

When these challenges arise, the typical response is to add more: more data, more insight, more ideas, more slides, etc.

However, the issue is not a lack of information. It is a misalignment between how presentations are constructed and how decisions are made.

Most organizations are highly effective at building comprehensive sell-in stories. Far fewer are structured to ensure those stories lead efficiently to a “yes” decision.

Retailers, however, are evaluating both simultaneously.



## Why “good” decks still struggle

Many sell-in presentations reflect what the industry would consider best practice. They demonstrate strong brand performance, superiority over the competition, articulate relevant consumer insights, align with the retailer’s shopper, and outline logical pathways to growth.

These elements are necessary, but they are not sufficient.

What is often missing is a clear translation from narrative to decision. From the buyer’s perspective, the central question is straightforward: what, specifically, am I being asked to do, what’s in it for me, and why should I do it now?

**When those answers are not immediately evident, friction enters the process.**

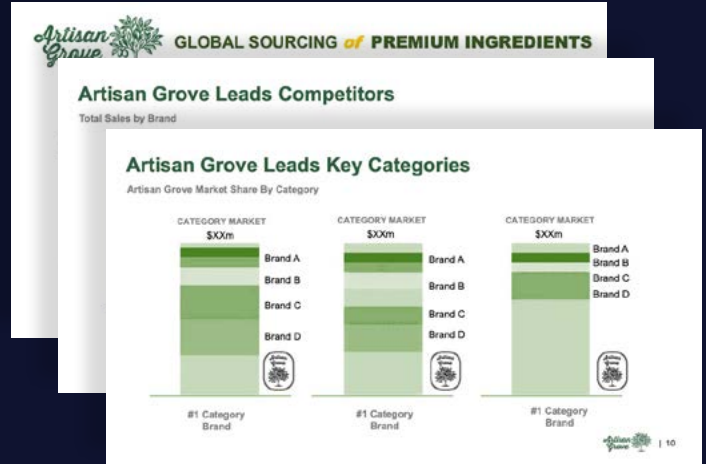
# Three Common Sources of Friction

## 1 The missing category growth problem.

Presentations often build a compelling case through performance metrics and market context before moving directly to recommendations such as new items, expanded assortments or innovation.

However, they frequently stop short of explicitly defining the retailer's category growth problem. Without a clearly articulated challenge tied to the retailer's objectives, recommendations can appear interchangeable, incremental, rather than essential

**Right:** Example of a strong performance narrative that lacks a defined category problem, creating decision friction in a line review.

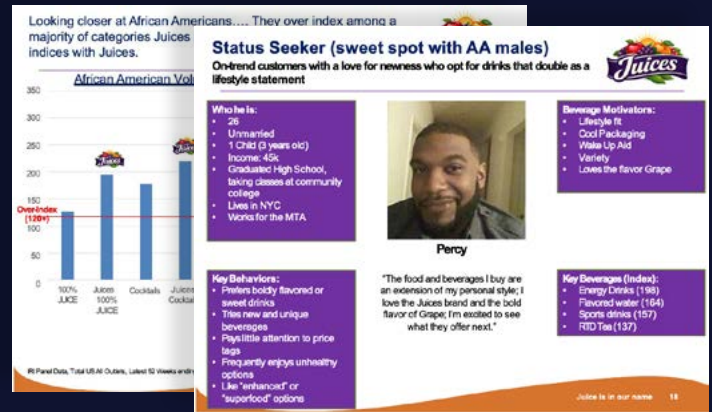


## 2 Generalized insights instead of retailer-specific gaps.

Insights are frequently presented at a category or consumer level, highlighting trends or emerging opportunities. While valuable, they are not always anchored to the retailer's specific business context.

As a result, the buyer must determine whether the opportunity is relevant to their assortment, their shopper, and their strategy. That additional cognitive step introduces unnecessary effort and slows the decision.

**Right:** Innovation pitch with strong consumer insight but no retailer-specific framing, leaving applicability unclear.

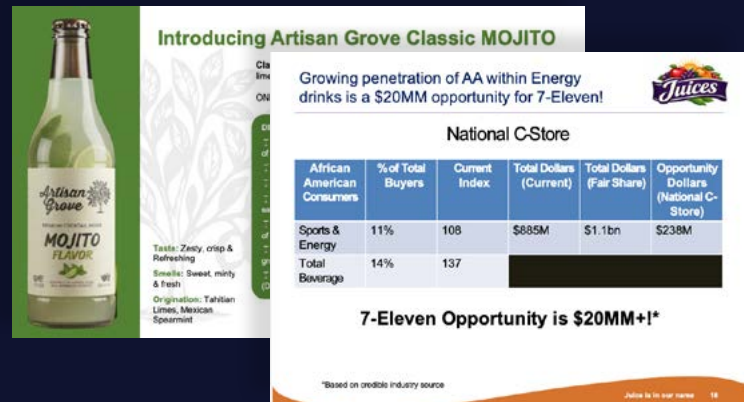


## 3 Lack of a clear, actionable ask

One of the most consistent and avoidable sources of friction is the absence of a clearly defined ask.

Without specific asks, such as distribution targets, shelf allocation, timing, or success metrics, the buyer cannot easily translate the recommendation into action. Decisions are therefore deferred, often to follow-up discussions where momentum is more difficult to sustain.

**Right:** End-of-deck scenarios where the recommendation is implied but not explicitly defined.



# How Buyers Filter Decisions Today

Consciously, merchants evaluate familiar criteria such as margin and incrementality. Beneath these factors, however, is a more immediate and intuitive filter.

Buyers ask themselves whether the recommendation will help them achieve their goals and is easy to do—the factors that make it easy to approve.

These types of questions reflect two underlying forces: perceived risk and required effort. When either is too high, hesitation is the natural outcome.

## CONSCIOUS

### What merchants ask out loud.

- Margin and profitability
- Incrementality vs. cannibalization
- Fit with current assortment
- Activation and shopper marketing support
- Fit with category strategy



## UNCONSCIOUS

### What merchants ask themselves.

- Is this safe for me to approve?
- Is it easy to execute?
- Will it help me deliver on my category goals?
- How much effort does saying yes actually require?

# The persistence of decision friction is largely structural.

Sell-in presentations are developed collaboratively across multiple functions: sales, brand, category management, shopper marketing, trade marketing, and others. Each function contributes essential input and ensures internal alignment.

However, in this process, ownership of the decision itself often becomes diffuse.

Sales teams are accountable for the meeting outcome, but they do not fully control the narrative.

The result is a presentation that is comprehensive and approved by all, but not always designed to get to a "yes." And isn't that the ultimate goal? **Instead, brands breed decision friction.**

## KEY TAKEAWAY

**The result is a presentation that is comprehensive and approved by all, but not always designed to get to a "yes."**



# Reframing the Role of the Sell-In Story

A more effective approach begins with a shift in the “job to be done”.

The primary job of a sell-in presentation is not simply to communicate a brand or category story. It is to enable a “yes” decision.

This reframing changes the criteria for success. Clarity becomes more valuable than completeness, and direction becomes more important than volume.




**YES**

## The Unlock: The Five Steps to YES

Analysis of retailer decision-making reveals a consistent progression that underpins approval. Effective presentations tend to align with **five key steps**:

### 2 Grand Benefit

Frame the opportunity in terms of category growth rather than product performance alone.




### 4 Reason to Believe

Provide credible evidence that reduces perceived risk.



### 1 Retailer Truths & Pain Points

Ground the narrative in the retailer's specific challenges and priorities.




### 3 How We Get There

Clearly connect the proposed strategy to the expected outcome.



### 5 The Ask

Define a clear, actionable decision that can be approved within the meeting.



**When these elements are aligned, the path to approval becomes more direct. When they are not, the buyer must compensate by filling in the gaps, which introduces friction.**

# Moving Forward: A New Standard for Getting to YES

Reducing decision friction does not require a wholesale reinvention of capabilities. It requires a shift in emphasis from building better stories to building decisions that are easier to approve.

That shift is not just about what goes into the deck, but how the deck is assessed before it ever reaches the buyer. The Five Steps to Yes provide a clear standard, but without an objective way to evaluate against it, teams default to optimizing for completeness rather than clarity.

These are not subjective judgments. They are decision criteria. And when they are applied consistently, they expose where friction still exists—before the meeting, not during it.

The adjustments themselves may appear subtle, but the discipline of assessing for them is what ultimately determines whether a recommendation moves forward or stalls at the point of decision.

This is the gap many organizations are now working to close. They are bringing more rigor and objectivity to the evaluation of sell-in stories before they ever reach the room.

Retail remains a merchant decision-driven business.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of a sell-in presentation is determined not by how compelling it is, but by whether it enables a clear and confident decision.



## KEY TAKEAWAY

Reducing decision friction shortens the distance between recommendation and approval.

**That is where growth is realized.**

RETAIL REMAINS A MERCHANT DECISION-DRIVEN BUSINESS.

# Score your sell-in story before it reaches the room.

GrowthStory™ assesses your deck against the Five Steps to Yes. Panel reviewed by an Aperture expert. 24-hour turnaround.



## After reviewing hundreds of retail presentations, the pattern is clear:

decks that look ready are missing key elements that keep them from being Retail-Ready.

GrowthStory solves for this. It's an objective assessment built around a category-growth narrative, combining AI-enabled automation with deep retail expertise, and behavioral science.

We don't grade slides. We diagnose decision friction. We ensure you're explicitly saying the right things in the right order, so you don't leave money on the table.

Let's Talk



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