

People Do Not Pick the Best Option. They Pick the One They Can Defend.

Choice is a justification problem, so design the reason and not just the ranking.

by Shreyas Kalyanpad

PUBLISHED: OCTOBER 16TH · BY SHREYAS KALYANPAD

A defensible choice is the one a person can explain to someone else without looking stupid.

The problem: we build comparison tables as if people are scoring options. They are not. They are rehearsing an argument.

Shafir, Simonson and Tversky wrote this down in 1993. When a choice gets hard, people do not compute harder. They go looking for a reason that survives being said out loud.

Your user is not asking which option is best. They are asking which one they will not have to defend.

Five places this shows up

For each: what teams ship, why it fails, what to ship instead.



The row she is pointing at is the one that gets repeated upstairs.

1. The tick grid

What teams ship: a feature table where every row is a tick or cross.

Why it fails: ticks are countable, so people count them. The column with the most ticks wins the meeting, even when half the rows are filler.

Ship instead: cut it to the five rows a buyer would repeat to their boss. Each row a sentence they can say.

2. The decoy you think you control

What teams ship: three plans with a weak middle one, to push people up a tier.

Why it fails: the evidence is thinner than the design blogs suggest. In a 2020 study, 233 people picked the best deal among properties. Only about 22% showed all three classic context effects in the textbook direction. Attraction held up. Compromise and similarity ran backwards for a lot of people.

Ship instead: treat the decoy as a bonus, not a plan. Make the option you want chosen the easiest to justify on its own.

3. The layout is part of the result

What teams ship: the same options, rearranged because a new grid looked tidier.

Why it fails: a 2021 review in Trends in Cognitive Sciences found small changes can make these effects vanish or reverse. Three: how options sit in space, how concrete the attributes are, how long the person gets to think.

Ship instead: test two arrangements of the same content before anyone argues about copy.

4. The badge that says nothing

What teams ship: a "most popular" ribbon on the plan with the best margin.

Why it fails: the badge works, but not because people believe you. It hands them a line to repeat. If that line falls apart in the meeting, you lose the deal and the trust.

Ship instead: say what the badge is defending against. "Best value for teams under 20" is a reason. "Most popular" is a rumour.

5. The buyer who has a boss

What teams ship: a pitch aimed at the person in the demo.

Why it fails: that person has to defend the choice to someone who was not there. Being held accountable means having to justify your decision to an authority, with consequences attached. It does not make people sharper. A three-study replication published in 2025 could not find that accountability reduces loss aversion, and the test favoured no effect. Pressure to justify makes buyers safer, not better.

Ship instead: write the one page they will forward. Their defence, in their words, with a number in it.

What your table is really handing them

WHAT YOU SHIPPED	WHAT THEY SAY IN THE MEETING
Forty feature ticks	"It had the most features."
A weak middle plan	"I went with the middle one."
"Most popular" ribbon	"Other people use it."
"Best value under 20 seats"	"It is built for a team our size."
Migration cost in a footnote	"Nobody told me about that."
One named benchmark	"It cut our review time by a third."

Only the last row survives a hostile question.

The four-question audit

1. Read your pricing page out loud as one sentence starting "we should buy this because". Does it finish?
2. Which row would a buyer quote to their boss? If you cannot name it, your table has no argument.
3. What embarrassing outcome is your buyer avoiding? Does the page speak to it?
4. If the reason they repeat turns out to be wrong, who looks bad? If it is them, fix the reason.

Design the ranking and you win a spreadsheet. Design the reason and you win the meeting you were never invited to.

Checked against

Read on 16 October 2026.

- Shafir, Simonson and Tversky, Reason-based choice, Cognition 49 (1993): people seek and construct reasons to resolve conflict and justify a choice to themselves and others
- Dumbalska et al., A map of decoy influence in human multialternative choice, PNAS 117(40) 2020: 233 participants, and only about 22 per cent showed all three classic context effects in the expected direction
- Spektor, Bhatia and Gluth, The elusiveness of context effects in decision making, Trends in Cognitive Sciences 25(10) 2021: spatial arrangement, attribute concreteness and deliberation time can make the main effects disappear or reverse
- Does holding decision-makers accountable make them less loss averse? A three-study replication attempt, Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 2025: no effect of process or outcome accountability, with Bayesian evidence for the null