

How to Sell an Idea

By Geoffrey James

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Got an idea that could kick your career into overdrive? You'll need support to make it happen—from your own boss, a financial backer, or even a decision-maker at another company. Here's how to sell your idea to the people who can turn it into reality.

Things you will need:

- Free (but good ideas are priceless)
- One week to several months
- **Whiteboard:** They're not just for meetings anymore. Keep one by your desk to store your brainstorm in plain sight, where they'll germinate best.
- **Reality Checker:** Recruit a trusted friend or colleague to be painfully honest about the strengths and weaknesses of your idea.
- **Allies:** Identify and woo superiors who trust your judgment. You'll need them to endorse your idea, vouch for you, and help with introductions.
- **Humility:** Persistence is good, but if no one's buying, you'll need to listen carefully to criticism in order to keep moving forward.

A yellow sticky note with the text 'step 1' written in black.

Confirm That You and Your Idea Are a Credible Match

GOAL: Make sure an appropriate messenger will deliver your message.

Selling ideas is not like selling products. With a product, customers can see what they're buying. With an idea, there's nothing to see except you, so unless you're a plausible source, nobody's going to buy. A CEO won't take corporate strategy tips from mailroom clerks, no matter how brilliant their ideas might be. On the other hand, a top-performing district manager will likely get a fair hearing, even if he's not part of the upper-management team.

You have three basic choices if your idea requires higher-level buy-in to get traction. You can:

1) Entrust your idea to somebody farther up the food chain. The danger, of course, is that once it leaves your hands, it's no longer your idea. Don't be too surprised if your boss neglects to mention that the inspiration came from an underling.

2) Come up with an idea that better matches your credibility level. For example, if you're a mailroom clerk, devise a better way to sort the mail. Leave corporate strategy to the bigwigs, and make plans to climb the career ladder one step at a time.

3) Shut up and get back to work.

Hot Tip

Three Questions Idea-Buyers Ask Themselves

1. Is this person competent, based upon past performance?
2. Is this person speaking with candor or handing me some BS?
3. Does this person care more about the idea than about me and my issues?

Source: Neil Rackham, author of "Spin Selling"

step 2

Frame Your Idea Within a Strong Narrative

Goal: Give your target something to remember-and talk about.

People don't get excited about the facts behind the idea; they embrace the story that surrounds the facts. To be effective, the narrative must be compelling, which means it should make intuitive sense to the idea-buyer according to his or her view of the world. Likewise, it should also make the buyer feel good about the decision to adopt your idea. "When you're trying to sell somebody a new idea, you must persuade them that the idea confirms their own opinions, rather than proves them wrong," says Seth Godin, author of the New York Times bestseller *Persuasion Marketing*.

The best way to build a narrative is to tie it to current events, especially within your corporate environment. Did your firm just lose a big customer? Chances are the sales manager is worried about a larger exodus—that's her worldview—so your idea should directly address the question of how to win customers back. Similarly, if a competitor just launched a winning product and your company has a history of successful innovation, your idea should show how your firm can leapfrog the competition by returning to its innovative roots.

Case Study

The Sell for the Speak and Spell

When Texas Instruments researcher Gene Frantz and his team invented a computer chip that could synthesize speech in the mid-1970s, computing was still all about big mainframes and number crunching. The idea of a talking computer was seen as science fiction, but talking toys (that used tape loops) were already common. There were also numerous media reports circulating about how television was negatively impacting the reading ability of children.

To sell the idea to TI's management, Frantz positioned the technology as the brains of an educational toy called *Speak and Spell*. "It looked like a big handheld calculator, which was a big product category for TI at the time," Frantz explains. Positioning his idea as congruent with both the corporate culture and the general concerns of society not only

resulted in a high successful product, it supercharged Frantz's career; he's now a highly respected senior fellow.

step 3

Map the Idea to the Perspective of the Decision-Maker

Goal: Understand what motivates and inspires the person you're pitching to.

Decision-makers will inevitably see your idea from their own perspective. In other words, your idea must be expressed in terms that address the practical business concerns of the potential buyer. If you're talking to an information technology manager, emphasize the technical bells and whistles. By contrast, if you're talking to an accounting manager, the discussion should be all about controlling costs.

Big decisions usually involve a team of senior managers, each with different expertise, according to Edward R. Weiss, who as general counsel at Group One Software oversaw the acquisition of 15 firms. "When somebody came to me with an idea for an acquisition, I depended upon other members of senior management to ensure that the technical and financial all aspects made sense," he says.

Hot Tip

Hot Button Questions for C-Level Execs

- Chief Executive Officer: Will it increase the value of the firm?
- Chief Financial Officer: Where's the return on investment?
- Chief Operations Officer: Can we execute on this plan?
- Chief Information Officer: Will it run on our systems?
- Chief Marketing Officer: Can the world understand it?
- Chief Sales Officer: Will our customers buy it?

step 4

Step 4. Reduce or Eliminate Downside Risk

GOAL: Address weaknesses or objections to your idea head-on.

Even the boldest decision-makers want to cover their bottoms, so don't try to downplay potential problems and objections. Instead, anticipate them in advance and be ready with a convincing response.

This is where you should turn to a trusted friend or colleague to act as your reality-checker, to ensure that you're not just huffing your own fumes. Get your friend to list every doubt or glitch that comes to mind. Avoid the temptation to brush-off such concerns as trivial or off-point, and instead treat each as a practical problem that demands an effective response.

For example, if the objection is "we did this before and it didn't work," be ready to articulate how your idea is substantially different and exactly what factors and circumstances make it more likely to succeed. Similarly, if the objection is that the idea will cost too much to implement, you should prepare a spreadsheet that shows how the expense can be made to fit into the current budget.

"If it's a good idea, everyone will say it's crap, at least at first," says Ken Gidge, who among other things invented the hanging plastic "strip doors" used in service-station garages. "When the suits start telling you why it won't work, you get aggressive. Throw numbers at them to quell their skepticism; then get a commitment for a pilot."

Nitty Gritty

Three Strategies to Manage Risk

1. Have a "can't lose" contingency plan.
Example: "Even if this fails, we'll understand the market better."
2. Define a low barrier to entry.
Example: "We can run a small pilot to see whether it will work."
3. Turn weakness into strength.
Example: "There's no research available so our competition knows no more than we do."

step 5

Step 5. Close the Deal

GOAL: Create momentum to keep your idea moving forward.

You've told a compelling story that the decision-maker understands, and you've addressed all the objections. Now it's time to clinch the sale. Summarize your idea and ask a few final questions to ensure that the idea-buyer agrees it's workable—for example, "Does this meet your objectives?" If you get agreement, you probably have the green light you need to move forward. Start by asking a next-step question such as, "When can we bring this to the budget committee?"

It's okay to be persistent, but politeness and patience are cardinal virtues as well. You never want to give your target an excuse to brush-off the idea just because she got fed up with the person who pitched it. "I've been in meetings where somebody with a suggestion or idea just won't shut up," says Brad Finn, former head of Maxwell Shoe, a \$200 million-a-year women's

shoe wholesaler. "Eventually, I'd kill the issue by making a semi-humiliating remark like, 'That's a good idea, maybe you should quit and take it to a competitor.'"

Voice of Experience

"Ask for feedback frequently throughout the dialog. The best part about this is if you continue to check for agreement, the buyer will often preemptively close the sale by saying something like, 'When do we start?' But if the buyer doesn't do this, you'll have to ask for the next step. Remember: it's your idea, so it's up to you to move the process forward."

- Linda Richardson, chairman of Richardson, a leading sales training firm