

Wisdom of the Pros

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What does it take to clinch an idea sale? We asked the experts—including a movie producer, an ad exec, and a minister—to give us the low-down on their ultimate idea-selling tactics.

The Advertising Executive

Arthur Bijur, President, Cliff Freeman and Partners

His Customers:

Chief marketing officers

His Technique:

Sell the thinking behind the idea rather than the idea itself. "In today's advertising business, it's not enough for an idea to be entertaining and appropriate. Salable ideas must be extendible onto television, print, podcasts, web pages, word of mouth, product placement, and so forth. Because of this, the surface level of the idea is often less important than the research and deep thinking that went into ensuring that it will perform well in different venues. Laying that kind of groundwork reinforces the client's trust that you, and your idea, will deliver as promised. In a sense, you don't sell the idea; you make the idea buyable."

The Grant Writer

Deborah Montgomery, Chief Associate, Resource Associates, Inc.

Her Customers:

Administrators inside large charities and government agencies

Her Technique:

Find out what they've supported in the past. "Ultimately, my job is about matching the mandate of a funding organization with the capabilities of whoever is seeking the grant. So before writing a proposal, I contact previous awardees, get a copy of their grant proposals, and discuss the process with them. Then I formulate a strategy that incorporates my client's basic idea with an emphasis on the specific type of activities and actions that I know appeal to the funding organization."

The Religious Leader

Robert Cummings Neville, Professor of Theology and University Chaplain, Boston University

His Customers:

Anybody who believes, or wants to believe, in God

His Technique:

Work hard on the rhetoric. "It takes me 20 to 30 hours to prepare a 20-minute sermon, and at least half that time comes after the first draft. Sermons, like essays, need to set up anticipations and then surprise you. Then there is the work of editing many times through to shorten the sentences, to remove clichés, and to set up cadences. All of this is to say that the art of rhetoric is itself a crucial part of how you communicate complex ideas. It's not merely an instrument or a medium; it becomes essential to the ideas themselves."

The Movie Producer

David Rotman, Screenwriter and Executive Producer (Dragonheart, Cliffhanger)

His Customers:

Studio executives

His Technique:

Make your idea seem like it's in great demand. "If a studio thinks another studio is hot after a property, they're immediately interested, especially if you've got a track record that shows you know how to pick winners. It's not so much the idea itself that matters, but the potential that the executive you're talking to will look stupid if he or she turns away an idea that later becomes successful. If there's one thing that a studio executive hates more than missing a chance to make big money, it's watching a different studio executive make even bigger money."

The Management Consultant

Michael Bosworth, co-founder, CustomerCentric Systems, co-author CustomerCentric Selling

His Customers:

C-level executives

His Technique:

Make them feel the pain first. "During the conversation, troll to find out what keeps the client awake at night. Ask questions like: 'What would you do if your primary distributor went out of business?' or 'How do you plan to react if investors don't buy into your new strategy?' Once you've discovered where it hurts, help them imagine how much better they would feel once your idea has solved the problem. Ask questions like: 'Would it be useful if you could immediately identify your distributor's customers?' or 'Have you thought about altering your marketing to address investors as well as customers?'"

The Industry Analyst

Tom Austin, vice president and fellow, Gartner

His Customers:

Industry executives

His Technique:

Get the potential idea-buyer to help create the idea. "I start out with an idea that I think is pretty good, but as I continue to explain my thinking, first to other analysts and then to our clients, the idea evolves and changes—often in very fundamental ways. Communication is an accelerated technique for interactive development, because the discussion process hones the idea, making it sharp and incisive. Eventually, when it's time to actually sell the idea, many of your listeners will have already contributed to its formation and have had time to assimilate its implications."
