



Got a great idea? Think it will change the world? No one will. Two researchers find that selling an idea, whether from the

By G. Richard Shell and Mario Moussa

idea champions

We once met a 31-year-old technology manager on the West Coast named Kumar Chandra. He moved to the United States from India several years ago to work for a major pharmaceutical firm. With an advanced degree in computer science, he was an expert on improving the information systems at his company. But he could not get support for his initiatives. After telling us a sad story about how a coworker stole his best proposal and got it adopted, Kumar summed up his problem with stunning simplicity. "I can't seem to sell my ideas," he lamented.

Kumar is not alone. Companies sell their products and services, while people in organizations sell their ideas. Your success depends on how well you do it.

Even if you are at the top of your organization, you need to sell your ideas. General Electric's Jeffrey Immelt, one of the world's most powerful CEOs, knows he cannot simply issue orders. "When you run General Electric," he says, "there are seven to 12 times a year when you have to say, 'You're doing it my way.' If you do it 18 times, the good people will leave. If you do it three times, the company falls apart." The art of leadership requires that you strike the right balance between telling and selling. Go too far in one direction, and you fail to motivate your people. Go too far in the other, and you come across as rudderless.

*believe you if you don't know how to tell them.
top of the ladder or the bottom, is a process that anyone can learn.*

In our research for our book *The Art of Woo: Using Strategic Persuasion to Sell Your Ideas*, we have discovered some important ways to help people become idea champions. These best practices apply no matter where you are—in the boiler room or the boardroom, in profit-driven companies or mission-driven organizations, at work or at home. The best idea champions seem to possess a natural talent for getting others on board. But we found that even woo masters follow a multistep process that you can learn.

Step One: Analyze Your Situation

To get started, you need a good idea. And this takes work—lots of research and gathering input from experts. There are no shortcuts or guarantees. But one thing that always helps is being able to state what problem your idea solves. As the great engineer Charles Kettering famously put it, “A problem defined is a problem half-solved.”

Once you have defined the problem and have an idea for solving it, you need to identify the people who should hear about it. Idea champions take this challenge very seriously.

When Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on South Africa’s notoriously brutal Robben Island, he survived for 26 years by focusing on specific goals for improving prison conditions and scouting exactly who would be the right people to sell his ideas to. One of his first important insights was that the lowest-level employees—the warders—had the most control over decisions related to prisoners’ well being. As Mandela learned, “The most important person in any prisoner’s life is not the minister of justice, not the commissioner of prisons, not even the head of the prison, but the warder in one’s section.” If you needed an extra blanket and went to the minister of justice, “you would get no response.” If you went to the commissioner of prisons, the commissioner would say, “It is against regulations.” If you went to the head of the prison, he would respond, “If I give you an extra

blanket, I must give one to everyone.” But if you were on good terms with the warder, the warder would “simply go to the stockroom and fetch a blanket.” In addition, and perhaps most importantly, when you had a good relationship with the warders in your section, “It became difficult for the higher-ups to treat you roughly.”

If you have access to the decision maker, a simple meeting with a straightforward idea pitch is the way to go. But be careful—studies suggest even uncomplicated decisions require contact with an average of five people in most organizations and complex

singer Bono walked into the office of a 78-year-old, archconservative U.S. senator named Jesse Helms (R-NC). Bono was making the rounds in Washington, DC, to recruit allies for Jubilee 2000, a program for getting governments to forgive the crushing debts faced by African countries so more local resources could be directed at the AIDS epidemic.

When the meeting began, Bono launched into his standard pitch for aid to Africa. He had gathered his information during months of research, including interviews with experts such as World Bank President James

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decisions usually involve as many as 20 people. The more typical decision process, therefore, will have many stepping stones—decision makers and influencers—that you need to traverse.

Step Two: Confront the Five Barriers to Yes

A big part of effective selling is anticipating objections. Our research suggests that there are five main objections you confront when selling an idea at work: negative relationships, poor credibility, communication mismatches, hostile belief systems, and conflicting interests. You need to address and neutralize each of these factors if you are to maximize your success at selling an idea to a boss or team.

Bottom line: Great persuaders know how and when to turn the five barriers into assets.

On September 20, 2000, U2 lead

Wolfensohn, former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul Volcker, and Harvard development economist Jeffrey Sachs. He liked to hurl metrics at his audience as fast as they could keep up.

But as Bono recited his litany of statistics in Helms’ office, he saw that he was losing his audience. He was speaking the wrong language, and the elderly man’s eyes began to wander. The meeting was coming to a rapid end.

So Bono adjusted, switching to a completely different language. Bono, himself a born-again Christian and close student of the Bible, had heard that Helms was a religious man. So he started speaking of Jesus’ concern for the poor and the afflicted.

“I started talking about scripture,” Bono later recounted. “I talked about AIDS as the leprosy of our age.” As Bono warmed to his subject, he pointed out

that more than 2,100 verses of scripture in the Bible pertain to poverty, a number second only to the number of verses dealing with redemption. Helms was listening now. Bono told of the married women and their children dying of AIDS. "Helms listened," reported James Taub in *The New York Times*, "and his eyes began to well up. Finally the flinty old Southerner rose to his feet, grabbed for his cane, and said, 'I want to give you a blessing!' He embraced the singer, saying, 'I want to do anything I can to help you.'" And help he did. With Helms' support, Congress appropriated \$435 million just weeks after this meeting to bring down the debt owed by African nations to the United States.

Let's take a moment to review how Bono turned potential barriers into assets.

First, Bono brought a very well prepared, polished idea to the table with

him when he went into Helms' office.

Second, he had done a great job of understanding the decision-making process for U.S. cancellation of African debt. He had mapped a careful stepping-stone strategy. Bono's first stop had been Congressman John Kasich (R-OH), a U2 fan who opposed all forms of foreign aid and thus had an ideological interest in eliminating African debt because he saw it as a quick exit from that aid venture. Bono then used his relationship with Kasich to obtain his appointment to see Helms.

Third, when Bono sensed Helms' lack of interest in his data-filled pitch, he shifted to another credibility platform—the values he shared with Helms as a born-again Christian. Using the metaphorical language of their personal beliefs, he intensified his message, adding passion to his purpose and expertise.

Perhaps most important, Bono's presentation won him Helms' personal trust. Within the span of this short meeting, Bono created the foundation for a working relationship, which then blossomed in follow-up meetings and events.

Step Three: Make Your Pitch

When you make a solid case on the merits of your idea, you appeal to people's rational side—the human calculator that adds up the benefits and costs of your proposal and weighs them. This is an absolutely necessary part of idea selling. Your problem statement, the evidence you cite, and the arguments you make form the foundations on which your audience builds explanations about why it might say yes or no.

But a problem remains. That calculator does not make the actual decision. Something deeper and more interesting is involved.

The unconscious mind, as Malcolm Gladwell demonstrates in *Blink*, takes the logical and factual information gathered by the conscious mind, locates the patterns in the data, and folds these patterns into insights based on experience. These insights—not the logic of your case or the strength of the evidence—are what ultimately produce the decision to accept or reject a new idea.

So you really have two audiences in every persuasion event: your audience's rational calculator and its intuitive decision maker. You must present arguments and evidence, but unless you also make your ideas easily accessible to the nonrational mind, you will lose the sale.

You need a sophisticated understanding of how your organization works, who pulls the strings, and how things get done.

George W. Ferris, a bridge builder from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, almost lost his chance to invent the Ferris Wheel for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair because he stumbled at this stage of his idea-selling campaign. After weeks of intense calculations, Ferris and his team made a successful pitch to the fair's Ways and Means Committee that such a wheel could be built. But the very next day, the committee reneged as doubts grew about this audacious idea. The decision makers just could not see it working. As word got out about the Ferris Wheel project, former supporters began calling Ferris' design a "monstrosity," and engineers derided it as both infeasible and unsafe.

Undaunted, Ferris pushed on. He created more detailed specifications, put \$25,000 of his own money behind

the effort, and recruited prominent investors, including an engineer who had helped build the Canadian Pacific Railway. After five months of effort, he returned to the Ways and Means Committee with greatly enhanced documentation that proved his design would work and a checkbook that showed that he had enough money to make his massive wheel a reality.

What was different about the second meeting? Ferris had taken the time to make his idea vivid and memorable. People bought it with both reason and emotion. This time the committee's approval stuck and the wheel was the hit of the fair.

Step Four: Secure Your Commitments

Once you have made the sale to the right people, your final step is to lock your idea into the organization through budget lines, job descriptions, incentives, and other standard operating procedures.

An executive we worked with at a major university followed just this strategy when he was charged with redesigning the information systems support function. He began by creating an open consultation process so people from every important constituency in the organization could be heard. This gave him the input he needed to design possible solutions built around a new mission statement: "The User Comes First." Next, he launched a series of pilot programs designed to test how different support roles might work for different

organizational units. A steering group of senior managers was set up to monitor the pilots and make budget and organizational recommendations to him. Finally, he asked this group to make a series of "lock-in" recommendations, asking for specific budget lines, job titles, salary bands, incentive plans, and other official policies to assure that the new user-friendly focus for IT would become the standard procedure. Without this last step, it would have been all too easy for IT's "technology first" culture to reassert itself.

Go Forth With Your Ideas

Being an idea champion requires more than just good selling skills. You need a sophisticated understanding of how your organization works, who pulls the strings, and how things get done. If you are prepared to work hard, you can take what seems to be a mysterious art and turn it into a systematic process that makes you an influential player. **an**

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