

## FORWARD THINKING



by MICHELE C. WIERZGAC

# Selling Ideas to Your CEO

*Considerations for communicating with senior management*

**A**FTER A UNIVERSITY BOARD MEETING an event planner named Jamie walked out of the board room simultaneously with the president of the university. She reintroduced herself and they shook hands.

Polite exchanges were made when Jamie casually uttered the words, “Ms. President, you had expressed in the board meeting that raising research funds is a priority for the university. The special events department calculated that adding a fund-raising element to the annual class reunions would provide this much needed revenue for research. It is projected that if we offer a reunion with a competition between the classes, the university would raise \$50 million.”

“Great,” the president replied. “May I see a proposal on my desk tomorrow morning?” “Absolutely,” Jamie replied.

The situation above is a true story, and also a prime example of using the business skill of strategic communication.

In the hectic world of meeting planning we are continually executing logistics at a record-setting pace—constantly determining the “what ifs” and problem solving while in perpetual motion. And when we do have brilliant ideas, we table the idea because we are too busy to take on the idea, or the boss will not listen.

Strategic communication is the art and science of managing very focused

messages and achieving goals while simultaneously respecting the complexities of interacting with different audiences. The point of communicating strategically is turning situations into action.

Strategic communication is about getting in the heads of your audience. It is critical to understand how CEOs, senior managers or C-level executives think before you bring your brilliant idea to their attention.

On a daily basis, CEOs have five basic concerns on their minds. It is important to think about how your new idea will help them with *their* top priorities, not yours.

**Current objectives:** CEOs think about new ideas as how they relate to the current objectives of the organization, and you can find the objectives listed within the organization’s strategic plan. The majority of these objectives are broken down into four main categories:

- **Organizational growth and increased profitability:** How does your idea support the growth of the organization? Is the idea profitable?
- **Keeping the stakeholders happy:** Will the idea be supported by investors, board members and other executives within the organization?
- **Value:** What value does your idea deliver to the organization?
- **Agility:** How quickly can this idea be implemented with little or no cost?

**Current business issues:** In the example above, the president communicated that the most pressing current business issue was to obtain funding for research.

How will your idea address this current business issue?

**Understanding your customer:** CEOs constantly think about their customers. Knowing and understanding the customer is critical for organizational effectiveness. Does your idea support the customers?

**Impactful idea:** CEOs are looking for ideas that have the greatest impact in solving a problem. Is your idea impactful?

**Return on investment (ROI):** CEOs want to hear ideas that deliver ROI to the organization. Does your idea deliver ROI?

Strategic communication is also knowing the characteristics of your audience. CEOs exhibit certain behaviors that are important to understand in order to have your idea considered.

**Lacks time:** CEOs do not have enough time. They run from one meeting to the next, so if you can’t describe your idea in 30 seconds or less, the CEO’s eyes become glazed over, they become disinterested, and then almost always say “no.” Being concise is a fundamental skill in getting your idea heard. To achieve this you must do the following:

- **Review the key business issues first:** This action demonstrates to the CEO that you are aware and understand what is impacting the organization. You must also be respectful. Remember what Jamie said to the president: “You had expressed in the board meeting that raising research funds is a priority for the university.” This statement demonstrates understanding and respect for the issues at hand.

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- ▶ **State your conclusion next:** Jamie stated concisely, “The special events department calculated that adding a fundraising element to the annual class reunions would provide the much needed revenue for research.” The listener immediately becomes intrigued and wants to know more
- ▶ **Quickly summarize the facts and figures:** Jamie simply said, “It is projected that if we offer a reunion with a competition between the classes, the university would raise \$50 million.” Remember that a major concern of every CEO is growth and profitability; therefore, facts and figures are essential.
- ▶ **Be prepared to deliver a written or verbal proposal:** Don’t be surprised if they want the information quickly. The president requested something on her desk the following morning. If the research is completed, be sure it is in the presentation style appropriate for the culture of your organization (i.e. memorandum, booklet, PowerPoint).

**Your reputation:** The CEO may check into your reputation. What do others within the organization think about you? Are your ideas credible? CEOs surround themselves with individuals who are loyal. If you have a reputation for being a rebel, your ideas will never be heard, nor implemented. So if your ideas are always being rejected, you may want to examine your reputation. If you have said or done something that has damaged your reputation within the organization, you may want to consider thinking of moving on and starting over. Obviously, Jamie’s reputation is respected within the university.

**Applies to the broad scope of business:** Ideas that support what is currently going on within an organization are usually considered. Many times our ideas are brilliant—so “forward thinking” that the organization is not ready. Perhaps the idea requires more time to garner buy-in and support from additional departments. Individuals who have been with an organization for many years become silent because their “ideas are never heard.” Then a few years later, they complain, “That was my idea 10 years ago and nobody listened.” New ideas are all about timing. Hang onto your brilliant idea and wait patiently for the perfect time to strategically communicate your idea. In this scenario, Jamie’s idea took two years to adopt.

**The Ego:** Ego is an inflated feeling of pride in your superiority over others. If your CEO has an inflated ego, you may have to employ the strategy of making your idea sound like their idea. Be careful of brown-nosing the boss, too. This may create a problem with your colleagues. \*

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