

HOW TO SELL YOUR IDEAS

(Continued from last month)

Mr. Eckstein emphasizes the need for utmost clarity in the presentation. "Remember, if you have an idea, it is a thing you have worked with for some time. It's clearer in your mind but may not be clear to anyone else. It embarrasses a 'buyer' to be told of an idea that he just can't make heads or tails out of; he is resentful."

Don't get overly anxious in anticipating rejection. This can spoil your presentation. On the other hand, you should be prepared to explain the reasoning you used to arrive at it.

The presentation should be made as concise as possible. People get impatient with long-winded preliminaries.

You should be sure, however, that you cover all the pertinent facts.

Mr. Von Fange cautions: "When speaking to a manager, remember that if there is one bother in his life, it is the man who rambles for half an hour on something that could be said in 20 words." He further notes that there is "a curious and widespread tendency to surround proposals or requests with so many commentaries that the request itself can hardly be discerned."

In situations where the audience includes one or several professional people, you'll need to include counterarguments to your idea and discuss these

also. This two-sided approach will help you convince the more sophisticated persons of your thoroughness.

The two-sided approach has additional advantages, especially in taking the wind out of objections and arguments that might arise later.

"This approach is superior with those who initially disagree with you because it disarms the objections which they are mentally rehearsing while receiving your message. It is dangerous to assume that arguments favoring the other side will do no harm if left unvoiced. If your audience has these arguments in mind, it is better to bring them out where they can be dealt with," says Prof. James N. Mosel of The George Washington University.

Don't go too fast

The presentation of the new material should be delivered no faster than it can be understood and absorbed. Clear and lucid language is absolutely necessary. Take special care to eliminate trade jargon unless the people who are listening are equally at home with such language.

E. J. DeWitt, president of Wallace Supplies Manufacturing Company, feels that most failures are attributable to the tendency to use specialized language.

"We have had tape recordings of engineers trying to tell management what would be management's gain if engineers' recommendations were to be followed. Reruns of these tapes have been most instructive. Time after time verbal impasses developed.

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Time after time restudy showed a bogging down over a technical phrase in a layman's discussion. . . . Most people—engineers included—tend to talk with their everyday vocabularies. Unfortunately, the vocabulary of the specializing engineer is not one with which most laymen will be comfortable."

Arguments answering objections or criticisms should be well prepared, but it's a good idea not to offer them before they are actually needed. An argumentative approach creates the impression of unnecessary defensiveness. It may change the entire feeling or attitudes of the people who are listening.

Says Dr. Paul R. Lawrence of Harvard University, "A man who goes into his job with the conviction that people are going to resist any idea he presents with blind stubbornness is likely to find them responding just the way he thinks they will. The process is clear: Whenever he treats the people who are supposed to buy his ideas as if they were bull-headed, he changes the way they are used to being treated and they will be bullheaded."

Special attention has to be paid to the practical details of the idea, how it can be carried out. Mr. Von Fange advises, "We should avoid any rash tendency to attempt to sell our idea before we have a definite plan and program to support it. For management very generally, and very properly, will refuse to approve any proposed undertaking that is not well planned with regard to its execution." The advantages, as well as the costs and difficulties involved, should also be pointed out. Nothing kills the survival of chances of a new idea faster than a purely technical or abstract way of presenting it.

When selling an idea to top management, remember that a strong dollars and cents case must be made. The possible savings potentials or profit potentials and primary selling features should be demonstrated and the presentation should include plenty of "business benefits to us" and not solely "how it works."

People are notoriously poor visualizers, especially when it concerns something unfamiliar. Therefore, whenever possible, it's a good idea to augment your verbal presentation with sketches and charts. Verbal descriptions sometimes are boring and, especially with new ideas, often aren't clear.

When you present an idea your reputation and good judgment are tested. If the idea or presentation is inadequate, it will affect your future in the company and make any future selling of ideas even more difficult. The image your boss has of you is highly important in getting your idea accepted. If you have a reputation for trustworthiness and expertness, it will be easier to sell your idea.

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Use the soft sell

Overselling should be avoided. While enthusiasm can be contagious, a superabundance, especially at the beginning of the presentation, will put people on the defensive.

"It is easy to get too enthusiastic about an idea, especially if it is your own," Mr. Mason points out, "and when you begin to overestimate rewards and overstate your opinion of them, it may create doubts among people who would otherwise want to give your idea serious consideration. Actually, the idea itself may be perfectly good in a more modest sort of way, but obvious overselling can frighten people out of wanting to take a chance on it."

Be particularly cautious when the new idea involves radical change. Your bosses may resent or resist the new idea merely because they were so intimately involved in the past. Talk about the good times ahead, rather than the bad times past.

If the idea is too radical or too big, it should be presented piecemeal, in logical sequence. This prepares the group to accept it gradually.

James A. Houle of Rubber and Asbestos Corporation, Bloomfield, N. J., says that ideas which entail major changes or expenditures are best broken up into three or four parts, each of which can then be installed or introduced separately.

"This progressive step-by-step method," he notes, "is often acceptable to management when the overall 'big idea' involves sweeping changes."

Be careful to avoid an air of superiority or pride when presenting an idea. This may make your listener feel small or inferior and build resistance.

It will help a great deal if you know as much as possible about the people to whom you must present your idea—their temperaments, aptitudes, idiosyncrasies and preferences.

By putting yourself in the boss's shoes all the way through, by trying to imagine how you would react, were the positions reversed, you will be able to do a much better job of interpreting and selling your ideas.

Important to test

One way to help make a sale is to offer to test the idea, if this can be done.

Mr. Houle says, "Any idea that can be subjected to a road test should certainly get one. When ideas are debated instead of tested, a poor idea, supported by a good debater, makes a better showing than a good idea, supported by a poor debater. When ideas are tested, good ideas stand out."

Waldemar Ayres, director of research for Singer Sewing Machine Company, suggests: "Think through

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every problem likely to arise in carrying out your proposal. Then provide an acceptable answer to show you've anticipated and planned for every such circumstance. A busy executive has all sorts of worries of his own. If, in order to approve your proposal, he has to stop and solve a problem relating to your baby, the easiest and quickest thing for him to do is to say no."

At the end of the presentation, you should sum up the more salient points, the anticipated advantages of the idea, the need that exists or can be created for the idea, and why you think the idea should be adopted.

Leaving copies of a clear, well written report with your listeners will give them a chance to study it later, and perhaps to arrive at your conclusions.

—Eugene Raudsepp
Research psychologist

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