

How to Sell an Idea to Your Boss

by Roberto Verganti

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“My problem is not how to be innovative. My team often comes up with interesting ideas. But when we introduce them to top executives, they always turn them down. How can I convince my boss to invest in our ideas?” The question – asked at the end of a seminar on innovation at a major IT firm – did not surprise me.

One of the hardest challenges for creative people – especially those working in units such as R&D, design, or marketing – is how to win top management’s support for their ideas. Many feel that their proposals are killed not because they have poor potential but because their boss simply does not understand them or does not even listen to the presentation. They feel frustrated and dream of working with CEOs like Steve Jobs or Alberto Alessi, who often invest in breakthroughs.

The solution to this problem is to have your boss onboard long before the idea comes up. Top executives who successfully promote innovation hardly invest in unexpected breakthroughs. They are actively involved upfront. A former senior manager at PortalPlayer, a contractor that helped Apple develop the iPod, reported, “The interesting thing about the iPod is that since it started, it had 100% of Steve Jobs’s time.” The same is true at Alessi, the Italian company famous for the design of its home products. When breakthrough ideas arise, CEO Alberto Alessi is already there.

Therefore, avoid situations in which you have to sell an innovative idea to your boss. You might succeed, but the outcome will depend on factors that have nothing to do with the merits of your idea (e.g. how you presented the idea and the mood of your boss). Executives give poor responses to

cold calls – especially when it comes to breakthrough concepts that require deep understanding and may have risky implications for the business. In such a situation, they, of course, prefer to say “no.”

Instead, start the interaction with senior executives earlier in the innovation process:

1. **Get an endorsement to investigate a business challenge.** For example, if you work in the R&D department of a food company, a challenge could be coming up with new products that are healthier and provide a better experience by eating less. It’s more likely that you will gain support for investigating such a challenge than suddenly selling an idea for a new valuable cheese that people will buy in smaller quantities. So even if you already have an idea for solving a problem, don’t immediately pitch it.
2. **Design the innovation process together.** Once you have top management’s support to tackle the challenge, come to an agreement on how to come up with ideas for tackling it.
3. **Update top executives frequently.** Keep feeding them information on how the investigation is developing along the way. When you do so, don’t talk about the emerging possible solutions; instead, provide information on how you are interpreting the challenge. In this way, executives will more easily grasp the solution once you present it.
4. **Involve top executives in the creation of the solution.** By doing so you will not only receive precious insights but also stronger support, because executives will feel they own the idea. (This implies that your boss will put his or her name on the idea. Are you ready to sacrifice your ego for the sake of the innovation?)

I’m not implying that if you follow these steps, the idea that you ultimately propose will or should be accepted. (A recent article in *Fast Company* reports that Steve Jobs’s “default answer is no.” And Alberto Alessi receives every month hundreds of ideas that he turns down.) But your boss will definitely have a better understanding of your proposals, your company’s decision-making processes will substantially improve, and you will feel more supported and less frustrated.

In summary, if you’re pursuing radical innovation, do not sell the idea. Sell the process.



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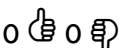
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Josh Meyer 10 months ago

Great advice, thank you! There are a lot of posts on this topic across all the business publications, but when I imagined following their suggestions, I just couldn't picture it working. This idea to not just pitch ideas is genius.

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