



Strategic Woo

By G. Richard Shell and Mario Moussa

The art and strategy of gaining appreciation for your bright ideas.

woo \`wü\ verb **1**: to appeal for the affection of and usu. marriage with: **COURT 2**: to solicit or entreat esp. with importunity **3**: to seek to gain or bring about

We spent three years researching the topic of strategic persuasion, and to describe it, we settled on the term “woo.”

This might prompt you to ask, “How can one woo strategically?”

A historical narrative provides the answer.

When Napoléon Bonaparte was a young officer in the French army, he established an artillery battery at the siege of Toulon in such an exposed position that his superiors told him he would never get soldiers to man it. And had Napoléon ordered his men to perform this duty, the doubters would probably have been correct. But Napoléon showed his skill as a persuader by appealing to his men’s pride and courage rather than their duty to obey.

He decided to create a large placard to put on the battery, and in bold letters, he wrote “the battery of the men without fear.” When Napoléon’s men read these words, they started compet-

ing for the honor of being known as the members of such an intrepid band.

Napoléon successfully wooed his men. Rather than issuing commands, he spoke to their deepest aspirations. And he chose to communicate his wishes through an indirect appeal—an arresting, public affirmation of those soldiers brave enough to take on his assignment.

He made his actions strategic by letting his goal dictate how and to whom he sent his message in terms of that specific situation. And in a dramatic exercise of imagination, he empathized with the feelings of the people he needed to persuade.

Corporate history offers proof that even your best plans can fail to get a hearing. As Lee Iaccoca said, “You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere.” Being right, or in charge, is not enough. You have to sell your ideas. Alfred Sloan, the legendary General Motors CEO, described “the practice of selling major proposals” as the most important aspect of managing.

We call it “woo” because you need good relationships, in addition to good ideas, to win others over.

How do you woo?

When you woo, you focus on the perceptions, needs, beliefs, and values of the people you are trying to persuade. Psychologists call it perspective-taking. You persuade others by showing that you understand their interests and who they are.

Manipulative tactics might sound good between the covers of a how-to manual, but they rarely work. A friend of ours works for a boss who is fascinated by the “hidden psychology” of persuasion. This boss read a book that claimed that when you mimic the gestures of other people, your ideas become irresistible to them. So he started using the ploy with his direct reports.

The staff quickly figured out what their boss was doing—people are not so dumb. The boss’s little trick then backfired when others started secretly aping his mannerisms, and turned staff meetings into a running joke. The result—the manipulator lost his credibility.

Woo is different. It is a four-part process guided by the way people and organizations actually work.

1. Ideas. Woo begins with your idea, which, at its core, is a sharp definition of the problem you want to solve. Next you need to decide, as rock star and social activist Bono puts it, “Who is ‘the Elvis?’” The person determined to be the Elvis is the decision maker to whom you need to sell your idea. There are usually several of them.

2. Barriers. The second part is a systematic review of the barriers to being heard. These can include poor relationships, lack of credibility, contrary beliefs, conflicting interests, and communication mismatches. Pushing your idea pushes people away. Research shows that people are able to persuade themselves, so instead, you should concentrate your efforts on removing the psychological impediments to having a productive conversation.

3. Impressions. Once you have gotten the other’s attention—and not before—you can move to the third part, which is putting your pitch into simple, memorable terms.

4. Commitment. Lastly, you must secure commitment to your idea by asking the other to take small steps that demonstrate support.

Woo in action

The story of Frances Perkins’ effort to establish the Social Security system in the United States illustrates the principles of woo in action.

1. Define your idea and identify the decision maker. Perkins had compiled an impressive record by the time she was named U.S. secretary of labor in 1933, emerging first as a leader of social causes in New York City and then serving as industrial commissioner under President Franklin Roosevelt when he was the governor of New York State. As her career developed, she dreamed of assembling an extensive plan for national labor and economic security legislation.

This had crystallized into the idea for the Social Security system by the time Roosevelt, the central decision maker in this story, asked her to join his cabinet.

2. Remove the barriers to yes. In late 1932, just after the election, Roosevelt called Perkins to a meeting at his Manhattan townhouse. Because she had not yet agreed to serve, Perkins knew that this was her moment of maximum leverage with the president-elect.

Her previous accomplishments had given her all the credibility she

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needed, but she did not want to overplay her hand. She therefore chose to communicate her idea as a compelling aspiration rather than a concrete proposal. Her goal for the meeting was to obtain something important but modest—authorization.

As they sat together, Perkins laid out her grand vision and asked, “Are you sure you want these things done? Because you don’t want me for secretary of labor if you don’t.”

Roosevelt was startled when he understood the scope of her ambition. There was no doubt he was paying attention.

3. Make the pitch. “Well, do you think it can be done?” the president asked.

“I don’t know,” Perkins replied frankly. But then she observed, “Lots of other problems have been solved by the people of the United States, and there is no reason why this one shouldn’t be solved.”

“Do you think you can do it?”

Roosevelt pressed.

And it was at that moment when Perkins asked for exactly what she wanted, keeping her pitch simple, focused, and direct. There were no long explanations and no complicated visual aids.

“I want to know I have your authorization,” Perkins said. “I won’t ask you to promise anything.”

4. Secure commitment. “Alright,” said the president. “I will authorize you to

try, and if you succeed, that’s fine.” At this early stage of Perkins’ idea-selling campaign, she did not seek her boss’s full approval of her program—simply his authorization.

She avoided asking for resources or an agreement that Roosevelt would serve as an idea champion. It was too soon for Roosevelt to give his public endorsement to a notion that was still taking shape. However he was capable of clearly stating his commitment to let Perkins go forward.

Small steps often lead to big changes. When the time came, Roosevelt put the full weight of his authority behind Perkins’ idea, and in 1935, Congress passed Social Security legislation with overwhelming majorities in both the House and Senate. A private conversation about one woman’s aspiration led to a historic turning-point for the United States.

Woo matters to you

You need persuasion skills no matter what kind of organization you work for. And you need them even if you run the whole operation. Most importantly, you need to think strategically about persuasion, with an eye on the moves that lie ahead of today’s actions.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, at only 23 years old, recently learned this lesson. As the popularity of his young company’s website took off, he gained a reputation for self-assurance that bordered on arrogance. In a March 2007 speech, he proclaimed, “Young people are just smarter.”

But Zuckerberg soon recognized that being young and smart was not enough, even if you have the optimal business model. As the *Wall Street Journal*’s Vauhini Vara observed, Facebook needs people with “the ability to woo advertisers, manage a big staff, and handle public relations.” Zuckerberg has begun to hire emotionally intelligent senior executives who fit the bill.

We recently read about a Dutch traffic engineer named Hans Monderman whose ideas resemble our advice about strategic persuasion. Monderman

designs intersections with no stoplights, signs, painted center lines, speed bumps, or defined pedestrian crossings. Monderman calls his system “shared space.”

Surveying a busy intersection, Monderman comments, “This is social space, so when grandma is coming, you stop, because that’s what normal, courteous human beings do.” Tens of thousands of people cross paths every day at his intersections, and there has never been a fatal accident.

Selling ideas is like maneuvering through the traffic in one of Monderman’s shared spaces. You have to navigate by keeping your eye on the right people and avoiding obstacles such as conflicting interests, cultural missteps, and political minefields that can cause a lot of problems. As a professional who needs to get things done, you have to cross these dangerous intersections to reach safety and success.

The ability to woo helps get you there.

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