

THE PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIST

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A Good Response to a Bad Idea: Disagreeing with Management Confidently and Effectively

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Many PR professionals have heard stories about a CEO or a client becoming enamored with a particular idea. Perhaps they want to sponsor an initiative that's off-strategy or off-brand. Perhaps they're pushing for an expensive event or for a booth at a trade show that doesn't provide a worthwhile return on investment. Or perhaps they are contemplating a major change in employee policy but haven't conducted any research to determine audience attitudes or impact.

The CEO then asks the organization's PR leadership to make a recommendation. That person evaluates the idea using context, experience and instincts, and recommends against it — confident that his or her voice will be heard. But the boss's response is clear: "Wrong answer."

PR professionals should be management's trusted counselors, offering insight into how key publics will respond to organizational actions. But this can be much harder in practice than in principle. PR professionals, even senior ones, often have trouble pushing back, saying "no" or telling management/CEOs when they have a bad idea. Even when we are willing to disagree, we may not have the persuasiveness or credibility to effectively make our case.



Speaking up is hard to do

It may seem strange that executives and clients frequently reject the advice of their PR counsel, even when they are ostensibly paying those professionals to provide guidance. But it's common. Why?

One reason is that clients and executives often love big, bold, splashy tactics. And once they fall in love with a particular idea, it can be difficult to dissuade them. Let's face it — executing tactics can be fun, or, in more serious scenarios, can give management the feeling that they are "doing something" about the situation at hand — that they are taking action. Once they start heading down that road, it becomes harder to get them to consider opposing points of view.

Executives generally view their own ideas as being sound, and they may not be receptive to feedback that suggests otherwise. After all, successful company leaders have gotten to where they are by exercising good judgment. They are accustomed to being right.

To further complicate the matter, public relations is one of those areas that everyone thinks they have some expertise in. As Helio Fred Garcia, president and founder of crisis management firm Logos Consulting, puts it, "Executives think they already know all about communications."

But Garcia also offers another, more sobering perspective on why the PR practitioner's advice is ignored. "All too often, communicators are marginalized," he says. "They are cast as a part of a functional area — in this case, communications or public relations — and not as an expert in the things the boss or client actually wants advice about." This is just as true in small organizations as it is in big ones.

Steps for responding to a bad idea

Responding effectively to a bad idea requires making your response business-relevant and constructing a solid, supported case. Here are some keys to success.

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Invoke third-party opinions and examples. Executives tend to put a lot of faith in third-party opinions — a fact shown by their readiness to engage outside consultants on a variety of issues. And the more critical the issue is to the company, the less inclined leaders are to believe that they can find the expertise to solve it inside the company.

One senior PR professional was dealing with an executive who wanted to initiate a lawsuit against a particularly aggressive company critic. This PR professional, while agreeing that the company's claims were valid, believed that a lawsuit was a bad idea and would generate widespread negative public perception.

After some preliminary conversations failed to convince the executive, the professional spent the following weekend searching for examples of what other companies had done in similar situations and the outcomes.

By Monday morning, the practitioner had compiled data about other organizations that had won similar lawsuits but had lost in the court of public opinion. Once the PR practitioner introduced these examples into the discussion, the executive's insistence on pursuing the suit quickly diminished.

Use data. Numbers can speak louder than words.

"Management wants people who have good instincts but who can also back up their recommendations with data," says Maryanne Rainone, senior vice president and managing director of New York-based executive recruiters Heyman Associates.

At one company, management had spent a considerable amount of time and money introducing a new program for employees. Over time, the HR and employee communications departments developed concerns about whether the program was effective. They felt that continuing the program was a bad idea but had difficulty convincing management. The group finally conducted an employee survey and presented the confirming data and comments directly from employees. The company soon discontinued the program.

It's also important to present data in a clear, compelling and understandable way. Brent Jensen, a former senior manager at a Fortune 500 company and currently a faculty member in the College of Business at Central Michigan University, puts it this way: "Data, while important, isn't in and of itself visually impactful. In convincing management of your position, it's important to create visual imagery around the data."

So, for example, in the earlier example about the advisability of a lawsuit, the PR professional might include a matrix of key media reports and a cluster chart showing audience sentiment.

Challenge the idea based on its implications. When we are invested in our ideas, it is natural to feel protective of them. Clients and executives aren't any different.

"Challenging an idea within the framework of its potential negative outcomes helps management avoid the feeling that the criticism is directed at them," says John Bingham, associate professor at Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Management.

A 1996 study by Avraham N. Kluger and Angelo DeNisi in *Psychological Bulletin* noted that the relationship between feedback and performance, contrary to many people's assumptions, can actually be negative — in other words, performance often worsens as people give more feedback. However, the study went on to note one condition that mitigates this effect: the "Locus of Attention" — the perception of who has the control and commands attention in the feedback loop.

Bingham explains: "Focusing on implications when you deliver feedback allows the client or the executive (the generator of the idea) to retain control of and maintain the idea itself. This, in turn, helps to keep your listener from rushing to a 'wrong answer' verdict on your opinion."

One way to stay focused on the implications, Garcia notes, is to ask questions.

"Ask questions based on outcomes, not processes," he says. "What does success look like? What matters to us? What do we want our audience to do, think, feel and know?"

One organization learned that a former employee was about to receive a significant honor. Anxious to seize the moment, the company's management asked the PR manager to put out a press release noting that the honoree had once been an employee. But the PR manager quickly realized that, since no one actually knew anything about the former employee's attitude toward the company, an announcement like this might be premature.

The PR manager carefully explained the concerns to management in a way that questioned the outcomes, not the idea — validating management's desire to recognize the company and the accomplishments of its employees, and shifting focus to the desire to avoid potential embarrassment.

The organization chose to follow the manager's advice and wait on issuing an announcement. Sure enough, the award recipient soon agreed to an interview and shared a less-than-glowing perspective of the time spent with the company.

Don't become a "no-man." PR professionals worry about being perceived as the "yes-men" or "yes-women" that will agree and implement what someone asks them to do. Obviously, that's a reputation we don't want to cultivate — but there are dangers in saying "no" too quickly as well.

"Avoid using the 'imperative mood' — 'you can't do this; you can't do that.' Anytime we resort to that, we are challenging the boss's authority, whether we intend to or not," Garcia says. "Instead, provide options — and connect each option with a predictable set of outcomes." It's also critical to tie those outcomes back into the organization's strategy and goals.

Invest in relationships. All of us tend to be more accepting of advice from people we know and trust, and who we believe genuinely know us. In public relations, that trust relationship is especially critical.

"Relationships are a PR person's most important priority," Rainone says. "The better the relationships, the more trust there will be. If that trust isn't present, you could bring in Congress to back you up, and it still wouldn't make any difference."

Choose your battles. Not every bad idea is worth challenging, just as not every good idea is worth pursuing. "Develop a sense of balance," Rainone advises. "Ask yourself, 'Which things are worth fighting for, and which ones aren't?' Don't insist on being right just for the sake of being right." Assess which decisions have long-term implications for your company, and spend your time there.

How can we tell when it's time to challenge a bad idea? One consideration, Bingham says, is the severity of the problem. He stresses, "Keep your bearings. Just how big is the issue? It might simply be a pain in the neck. But if it's a true business problem, and if you pose it as a business problem, it's much weightier for an executive to consider."

Another important indicator of severity is the damage to reputation or goodwill that an idea might create. Suppose your company is considering changing its longstanding policy of allowing employees to keep their frequent-travel perks obtained during company travel (such as free air miles), and requiring employees to turn them back in to the company instead. Management may be focusing solely on the potential cost savings. But you might point out that the negative reaction of employees, many of whom are required to travel extensively, could far outweigh the positive financial benefits — and that people need to consider this reaction when making a decision. When management realizes the powerful impact of all their decisions on all their key publics, decision making can take a different direction.

Be right. As the saying goes, past performance is often the best predictor of future success. "If you want management to trust your counsel, you have to make predictions that come true," Garcia notes. This is easier said than done, but there are ways to improve the accuracy of predictions and make sure that accuracy is noted. Get to know your target audiences and monitor discussions about trends and issues important to them. In time, PR professionals will find they can make more accurate predictions about group behavior, Garcia says.

"Revisit those predictions in subsequent management discussions," he adds. "And keep following that process — credibility is built over time."

Build a coalition. Seek the input of other thought leaders and decision makers in your organization, and do it before — not during or after — someone presents a bad idea. "The CEO may not be considering all stakeholders," Bingham says. "Don't tear down the idea, but simply say to other influentials in the organization, 'Here's what we're thinking. What do you think? How might this proposal affect your business?'"

The point of building such coalitions is not to assemble a powerful group of people who will trump the client's or CEO's idea or collectively shout, "We told you so!" when the idea heads south.

"If it's the CEO's idea, then that's a losing game," says Bingham. "The point of coalition building is to ensure that everyone has taken a good look at the potential consequences of what's happening and has an opportunity to add their perspectives."

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