

THE Reader's Digest

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*Three tested rules anyone
can use to advantage*

How to Sell an Idea

Condensed from Your Life

Elmer Wheeler

HAVE you ever approached your boss with a red-hot idea for increasing efficiency — only to have him become resentful instead of enthusiastic? Have you ever offered your wife or the neighbors “good advice”? If you have, you know what I mean when I say that people resent having other people’s ideas forced on them.

When someone approaches us with a new idea, our instinctive reaction is to put up a defense against it. We feel that we must protect our individuality; and most of us are egotistical enough to think that our ideas are better than anyone else’s.

There are three tested rules for putting your ideas across to other people so as to arouse their enthusiasm. Here they are:

Rule One: Use a fly rod — not a feeding tube. Others won’t accept your idea until they can accept it as their idea.

It was said during World War I that Colonel House was the most powerful man in the world because he controlled the most powerful man in the world — Woodrow Wilson.

“I learned that the best way to convert him to an idea,” explained House, “was to plant it in his mind casually, to get him thinking about it on his own account.”

When you want to sell someone an idea, take a lesson from the fisherman who casts his fly temptingly near the trout. He could never ram the hook into the trout’s mouth. But he can entice the trout to come to the hook.

Don’t appear too anxious to have your ideas accepted. Just bring them out where they can be seen.

“Have you considered this?” is better than “This is the way.” “Do you think this would work?” is better than “Here’s what we should do.”

Let the other fellow sell himself on your idea. Then he’ll stay sold.

Rule Two: Let the other fellow argue your case. He instinctively feels called upon to raise some objection to save his face. Give him a chance to disagree with you — by presenting your own objections!

“The way to convince another,” said wise old Ben Franklin, “is to

state your case moderately and accurately. Then say that of course you may be mistaken about it; which causes your listener to receive what you have to say and, like as not, turn about and convince you of it, since you are in doubt. But if you go at him in a tone of positiveness and arrogance you only make an opponent of him."

Franklin used this technique, against great opposition, in his sale of the idea of adopting the Constitution of the United States.

"I confess," he began, "that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution; but, Sir, I am not sure I shall never approve it; for having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information or fuller consideration to change opinions, even on important subjects, which I first thought right. I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the convention who may still have objections to it would with me on this occasion doubt a little of his own infallibility, and, to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument."

Abraham Lincoln used the same technique in selling his ideas to a jury. He argued both sides of the case — but there was always the subtle suggestion that his side was the logical one. An opposing lawyer said of him: "He made a better statement of my case to the jury than I could have made myself."

Another technique is to sell the other fellow the idea as his, not

yours. "You gave me an idea the other day that started me thinking," you begin.

Tom Reed, for many years Speaker of the House, was an adroit persuader. At a committee hearing he would remain silent until everyone had had his say, making notes of all objections. Then, when everyone else was argued out, Reed would say, "Gentlemen, it seems to me that what has been said here can be summarized as follows. . . ." Reed would then present *his* ideas — and sell them.

Once Dudley Nichols, the movie director, wasn't satisfied with a scene in one of his pictures. To remedy the situation, he said to Rosalind Russell, the star, "Wonderful, wonderful, but I could see, Miss Russell, when you hesitated that brief instant, that you were thinking about the possibility of playing the scene down just a trifle more. Shall we try it once the way you were thinking?"

Rule Three: Ask — don't tell. Patrick Henry, another famous idea salesman, was a political unknown when first elected to Virginia's House of Burgesses — but every resolution he introduced was passed. Listen to him in his famous "Liberty or Death" speech and see how he uses questions to get his ideas across:

"Our brethren are already in the field — why stand we here idle?"

"Shall we lie supinely on our backs?"

"What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be pur-

chased at the price of chains and slavery?"

Try saying the same thing in positive statements and see how much antagonism it would invoke.

When you put your ideas across with questions, you give the other

fellow a share in the idea. You don't tell him — you ask him for the answer. You're giving him a chance to sell himself.

Try these rules the next time you want to put an idea across to your boss, your family or the neighbors.

