

Gaining Support for Your Ideas

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We've all got great ideas to help us to improve, streamline, or attract more users to our library.

Likewise, we all have stories to tell of our ideas being overlooked, while we watch other projects receive the attention and funding we wanted

How do you gain support for your ideas? It's an interesting question, and obviously not a question that is restricted to librarians. Most people, in their working life or community activities, need to gain the support of others for their ideas – from the little things to large projects.

If you want to get your ideas adopted, you need to be able to successfully convince others to support your ideas or proposals. Unfortunately, there isn't a quick, one step approach for gaining support.

To start convincing others to support your great ideas, the following simple approach is a helpful guide:

Clear goals

It's a simple rule, but be clear in your mind what you are aiming to achieve with your idea, and why it is important.

For example, you may have an idea to change some aspects of your library web or intranet site to make it easier for your practitioners to find key information on their area of practice

As you work towards the changes that are needed to implement the web or intranet developments,

keep in mind what you are trying to achieve, and why it is important.

Knowing why it is important, is an important first step in convincing others that your idea needs to receive attention, and should be acted on

In larger projects, such as a significant upgrade and overhaul of your online services, your idea may need to be implemented over several years, which may include various changes in management and funding cycles.

Being able to articulate your simple, and clear, goal and why it is important helps to bring others on board to your ideas

Audience

To convince others to support your ideas, you need to sell them your ideas. Who is the audience that needs to 'buy' your ideas or your proposal? Usually there is a range of people that need to be convinced. For example, for your idea to improve the library intranet/web site, you may need to firstly convince your library colleagues.

To get your idea implemented, you may also need to gain further support from IT, finance or other senior management, and compete with the other requests for technical resources and funding

Along the way, you will also need to gain further support from the audience of users who use and recommend your intranet or web site enhancements.

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In much larger proposals, particularly Government funding projects, the task of identifying the audience you need to influence and the ultimate decision makers is complex and difficult due to the layers and formal processes surrounding business case decisions.

Reputation

We've all had experiences of being sold a product or service, only to quickly lose the attention of the seller once they have our money.

Beyond just pitching a winning argument to gain support for your idea, or writing a winning business case or proposal, you need to take responsibility for attracting, retaining and rewarding the faith of others in your ideas.

People will rarely invest in services whose 'house isn't in order'. The reputation of your service and your people is very important in attracting people to your ideas.

It is important to be able to demonstrate to those you need to convince to support your ideas, that you have a sound and reliable reputation and will be able to implement the ideas you are putting forward.

There are a variety of tools you can use to demonstrate that you have a reliable reputation, such as case studies, statistics, testimonials, or insightful analysis of a problem and the proposed solution.

Opportunities to influence

Most commentators on proposal or business case writing will mention that you need to understand the needs of your clients and decision makers. This is much easier said than done.

To tap into understanding the current needs, frustrations and desires of your library users, and your key decision makers, look out for opportunities to influence.

There are two sides to this task. One is keeping in touch with the needs of your end users through whatever means is best suited to you and the size of your organisation. For example, in law firms, this may be through regular attendance at firm seminars, practice group meetings, informal discussions with practitioners, feedback received from training sessions and so on.

This thorough understanding of your end users helps to spark ideas for further improvements or enhancements to your services.

The second element is creating opportunities to influence people who can support your ideas, and may be the decision makers in giving the go ahead to your ideas. For example, if you are being stymied by the 'there isn't any budget for that' comment, you may try to get a better understanding of current and future budget priorities and the requirements and impediments for getting new spending approved in the short and longer term.

You have already identified the audience who need to be convinced of your idea. Work through a plan to get the information you need to get budget funding, from the people you need to convince. They will start to see that your approach isn't 'on the fly', but instead is well considered, and it also adds to your reputation of being reliable, and able to implement what you are proposing.

Timing

As we have all seen from the last twelve months, many great ideas are postponed due to changes in priorities that are beyond your control

However, if you have ideas to streamline the delivery of your services, or improve the use of resources, hard times can be the ideal opportunity to get these ideas heard ahead of more flashy projects.

Benefits

Be able to talk about the benefits of your idea. It is easy to think about the features of the idea you are proposing, but what are the benefits for the direct end users and the decision makers.

At a broad level, it is said that people only buy three things – improved return, managed risk, and future options.

It can be helpful to frame your benefits under these banner headings. For example, proposed enhancement to a library web or intranet site may be that it provides a three step training module for new lawyers saving training time (improved return), ensuring all new lawyers complete training on key legal research tools (managed risk) and can be easily modified and rolled out for other practice areas over the next six months following its trial implementation (future options).

Pitching your ideas

In pitching your ideas, keep your message clear and simple. As mentioned at the start, keep in mind your goal, and why it is important

If you need to outline your idea in a proposal, a simple format to follow is to outline:

- the needs of your decision maker;
- a quantification of their needs – time, cost, resources;
- your idea;
- how your plan suits their needs;
- quantification of your plan – time, cost, resources;
- benefits of your ideas for decision makers; and
- the next steps required.

Persistence

Realistically, even after all of your hard and diligent work trying to convince others to see the wisdom of your ideas, they won't always be accepted

However, taking the time to review what went wrong, and looking to learn from the process, is very helpful in getting your next great idea adopted.

We all face challenging and difficult times gaining the support of decision makers for our ideas. However, a planned approach can improve your chances of getting your next idea adopted

Further reading:

Some recommended further reading in this field includes:

Norbet Aubuchon, *The Anatomy of Persuasion* (Barnes & Noble: 1997).

B Kim Barnes, *Exercising influence* (Barnes & Noble: 2007)