

# SELLING GREAT WORK.

By Jack Neary

## *Lessons Learned In 30 Years Of Getting Clients To Take The Leap.*

Selling great work is the second most important thing we do. (If you have to ask what the most important thing is, we should talk.)

What follows is not a guide on how to create great work, nor is it a primer on presentation skills. It is a point of view on how we can increase our success rate in getting our clients to approve our work.

Selling great work is arguably more difficult than creating it. Consider the painfully true words of Luke Sullivan: "About 20% of your time will be spent thinking up ads; 80% will be spent protecting them; and 30% doing them over."

What is an effective way to sell great work?

First of all, there is no rule book or policy manual. And that's a good thing.

After all, creativity flourishes most freely in an environment that is unbound by rules and regulations. And selling is a creative act.

A truly creative culture fosters spontaneity and encourages risk taking. With risk-taking comes the possibility of failure, and that, too, is a good thing. Nothing great ever happens in a culture where everyone is afraid of failure and, as a result, fail to take risks. Rules inhibit risk, and force you to do things in the same way over and over.

Which is fine if you're an accounting firm, and terrible if you are an ideas company. Or, as Norman Mailer put it so well, "If there is one fell rule in art it is that repetition kills the soul."

In the absence of a rule book on how to sell great work on what can we rely to guide us to greater success?

Well, let's take a look at some of the things we've learned along the way. What has worked? And what hasn't? From these observations we can draw a few principles that will help us.

**Principle #1:**  
**Banish the word "SELL" from our vocabulary.**

In my experience, clients do not like being sold to. They are only human, and it is human nature to be skeptical of those who are pushing something on them. Instead, try taking them by the hand and gently pulling them along. I have found that in most cases a little charm and sweet reason works better than a constant barrage of furious pushing. Let's face it you can only fall on your sword once. Save that for when you really need it.

Think of it this way: Our job is not to SELL our work, our job is to help our clients BUY our work. There is a difference.

Consider this insight: Clients are more willing to buy our work when they know we share their pain. Therefore ...

**Principle #2:**  
**Be passionate not only about your work, but about what your work can do for your client's business.**

Clients can sense if you believe in your work. (If you don't believe in it, you shouldn't be sharing it with your client.)

Enthusiasm is contagious. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care."

Your enthusiasm is especially contagious when it bubbles over to include the record-breaking results your work can generate for your client's brand. Be sure to present your work in that context. Think about why the work is important to your client, not why it is important to you. Forget about the awards, at least for a while.

Take to heart the advice of the great British creative director Alistair Crompton: "Think like a creative person but talk like an accountant."

### **Principle #3: Care to prepare!**

I have seen a lot of creative presentations in which the creative and account people were woefully ill prepared. It is truly amazing how little some writers and art directors know their own work. Do not presume that because you conceived the idea you actually understand the idea.

Take the time before you share your work with the client to think through very thoroughly how your creative works. If you have to write it out on paper beforehand to help you galvanize your thoughts, do so. It is unlikely that you will have all the answers to your client's questions at your fingertips in the heat of the presentation. Few of us are that good on our feet.

Or, as Winston Churchill said to his valet, "Do not bother me, I am rehearsing my impromptu remarks."

So know the work cold. And that applies to the account people and planners, too. You should be able to talk about the work as compellingly as any creative person. After all, it's your work, too.

Remember, great rehearsals lead to great performances. Before you meet with the client, make sure you have at least one meeting as a BBDO team to talk about how you are going to present the work, the role of each person, the kinds of questions you are likely to be asked, well, you get the idea. And don't leave it to discuss in the car ride to the client.

The following checklist might help you to prepare:

1. Do you have an idea?
2. Is it inextricably linked to the brand truth?
3. Can you explain the idea in two sentences or less?
4. Have you thought through what you want to say?
5. Have you thought through HOW you want to say it?
6. Do you know your client audience? What are the issues that will be on their mind?
7. Have you prepared a rationale for the work?
8. Have you considered what is the optimum form in which the work should be presented (roughs, key frames, animatics, etc.)?

Let's focus on one of those points in more depth: Do you have an idea? And can you describe in a sentence or two?

Frank Lloyd Wright said, "An idea is salvation by imagination."

That's all very high-minded, but not particularly useful for our purposes here.

Let's examine what an advertising idea isn't. It is not the headline, not a song, nor is it the nifty look you get from a certain kind of lens. They might be ways to express an idea, but they are not the idea.

In our world the idea is the basic concept or premise that drives the campaign from one ad to the next. We can get a better grasp of this by examining how other ideas are described.

Here is the idea behind a famous film:

*Money can't buy happiness. A fabulously wealthy man obsessed with the memory of his childhood snow sled takes little satisfaction from a life spent collecting the finest things money can buy.*

And the idea behind a famous book:

*The illogic of logic. Only a crazy man can be excused from fighting in a war; to be excused all he has to do is ask, but by asking he will prove that he is sane because only a sane man would want to avoid war.*

The idea behind a famous ad campaign:

*It's ugly but it gets you there.*

Let's also take a closer look at point number seven on the preparation check list: Have you prepared a rationale for the work?

People say that decisions to buy are made emotionally and defended rationally. It makes sense, therefore, that we arm our clients with as much left-brain ammunition as possible for them to use in defending their decision to buy BBDO work within their company. Take the time to prepare a succinct, written rationale of the work. Remember: how will our work solve his brand's problem? It could end up being as important as the copywriting itself.

## **Principle # 4: Love the work.**

Creating great work is, well, hard work. With it come many sacrifices. Long nights, lost weekends, blood, sweat, tears.

Don't flush all that away with an off-the-cuff, half-hearted presentation.

The work doesn't present itself. You have to do everything humanly possible to help it, nurture it, and guide it home to the safe harbour of client approval.

If your idea really is great it is also valuable. It is worth a lot to our client and her business. Be sure you act like it is. (Word of advice: the idea might be precious, but you don't have to be.)

Take plenty of time to explain the campaign clearly, simply and lovingly. It amazes me how some art directors and writers think a creative presentation is just reading a script as quickly as they can. The purpose of the presentation isn't to get it over with. The goal is to help your client fully appreciate the potential of your idea. Take your time, the way you would over a magnificent meal. Savour it.

That doesn't mean you should take too much time. Keep your pre-ambles short and focused. Acknowledge the client's business situation. State the objective. And whatever you do don't repeat everything the guy before you just said. In fact, in my experience, the fewer people you have presenting the better. Also, make sure you are going with your strongest presenters. Your idea has only one chance to make that all-important first impression.

In your pre-ambles, do not tell the client she is going to love the ad. Let her be the judge of that. Also, avoid using descriptors such as award-winning, risky and avant-garde. The alliance between art and commerce is an uneasy one; that sort of language is often a red flag to the business-minded bull.

With the pre-ambles ended, now comes the time to actually share the work. Start with the idea, not the executions. Keep it simple. Feed them small, bite-sized portions. Get close to the client. Ideas are fragile and often require a more intimate setting at this stage. Don't share your work across the Grand Canyon of a corporate boardroom. If your work needs light, turn on the lights.

Don't read the script. Instead tell a story. Look at the client when you tell that story, not down at a piece of paper. You should know your work well enough that you can present it without a script. Make your story anecdotal. Draw from your own life. Once I helped a client buy an idea about a young man on the first day of his first job at McDonald's by describing how I felt on the first day of my first job.

Tell a story, then show the storyboard. Multiple frame boards to even the most seasoned advertising veteran can be confusing and distracting. Keep their attention focused on you.

It is often helpful to use props for dramatic effect. To illustrate the harsh reality of life in New York, Helmut Krone in a presentation once smashed a single, long-stem rose between two bricks! He made his point.

Size matters, too. Make sure your layouts or key frames are big enough to see from a distance. It's a cliché, but big ideas deserve big boards.

**Principle #5:  
Know when to shut up.**

There is little more annoying to a client under pressure to make a decision than a broken-record "salesman" nattering the same points over and over.

Knowing when to stop talking can mean the difference between being persuasive and appearing defensive and insecure.

"Silence and pause are my two greatest currencies for dramatic effect," said Ben Kingsley.

The U.S. politician Edmund Muskie said, "There's no point in speaking unless you can improve on silence."

Words to live by.

**Principle #6:  
The idea belongs to everybody.**

Needless to say, this includes your client. It's his work, too. Which means he is entitled to an opinion as much as you. Make sure you allow him plenty of air time during the presentation to share it.

Think of the presentation not as a broadcast, but as a conversation. A real conversation is an interactive dialogue. Invite your client into the conversation early in the meeting. The more he gets talking about the work, the more engaged he might become. An engaged client often has a stronger sense of ownership of the work.

Advertising is an art. Sharing your work with the client is an art. And so is listening. Listen not just to the words coming from your client's mouth, but to what he is really trying to say. Often clients have issues with not what is in the creative, but what is missing.

For example, when your client asks, "How many seconds will my product appear on the screen," he might be alerting you to a bigger, underlying issue, which could be, "I am concerned that my brand is not the central driver of the story in your TV spot. How can I be sure that the drama and the brand are inextricably linked?"

It is not easy judging creative work. Remember that when your client appears uneasy or at a loss for words. If you sense that something about the work is not sitting right with her, engage her in conversation. Draw her out. Try to get that issue on the table. It is amazing how often the issue will evaporate when it is discussed early instead of being allowed to fester unresolved.

**Principle #7:  
Pick your battles.**

A lot of client comments about the work are less harmful than they might seem to an anxiously expectant creative person hoping for a big thumbs-up.

Ask yourself if the client request or directive really compromises the integrity of the idea, or is it superficial? In other words, don't sweat the small stuff.

Often it is unproductive to discuss endlessly theoretical questions about the work. Sometimes it is better to put the issue aside and resolve it later by showing your client in a more demonstrative way.

For example, I once had a client who was dead-set against using the 60-second format in his TV buy, even though, by his own admission, longer formats allowed emotion to develop more powerfully in that medium. The problem was we were debating the finer points of emotion in theory and in the cold, stark remove of the corporate boardroom. The meeting ended with him saying, "I will not entertain '60s in our buy and that's that."

At the client screening of the fine cut I showed him a 30-second edit. He liked it. Then I took the risk of playing him a :60 with all its emotional power. My client choked up and approved the longer version there and then. He said, "Now I see what you mean."

One final point under this principle: resist the temptation to rewrite your work in the client meeting. As the old saw goes, "A camel is a racehorse designed by a committee."

Take the time to revise any creative thoughtfully and with care.

**Principle #8:**  
**Don't present any work you aren't prepared to produce.**

This should go without saying. Whatever the client sees has a chance of one day getting made. Which is not to say you shouldn't share creative options with your client; just be sure that each one is great.

**Principle #9:**  
**Don't put all your eggs in one basket.**

Don't rely on one meeting to "sell" the work. Use as many opportunities as is realistically constructive to engage the client on the work. The goal is not to "escape the meeting with the campaign still alive". It is to turn your client into a raving apostle for the work.

I have found that making a low-key preview call to the client the day before the creative presentation to be really helpful. They appreciate being let in on the work before they are put on the decision-maker's hot seat, and it allows you to spread a bit of that infectious enthusiasm.

After the presentation, why not follow up with another call? It lets the client share the benefits of his overnight perspective. And it could nip any potential issues in the bud with a bit of your reassurance.

Helping a client buy your work is one thing. Keeping it bought is another.

**Principle #10:**  
**Tailor the presentation to the client problem.**

We create customized solutions for each of our client's business problems. The same principle often applies to the meetings in which we present those solutions.

Try to ensure that your creative presentation is the most exciting, rewarding part of your client's day. Do not rely on routine. Surprise them.

Do not automatically presume that what worked in the last presentation will work again. Client circumstances change. Client moods shift. Be sensitive to that. All it takes is a little prep time among the team to think through the context and the audience.

Do not be afraid to change the "usual" order of the presentation, or the venue, or the form in which the work is shown. Remember, doing the same old same old defeats creativity. And getting your client to buy your work is a creative act.