

## **CEO's and Usability**

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**Published - July 2006**

### **Summary:**

Talking to a CEO about usability can be wonderful or terrifying. The difference between raging success and total failure comes down to understanding exactly what the CEO needs to know and then adjusting your usability message to fit. This article explains how to understand various contexts, and in turn, how to position your usability message.

### **Your Usability Message in Context**

As a usability professional, there are many reasons why you might speak with your CEO or other senior leaders. For example, you might need funding for a new laboratory or testing equipment. You might also need to justify current or future expenses, such as salaries, end user remuneration, or your travel budget. Most conversations are financial in nature.

There are other non-financial business reasons for a meeting with the CEO. Although not as common, there are situations where executives solicit feedback from their product teams or marketing department, but also usability professionals. I've seen some cases where senior leaders take a pulse on customers via usability professionals for strategic reasons, such as insights into customer satisfaction or out of box product quality.

Keep in mind that there are also other forums where a usability professional might interact with an executive. For example, you've probably bumped into a senior leader in the hallway or the elevator. Perhaps you've talked about usability and perhaps not. You might also interact with a CEO by email or through a memo. While this kind of interaction isn't face-to-face, it is nevertheless interaction. Understand the context and be ready to seize the opportunities to discuss usability and user experience.

### **CEO Persona**

To create a smashing presentation for a senior leader or executive, you need to first understand how they think. What follows is a stereotype based on my own experience as well as what I've read about CEOs. Mileage may vary; all standard disclaimers apply.

CEOs and executives have limited time and limited attention for any single topic. They are focused on business issues and business opportunities. In general, these folks are big picture, strategic thinkers with great drive and ambition. CEOs are action oriented and clearly comfortable with decision making.

Because of these characteristics, senior leaders seek out clear ideas, logical presentations, and well-researched summarizations. Most CEOs appreciate options yet they will also expect direct answers and concrete action plans. That is, they like to know the options but they want a recommended course of action spelled out, with supporting data.

### **Position Your Message**

You need to align your message to your CEO's wants and needs. Your presentation or report should be non-technical and jargon free. Be sure to clearly explain the nature of the problem or challenge and don't deep dive on anything until there's a rapport or meeting of the minds. Many people jump right to solutions without first framing the problem space. CEOs want to know what is wrong before they hear about solutions.

Follow a script if possible, and utilize a process for defining the problem. Don't just wing it; preparation and rehearsal are critical. While demonstrating your clear thinking, explain the outcomes. Specifically, show how you are resolving a problem or handling an issue, but then also explain the costs and benefits. **At the end of the day, you're talking about business and usability, not usability alone.**

### **Adjust the Message in Light of Your Usability Intentions**

To have a real impact, think of yourself as a sales consultant for usability. It's a good frame of mind. Your "customer" is your CEO. What do they want and need? How can you help them succeed? Along these lines, find ways to help your leaders do their own internal and external usability marketing. Aim to make such an impact that the CEO becomes an evangelist.

In my experience, the most effective selling of usability is by showing the results. Sell the results not the process. Frame the problem, explain how usability helped, and by all means, throw around user quotes and notions of return on investment. If you are lucky, you'll be able to bluntly demonstrate value by showing your CEO real usability feedback from users in the form of quotes or perhaps video clips. **Even better, if you can manage the miracle, get the CEO involved in a usability test. The payoff is crazy delicious!**

I can't stress enough that you must demonstrate business value when you are talking to CEOs and other executives. You need to tie UX work to tangible business outcomes. If you can do this with your own data, do it. However, it can just as effective to utilize industry data or outside research.

### **Wrap Up**

Be on the look out for opportunities. Also, be aware of your context and the environment, as well as the personality and intentions of your CEO. You must rehearse and plan ahead. Be prepared or suffer the consequences. Finally, position your usability message in a way that makes clear business sense to senior leaders. If you follow this advice, your chances of success will be outstanding.

### **What is the number one question you would ask a CEO?**