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## SELLING ISSUES TO TOP MANAGEMENT

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The time and attention of top management in an organization are critical, but limited, resources. This article develops insights on issue selling as a process that is central to explaining how and where top management allocates its time and attention. We see issue selling as a critical activity in the early stages of organizational decision-making processes. We first clarify the value of understanding issue selling at the individual and organizational levels and from both symbolic and instrumental perspectives. We then develop a framework for describing and studying issue selling in organizations that draws on three different theoretical perspectives: issue selling as upward influence, issue selling as claiming behaviors, and issue selling as impression management. We use the different perspectives to develop a set of testable research propositions. The article concludes with a discussion of practical and theoretical implications of the issue-selling framework.

The process by which top managers allocate their limited attention among a wide variety of potential strategic issues is critical to understanding organizational adaptation and change (cf. Cowan, 1986; Dutton, 1988; Dutton & Duncan, 1987a; Weiss, 1989). Strategic issues are events, developments, or trends that are viewed as having implications for organizational performance (Ansoff, 1980). No issue is inherently strategic. Rather, an issue becomes strategic when top management believes that it has relevance for organizational performance. This article focuses on one process that shapes the set of issues that top management sees as strategic. It focuses on a process that takes place during the early stages of decision making, when issues are first identified and diagnosed. As one public policy researcher has stated, "We're talking here not about how issues get decided, nor about how decisions are implemented and what impacts they have, but rather how issues come to be issues in the first place" (Kingdon, 1990: 1). In this article, we propose a framework for

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describing and comparing how issues become strategic by articulating the process of issue selling.

Issue selling refers to individuals' behaviors that are directed toward affecting others' attention to and understanding of issues. We focus particularly on middle managers' issue selling in organizational contexts. We define middle managers as managers who operate at the intermediate level of the corporate hierarchy (Uyterhoeven, 1972), operating two or three levels below the CEO (e.g., Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). Middle managers can attempt to direct top management's attention by providing or concealing important information about issues, by framing the issues in particular ways, and by mobilizing resources and routines that direct top managers' attention to some issues and not others. The important defining feature of middle managers is that these managers supervise supervisors and are supervised by others. Thus, our definition of middle managers rules out the top level of management and first-line supervisors. The definition includes general managers who have overall responsibility for a multifunction operation (e.g., strategic business unit managers and divisional heads), as well as functional managers (e.g., a vice president of marketing). However, as our article will explicate, important differences in the breadth of responsibility, functional orientation, and structural power of these two classes of middle managers affect when they will initiate issue selling and the form that their issue-selling efforts will take.

Middle managers are theoretically interesting because they have access to more resources than lower level management but have less control over their resources than upper level management (e.g., Izraeli, 1975). Further, middle management plays a key integrative role in linking activities and ideas between the technical and institutional levels in the organization (Van Cauwenbergh & Cool, 1982). Middle management also has been recognized in the studies of innovation and entrepreneurship for its pivotal role in the successful generation and mobilization of resources around new ideas (Burgelman, 1983b; Fulop, 1991; Kanter, 1982). As Kanter (1982: 96) suggested: "Because middle managers have their fingers on the pulse of operations, they can also conceive, suggest and set in motion new ideas that managers may not have thought of."

Two rationales inform our deliberate focus on the selling of issues as opposed to solutions or projects. First, issues are less defined, are relatively boundless, and have a less objective basis than solutions or projects (Feldman, 1989; Laumann & Knoke, 1987). Issues epitomize what strategy researchers have called "wicked problems"—they are ill-structured and "there is no single 'best' way for formulating their nature" (Lyles, 1987: 264). Thus, the process by which issues are sold in organizations is an important arena for studying the more general processes of interpretation and the construction of meaning in organizations (Daft & Weick, 1984). Second, a focus on selling issues exposes the interrelationships that exist among various solutions or projects that are potentially

relevant to a single issue (Langley, Mintzberg, Pitcher, Pasada, & Saint-Macary, 1991). For example, Mylonadis (1993) described how top management's gradual recognition of the issue of waste disposal exposed the interrelationship of various solutions that had previously been seen as unrelated and distant from one another.

We envision issue selling as a critical activity in the early stages of an organization's decision-making process. It is a process by which middle-level managers attempt to influence the identification phase of organizational decision making. The identification stage involves both issue recognition, in which "opportunities, problems, and crises are recognized and evoke decision activity" and diagnosis, in which "management seeks to comprehend the evoking stimuli and determine cause-effect relationships for the decision situation" (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Théorêt, 1976: 253).

Although top-level decision makers might identify important issues in a variety of ways, including scanning systems or consulting with outside constituencies, there are some important organizational advantages to getting middle managers' input in the issue-identification process. These advantages include exposing top management to the viewpoints of those closer to the actual operations of the firm, keeping middle managers more committed to the strategic direction of the firm by allowing and encouraging their involvement in such decisions (Westley, 1990), and enhancing the ability to move issues rapidly to the organization's agenda.

A focus on issue selling also builds on recent themes in strategy process research. First, it is consistent with the argument that middle-level managers can play significant roles in strategy making (e.g., Bower, 1970; Burgelman, 1983b; Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Nonaka, 1988; Schilit, 1987; Westley, 1990; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). Second, it emphasizes the emergent nature of strategy patterns and explains how individuals and coalitions in the selling process can cause a realized corporate strategy to depart from an intended one (e.g., Burgelman, 1983a, 1983b; Hart, 1992; Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Quinn, 1980). Finally, researchers in the area of managerial cognition have recognized the critical role of interpretation processes in strategy formulation (e.g., Dutton, Walton, & Abrahamson, 1989; Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Kiesler & Sproull, 1982; Lyles & Mitroff, 1980; Schwenk, 1988; Stubbart, 1989; Thomas & McDaniels, 1990; Walsh, 1992); they have paid less attention to the roles of interpersonal influence and impression-management processes initiated by those outside of top management. In contrast, a focus on issue selling puts these processes at center stage in explaining organizational action.

We develop our ideas about issue selling in two parts. In part one, we describe the significance of issue selling to establish its importance beyond the building of top management agendas. In part two, we utilize three literatures to both present a framework for describing and compar-

ing issue-selling behaviors and to develop a series of testable propositions for building an empirical research program on this important process.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ISSUE SELLING

Issue selling is significant to both individuals and organizations according to both an instrumental and a symbolic logic. An instrumental logic emphasizes how issue selling affects concrete and substantive actions, whereas a symbolic logic emphasizes the processes' role in creating and sustaining meaning. Both suggest that issue selling is associated with important outcomes. The four rationales for the importance of issue selling are summarized in Figure 1.

#### Organizational-Instrumental

The article's introduction outlined an instrumental logic for the importance of issue selling. In support, Wooldridge and Floyd (1990) found that middle-level management's involvement in the strategy-making process led to better organizational performance because that involvement promoted the formulation of superior strategies (rather than promoting

FIGURE 1  
Logics for the Importance of Issue Selling

		Organizational	Individual
LOGIC	Instrumental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agenda issues initiate and constrain decision processes and outcomes.</li> <li>• Agenda issues shape organizational adaptation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals' attachments to issues have career consequences.</li> <li>• Agenda issues are arenas for individuals' communication and interaction.</li> <li>• Obtaining top management's attention to an issue facilitates instrumental action on the issue.</li> </ul>
	Symbolic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agenda issues that gain currency confirm or disconfirm collective meaning.</li> <li>• Agenda issues create or dissolve an organization's reputation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals' attachments to issues affect their self-concept and/or self-esteem.</li> </ul>

increased consensus and commitment). Middle-level managers also have been shown to have crucial information and perspectives that differ from top managers' views (Bower, 1970; Burgelman, 1983b; Van Cauwenbergh & Cool, 1982; Westley, 1990). Issue selling is a mechanism that prompts top management to attend to issues that they might not otherwise attend to. Thus, it is one way that these perspectives are used to set an organization's strategic agenda (Dutton & Duncan, 1987b) and initiate organizational action.

Therefore, it is in top management's instrumental interest to understand the issue-selling process and to find ways to promote this behavior. They must also find ways to promote it that increase the positive consequences (e.g., directing attention to high stakes or strategically important issues), while minimizing negative consequences (e.g., fragmenting attentional focus or focusing on unimportant issues) for the organization. In particular, to gain an instrumental advantage from issue selling, top management must make efforts to channel the sometimes politically motivated selling behaviors of middle management in ways that are useful for the organization.

### **Organizational-Symbolic**

Issue selling also is important symbolically to the organization. Issues carry collective meaning for organizational members. The legitimation of some issues as "organizational issues" (indicated by top management's attention to them) signals to organizational members the sorts of concerns that have currency in the organization. Where members find these signals affirming, appealing, or desirable, they may be more motivated and committed to the organization (Alvesson, 1990). In contrast, where members find these signals disaffirming or undesirable, they may reduce their commitment to the organization and withdraw from attempts to sell issues in the future. For example, in a recent study of how the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PA) dealt with the issue of the rising number of homeless persons frequenting PA facilities, individuals at all levels of the organization saw the legitimation of homelessness as a corporate issue as an important signal that the PA was maintaining its ethical and altruistic identity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

Issues that consume top management's attention serve as important symbols to outside constituents as well. An organization manages its reputation and enhances its status by being visibly concerned with some issues and not concerned with others (Greenberg, 1990). Thus, as presented in Figure 1, given that top management's issue agenda is externally visible, the issues that are successfully sold to top management help to form a particular organizational identity for insiders and an organizational reputation for outsiders. This identity and reputation affect individuals' commitment and motivation, which, in turn, may affect an organization's effectiveness over time (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1992).

### Individual-Instrumental

Figure 1 also suggests that individuals have an instrumental motivation for issue selling due to the outcomes that accrue to individual issue sellers. First, for individuals, strategic issues are part of the currency through which their careers are made or broken. Studies of political docket setting emphasize the career consequences of effective issue selling (Cobb & Elder, 1972; Kingdon, 1984; Nelson, 1979). Research on the roles played by innovation and change champions (e.g., Burgelman, 1983b; Chakrabarti, 1974; Dean, 1987; Hutt, Reingen, & Ronchetto, 1988; Schon, 1963), scouts or ambassadors on new product teams (e.g., Ancona & Caldwell, 1988) and entrepreneurs in the policy-making process (e.g., Kingdon, 1984) also testifies to the important outcomes that accrue to individuals who successfully promote strategic issues.

Second, the successful selling of an issue may open new arenas or forums (e.g., project teams or task forces) in which individuals have an opportunity to interact and communicate with others (Bryson & Crosby, 1992). These issue task forces often draw together individuals from different departments and levels in the organization, providing individuals with new forums for interaction, visibility, and interpersonal influence.

Third, by successfully securing the attention of top management for an issue, middle managers move one step closer to securing effective action on the issue. Many middle managers raise issues (e.g., "the organization has a quality problem" or "we're not being sufficiently responsive to customers") because there is a link between top management's recognition and legitimation of the issues and middle managers' ability to achieve their unit's or their personal goals.

### Individual-Symbolic

Finally, Figure 1 suggests that the process of selling strategic issues is important to individuals beyond its instrumental purposes. Issues often have positive or negative valences associated with them that generalize to the individuals who promote them (Nelson, 1979). One organizational example is the reluctance of many female executives to speak publicly on what are seen as "women's issues" (Kanter, 1977). This reluctance may represent an attempt to avoid both the stigma attached to such issues by male and female colleagues and the effect of this stigma on their own sense of self-worth. This symbolic link between an organization's external image and members' self-concepts compels individuals to try to influence what issues get attention in organizations (Dutton et al., 1992).

## THREE PERSPECTIVES FOR DESCRIBING ISSUE SELLING

Given limited theory or research on the issue-selling process, we used three different literatures—social problem theory, impression management, and upward influence—to develop and embellish our understanding of issue selling. Each literature emphasizes different facets of

issue selling. Social problem theory suggests how the organizational and institutional contexts shape what issues claim top management's attention. Impression-management theory highlights the constraints and motivations that direct how and when a seller promotes an issue. Finally, the upward influence literature introduces social persuasion ideas that focus, in particular, on persuasion attempts by lower to higher authority individuals and groups.

### **Social Problem Theory**

A subdiscipline of sociology called social problem theory provides an important lens on issue selling (e.g., Spector & Kitsuse, 1977; Schnieder, 1985). Social problem theorists explore how and why certain social problems emerge in society by focusing on the activities that promote the labeling of conditions as "problems" (e.g., Blumer, 1971; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977; Schnieder, 1985; Schnieder & Kitsuse, 1984). The constructionist perspective from social problem theory emphasizes that social problems are not objective conditions; they are outputs from the activities of individuals or groups who make claims with respect to some putative condition (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977: 75). Thus, for an organization, trends such as rising absenteeism or changing consumer preferences become strategic issues only if individuals successfully make claims that these conditions are important, and others believe and buy into these claims.

By emphasizing claiming behaviors, social problem theorists reveal the importance of issue characteristics, seller characteristics, and their interaction in a social context that makes one claim more viable than another. In applying research from this area, we assume that top managers' attention to an issue is strongly related to their perception that an issue is viable, credible, and deserving of attention investment. Whether an issue is viewed as such, in turn, is closely tied to what is considered legitimate in the particular social context in which selling occurs.

### **Impression Management**

Theories of impression management from social psychology are a second important input into a model of issue selling. An impression-management lens highlights the fact that issue selling is a social process that creates tangible and intangible rewards for individuals. Impression management (often discussed as self-presentation) describes behaviors that an individual exhibits to control the images formed of him or her by others (Schenkler, 1980; Tedeschi, 1981).

There are two impression-management risks associated with selling an issue. The first risk is that a seller's name could become associated with issues that are seen as negative or inappropriate by other members of the organization. For example, sellers that raise the issue of sexism or the corporation's responsibility to the natural environment in today's or-



ganizations may risk a negative appraisal by others (e.g., as naive or radical).

The second risk is that any actions that the organization might take to respond to the seller's efforts might produce negative outcomes for the organization, which, in turn, might harm the seller's credibility within the corporation. Being the instigator of actions that produce negative outcomes also involves the risk of receiving more tangible negative outcomes (such as being marginalized, demoted, or fired).

### **Upward Influence**

The research on upward influence provides a final set of important insights into the nature of issue selling. Research on upward influence provides an important link between the ideas of issue selling and more general models of social persuasion and attitude change from social psychology (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; McGuire, 1985; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Smith, 1982). The research focus has been on how characteristics of the influence source (as pertains here, the issue seller), the target (in this case, top managers), and organizational context shape both the type of influence strategies that lower level individuals use and the relative effectiveness of these influence attempts (e.g., Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Mowday, 1978; Schilit & Locke, 1982; Schilit & Paine, 1987).

## **THE ISSUE-SELLING FRAMEWORK**

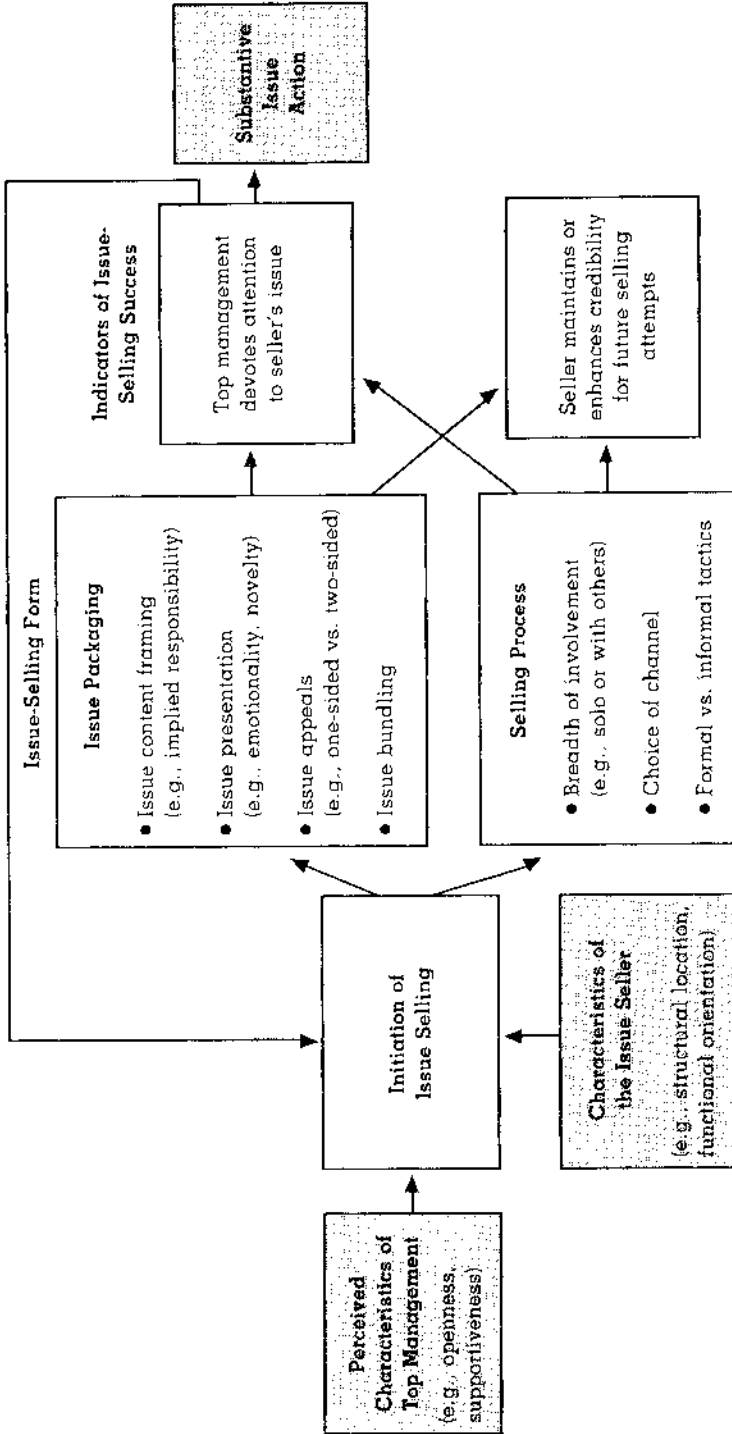
Figure 2 visually depicts an issue-selling process that integrates ideas from each of the three perspectives. The framework is discussed from right to left, beginning with the indicators of selling success and moving to the three clusters of choices about the issue selling: initiation of selling, issue packaging, and selling process.

### **Issue-Selling Success Indicators**

There are two major issue-selling indicators. One indicator of selling success is the amount of time and attention top management devotes to an issue. Collective attention allocation to an issue is indicated by a variety of behaviors: (a) the naming of an issue, (b) collection of issue-relevant information, (c) conversations about the issue, or (d) creation of either roles or task forces devoted to the issue.

Top management's allocation of attention to an issue is a necessary precursor to their taking substantive action on an issue, where the substantive action might involve the allocation of further material resources to an issue. We have visually depicted the mediating role that top management's attention investment plays in the decision process by including a shaded box in Figure 2. (The shaded box indicates that we will not talk about the substantive action link in the content of this article.)

Figure 2  
Choices in Issue Selling<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup>Our focus is on the choices that issue sellers can make in the process of selling an issue and the primary outcomes of those choices. Shaded boxes represent influences on the process or subsequent outcomes.

Even though there is a single arrow between top management's attention to an issue and substantive action on the issue, the connection between the two is often complex and sometimes indirect. For example, middle managers may secure top management's attention to an issue, but the actions taken to resolve the issue may be inconsistent with what an issue seller intended. The potential for a discrepancy between getting top management to invest attention in an issue and securing desired action on the issue underlines the importance of keeping these two steps separate but acknowledging their relatedness. This article focuses on gaining top management's attention as the most proximate outcome of issue selling.

The arrow presented in Figure 2 that connects top management's attention to an issue back to the initiation of issue selling signifies the iterative and dynamic nature of this process. When an issue is legitimated in an organization by top management's allocating attention to it, this attention investment can spawn subsequent issue-selling attempts by other individuals or groups who have a stake in the issue. So, for example, if the issue of "customer responsiveness" is legitimated by top management's devotion of time to it, then other parties in the organization who have a stake in the issue may mobilize to direct both the way that top management understands this issue and the form of substantive action that might be taken on the issue.

The second output of issue selling involves increases or decreases in a seller's credibility. The impression-management literature suggests that not only do individuals want to take credit for a high-payoff issue and avoid credit for a low-payoff issue, but they also want to avoid the attribution that they are managing impressions. Image maintenance assumes that in any selling attempt, sellers will be concerned about its effects on their credibility, given that they will have future dealings with top management. Bower (1970) and Burgelman (1983a,b) recognized the importance of credibility-enhancement concerns in managers' promotions of strategic projects. We suggest that these concerns also apply to the promotion and sponsorship of issues.

These two outcomes are often in tension with one another. During any single selling attempt, issue sellers can be torn between a desire to do whatever it takes to get the issue sold and a need to curb their behaviors to maintain or bolster their credibility as viewed by top management. This tension is felt in the choices that sellers must make in terms of (a) whether or not to initiate selling, (b) how to package an issue, and (c) what process to use in selling. We consider each set of choices next.

### **Initiation of Issue Selling**

At a very basic level, sellers have a choice about whether or not to "go to bat" for an issue. This choice is related to both the value that individuals attach to an issue and their beliefs that such efforts will be successful. In this sense, we can describe the choice to initiate issue selling using

a type of expectancy-valence motivational model (Vroom, 1964). In fact, if we depict the choice to initiate issue selling as a type of upward influence attempt, then research provides support for these motivational assumptions. For example, Mowday (1978) found that principals' level of intrinsic motivation (as approximated by individuals' need for power and need for achievement), instrumental motivation (the degree to which individuals valued and expected success in the influence attempt), and self-perception of power (the extent to which individuals saw themselves as having power) were all related to the frequency of their attempts to influence their supervisors. These results suggest that issue selling will be more likely when individuals believe that selling attempts will be successful or when the issue is so personally important that the value of securing attention for the issue is worth the extra effort exerted to sell it.

A key variable affecting a seller's assessment of the probability of selling success is the seller's structural location. Dutton (1988) hypothesized that the structural location of issue sellers would affect the probability that an issue would be placed on the organization's agenda. Studies of upward influence processes in strategic decision making also demonstrate the importance of structural location (e.g., Schilit, 1987; Schilit & Paine, 1987). For example, Schilit and Paine found that the functional orientation of managers was related to (a) the level of influence a manager had in an influence attempt, (b) the length of time an influence episode lasted, (c) the source of information used in the influence attempt, and (d) the prevalence of negotiation activities (Schilit & Paine, 1987: 178). Their work suggests that middle managers will be more willing to initiate issue selling when the issue is germane and has direct relevance to their functional areas. For example, marketing managers are expected to be more willing to sell issues that have marketing content or implications. We expect this pattern because managers have more and "deeper" information about issues directly relevant to their functional areas, and managers are more willing to initiate selling when they have an instrumental stake in getting top management's attention invested in an issue of potential interest to their areas. This pattern also assumes that functional managers incur less risk to damaging their image with top management and others in the organization when they go to bat for issues that fall within their legitimate functional domains. Thus, a middle manager's structural orientation shapes his or her willingness to initiate issue selling due to the effect of structural location on both the information available about issues and the stakes in the issue for a manager's image and unit. A manager's functional expertise also may serve as a limit on the areas in which top management is willing to hear his or her selling appeals.

An individual's willingness to promote an issue also may depend on his or her perceived power. An individual's power is derived from both personal attributes and structural location in the organization or department. Structural attributes such as a position's criticality, access to trans-

action alternatives, and access to the communication network of the dominant coalition have been shown to be important determinants of an individual's perceived influence (Brass, 1984). As applied to the initiation of issue selling, we suggest that middle managers do assess their influence (and the probability of selling success) in deciding whether or not to go to bat for an issue. If individuals believe that they are central in the firm's communication network, if there are few transaction alternatives for fellow managers (i.e., they are nonsubstitutable), and if they have access to the communication network of the dominant coalition, the initiation of the issue selling is more likely. Thus, when comparing the likelihood that general versus functional middle managers will initiate issue selling, we believe that general managers, who are structurally located more centrally in the firm's communication network, are nonsubstitutable; they have greater access to the dominant coalition and will be more likely to initiate issue selling (on average) than will functional middle managers.

Studies of persuasion processes underscore the importance of source characteristics (as applied here, issue seller attributes) in the success or failure of attempts to influence the beliefs and behaviors of others (McGuire, 1985). Although there has been considerable debate about why source credibility affects persuasion attempts (cf. Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), the general finding is that source credibility (either based on expertise or trustworthiness) affects the believability of sellers' messages (in this case, claims that an issue is significant for the organization). Thus, issue sellers who perceive that they are credible in the eyes of top management are more likely to initiate issue selling than those who do not see themselves in this way. Thus, another reason that functional managers may be more willing to sell issues that fall within their functional domains is that in these efforts issue sellers may see themselves as more expert and trustworthy (i.e., more credible). With greater credibility, middle managers may see issue selling as less risky to their images and more likely to secure top management's attention.

A seller's perceptions of the riskiness of actions potentially associated with an issue (as indicated by its potential impact, cost, and irreversibility) also affect the frequency of issue-selling attempts (Schilit, 1987). More specifically, Schilit found that middle managers were more willing to exercise upward influence in less risky decisions. As applied to issue selling, individuals may be more willing to promote an issue when they perceive that the implied cost and impact of actions associated with the issue are lower, and when those actions are more reversible. This finding suggests a conservative bias in the issues sold to top management, where individuals are more willing to promote issues that are perceived as less risky. This logic also may explain the hesitancy of middle managers in various functional areas to exercise upward influence on issues that are not directly germane to their own functional areas (as Schilit & Paine [1987] found).

The impression-management literature also supports this logic. If the

costs and benefits of selling an issue are easily assessed, then individuals can calculate the impression-management outcomes associated with acting (Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989). When payoffs are less clear, impression-management concerns contribute less to the decision to initiate issue selling. The payoff matrix for issue selling may be revealed by the make-up of top management (e.g., Is top management populated by individuals who have goals or backgrounds similar to the issue seller?) and by the seller's observations about the consequences that accrue to other issue sellers. The following propositions capture the links among structural location of potential sellers, sellers' perceptions of risk, and the initiation of issue selling:

*Proposition 1: The initiation of issue selling is more likely when (a) sellers value and expect success at issue selling; (b) sellers are general managers; (c) sellers are advocating issues that match their functional orientation or source(s) of expertise; (d) sellers see themselves as credible in the eyes of top management; (e) sellers are located in central positions in the organization's or department's communication network, with few transaction alternatives and access to the communication network of the dominant coalition; (f) sellers perceive the issue to carry less impression-management risk; and (g) sellers perceive the issue to carry less performance risk for the organization (payoffs to the firm are expected to be positive).*

The perceived attitudes and mindset of top management as the recipients of issue-selling attempts also shape when and what issues will be sold by middle managers. More specifically, the upward influence literature suggests that the degree of supportiveness and open-mindedness of the top-management group should also affect lower level participants' motivation to sell issues (Schilit & Locke, 1982). Similarly, Chacko (1988) and Ansari and Kapoor (1987) found that a supervisor's supportive style affected individuals' choices of upward influence tactics. Thus, where top management is seen as supportive and open, issue selling may be seen as less risky and the probability of success as greater, encouraging middle managers to initiate issue selling.

*Proposition 2: The initiation of issue selling is more frequent when top management is perceived as more supportive and open.*

Social problem theory, as well as garbage can models of organizational choice (e.g., Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972), underline the importance of solutions in creating opportunities for problems to be recognized. "Solutions produce problems by providing the framework within which problems can be stated" (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977: 84). Therefore, a seller with a solution for an issue ought to believe that his or her selling attempt

will be more successful in gaining attention for this issue. Further, given that top management's acceptance of an issue is thought to increase when the issue is sold with a solution, impression-management risk should decrease accordingly when the seller proceeds in this manner. Thus, both an impression-management and an instrumental logic would predict:

*Proposition 3: The initiation of issue selling is more frequent when an issue seller can identify a solution to attach to the issue.*

However, it may not always be in an organization's or an issue seller's best interest to always sell issues with solutions. First, developing a solution often requires time and thus there is a lag between the time when a potential seller recognizes an event, a development, or a trend as important and the time when he or she has formulated a solution for it. Organizations operating in high-velocity environments (Eisenhardt, 1989) may not be able to afford to wait. Rather, these organizations need multiple inputs, and they need them in a timely fashion. For some issues, too, there may not be any currently available solutions. In these cases, it may be in the organization's interest to get the issue on the collective agenda so that many minds can work on effective actions to resolve the issue rather than having individuals formulate actions separately. Finally, it may be in a seller's best interest to sell emotionally charged or value-laden issues (e.g., work-force diversity or work-family issues) without solutions because it may be easier to get others to buy into the importance of the issue itself rather than any particular action for resolving it. For such issues, too, it may also be in the organization's interest for the solution to be determined collectively, thereby increasing acceptance of the solution.

### **Issue Packaging**

Assuming that the issue-selling process has been initiated, issue sellers have choices about how to package an issue. Issue packaging refers to how an issue is linguistically framed, the way an issue is presented, and how an issue's boundaries are established. Although issue packaging is constrained by the common experiences, language, and accepted logics that exist as part of the organization's paradigm (Johnson, 1987), we believe that potential issue sellers still have ample discretion in how they package issues within the paradigm's constraints. In packaging issues, sellers may, at times, be concerned about their credibility in the organization (and may frame issues to enhance their credibility), whereas at other times, sellers might be most concerned about what is best for the organization or about a particular value position (e.g., organizations should protect the environment). There are a variety of factors that may cause one of these concerns to dominate the others.

A first packaging option is how the issue's content is framed. We defined issue very generally as any event, development, or trend with

implications for organizational performance. Issue sellers have choices in what substance and attributes of that event, development, or trend to emphasize and what aspects to downplay. Even though framing is conducted by a variety of actors interested in an issue (including the top-management group) and occurs in an ongoing process of framing and reframing through time, evidence from social problem theory suggests that issue sellers can strategize about how to sell an issue and can try to influence the frame placed around an issue over time. For example, Gusfield (1975) described how the problem of alcohol abuse and automobile accidents came to be framed as a problem of drunken drivers as opposed to alternative frames that focused on automobile safety, highway conditions, or law enforcement. The dominance of this frame had a direct effect on what actions were taken to deal with the issue, and it engaged different processes and responses. Applied in an organizational context, an issue seller can try to have an issue framed as a human resource issue, a cost issue, a technical issue, or some alternative issue (Cowan, 1991). The seller also might attempt to influence an issue's frame by influencing how top management perceives the issue's central attributes (e.g., its complexity or urgency). The seller attempts to influence an issue's frame by deliberately presenting it in a particular way and by attempting to influence how others frame the issue. The framing of an issue is significant because it implies that different units or groups are responsible for issue action, identifies different information as relevant, may engage different routines for handling the issue, and, thus, shapes and directs subsequent issue-relevant activity. "By the frame imposed on circumstances, a problem definition highlights some aspects of the situation, throwing other aspects into shadow" (Weiss, 1989: 97).

An issue's framing can affect selling success through a variety of paths. Previous research suggests that frames such as threat versus opportunity (Dutton & Jackson, 1987), internal versus external (Dukerich & Milliken, 1992), urgent versus nonurgent (Billings, Milburn, & Shaalman, 1980; Dutton & Duncan, 1987a), and uncertain versus certain (Milliken, 1990) are important in drawing top management's attention to an issue. These authors suggest that the more an issue is framed as involving bigger stakes, or is more of a threat, more urgent, and more uncertain, the more attention will be devoted to the issue. The logic connecting these issue characteristics to attention allocation is a simple one: Top managers are motivated to pay more attention to higher payoff issues. An issue may seem to have a higher payoff when it is seen as important and can be resolved quickly and effectively, and when damage to an organization's image can be kept at a minimum. Thus, issue sellers can affect the probability that an issue will claim top management's attention by trying to influence the framing of the issue to emphasize some issue attributes over others.

Issue framing also may affect selling success by making it easier or more difficult for top management to consider issue-related action. If an



issue is framed in such a way that top management feels a greater sense of control about resolving an issue, the probability of issue-selling success rises (Dutton & Duncan, 1987a). So, for example, if an organization's top management is populated by persons with finance training or experience, issue sellers may be more successful if they can get their issues framed as "cost relevant" or "potential profit generators" rather than "morally important." The former frames allow top managers to see the issue in terms of something they feel more capable to resolve, whereas the latter frame may leave them feeling less in control. A similar strategy would be to try to get an issue framed in terms of historical organizational precedents. In both cases, the issue frame decreases what Milliken (1987) called response uncertainty and increases what Dutton and Duncan (1987a) called issue feasibility.

Issue sellers also can try to get an issue framed such that top management feels capable to resolve it by selling an issue that is attached to a solution. For example, the Conference Board's recent report on how to sell work-family issues in organizations explicitly recommended selling the issue at the same time that one proposes a solution (Friedman & Johnson, 1991). This framing again would enhance top management's sense of control and efficacy. The probability of selling success should rise accordingly.

*Proposition 4: The more the issue framing conveys that an issue will have higher payoff and/or that top management is capable of resolving the issue, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in an issue.*

The idea that the successful selling of an issue depends on how feasible top management believes it is to resolve the issue suggests that top management's mindset or collective beliefs will play a role in determining if an issue-selling effort is successful or not. The collective beliefs of top management act as cognitive filters (Kiesler & Sproull, 1982) that affect whether or not an issue being sold is "bought" as urgent and feasible to resolve (Dutton & Duncan, 1987a). For example, Dutton and Duncan (1987a) argued that organizations with more differentiated belief structures (where differentiated means lower belief complexity and lower consensus) generate perceptions of greater feasibility of change in response to an issue. They argued that "where beliefs are highly differentiated, the feasibility of change is greater as multiple bases for understanding how to resolve an issue are available during diagnosis" (Dutton & Duncan, 1987a: 290). Jackson (1992) made a similar assertion based on her analysis of the effects of group composition on strategic decision making. She hypothesized that when top-management groups are "heterogeneous . . . [they] will, as a consequence of their external contacts, import a broader range of information and possible solutions for consideration, in comparison to more homogeneous groups" (Jackson, 1992: 355).

As applied here, her logic suggests that issue sellers who are promoting an issue to a top-management group with a more complex and less consensual belief structure will be more successful at capturing top management's attention than will issue sellers selling to top-management groups with a less differentiated belief structure.

*Proposition 5: Issue sellers who are selling to top management characterized by a more differentiated belief structure will be more successful at gaining top management's attention than will sellers who are selling to top management characterized by a less differentiated belief structure.*

It is not only the structure of top management's beliefs that determines whether issue-selling attempts will be successful, but the content of these beliefs is also important. Top-management groups differ in terms of the breadth and depth of expertise in various issue domains, that is, differences that affect their issue processing (Jackson, 1992). When top management has expertise in a particular domain (e.g., expertise regarding some new technology or in-depth knowledge about changing customer demands for an organization's products or services), this knowledge should enhance its receptivity to issue-selling initiatives that tap or connect to this knowledge domain. Thus, the success of issue-selling efforts is dependent, in part, on whether the issue framing and the content of the issue itself are consistent with top management's expertise. Where such consistency occurs, attention to an issue is more easily secured because top managers can better understand the issue and may feel more competent to take effective action on it.

*Proposition 6: Issue sellers who are selling to top management with expertise relevant to a particular issue domain will be more successful at attaining top management's attention than issue sellers who are selling to top management without this domain-specific expertise.*

Issue framing also affects the implied responsibility for resolving an issue. The depiction of an issue as a human resource or a technical issue assigns responsibility to different parties for both "causing" the issue and resolving it. For example, Pfohl's (1977) study of the emergence of child abuse as a social issue shows how claim makers were constrained by who would take blame for the issue. In this case, doctors were hesitant to label a situation as child abuse because abusive parents were also the ones paying the doctors' bills. Applied to issue selling in organizations, one can see how the responsibility (and implied blame and accountability for an issue's resolution) are important claims that would affect how an issue is sold and the probability of selling success. This framing "motivates" (and sometimes obligates) others to participate in the selling effort. In addition, attempts to get an issue framed so as to imply top manage-

ment's responsibility likely increases top management's motivation to elaborate or to think more carefully about an issue (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). To the extent that an individual can get an issue framed through time in a way that highlights top management's responsibility for the action, the probability of an issue seller's success in gaining top management's attention is increased.

*Proposition 7: The more an issue seller attempts to get an issue framed through time in a manner that implies top management's responsibility, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in an issue.*

Given a seller's image-enhancement concerns, however, the framing of issue responsibility is problematic. On the one hand, if an issue seller tries to get an issue framed so that top management is portrayed as responsible for a strategic issue that makes the organization (and top management) look "bad," this may enhance perceived urgency of the issue. Consequently, top management's investment in an issue should increase (e.g., Dutton & Duncan, 1987a). However, top managers may not appreciate being put in the position of having to respond to such issues. In fact, pressures operating on top managers to appear effective and in control may create disincentives for acknowledging issues that could spoil either top management's or the organization's reputation (e.g., Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Salancik & Meindl, 1984). However, top management may find avoiding the issue an impossibility, given the selling efforts of those below, particularly (as will be discussed in the following paragraphs) if those selling efforts are undertaken in public forums. In these cases especially, the issue seller potentially incurs impression-management costs by his or her attempts to package the issue as top management's responsibility. This tension is captured by Proposition 7, especially when compared with Proposition 8:

*Proposition 8: The more an issue seller frames an issue in a manner that implies top management's responsibility, the more likely it is that the seller will lose credibility for future selling attempts.*

Issue-selling success also is dependent on whether or not an issue seller gets an issue framed as "strategic." A strategic frame is evident when a seller provides an articulation of the issue's relevance for longer term organizational performance. Individuals have differing skills in and opportunities for framing issues strategically. These differences derive from both the differing traits and abilities of individual managers (Stumpf & Mullen, 1992) and the information access and experience base of middle managers. For example, middle managers who are general managers (i.e., who have overall responsibility for a multifunction operation), given their broader responsibility and greater autonomy than functional managers, may have greater information access and experience for framing an issue strategically. When issues are framed more strategically, top

management can more easily understand the issue's relevance and importance to the organization, and its attention is allocated to the issue more easily. Thus,

*Proposition 9: The more a middle manager can get an issue framed as strategic, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in the issue.*

The social problem literature is rich with examples showing that the way that an issue is presented (e.g., its drama and its succinctness) is vital for determining whether selling attempts will be successful. The drama of an issue's presentation "gives an issue life and sustains its growth" (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988: 62). Studies of the emergence of social problems document the importance of exemplars and vivid stories for capturing the attention of top-level policy makers. Drama and novelty inject urgency into the issue, drawing scarce attention resources to the issue. Statistics or more formalized and data-based descriptions of an issue typically follow these vivid and dramatic stories. This material or evidence is used to support an issue's significance. "Thus, in social problems claims, officially 'certified' facts are coupled with vivid, emotional rhetoric" (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988: 62). Studies of the effective behaviors of product champions (Howell & Higgins, 1990) and innovation champions (Dean, 1987) support the importance of using emotion and passion in successfully pushing new ideas. Exemplars and vivid stories make material about an issue more salient, making it easier to encode and to retrieve such material (Kiesler & Sproull, 1982). These assertions from social problem theory are supported by research on social persuasion, which suggests that messages (in this case claims about an issue) that are more interesting and that can be more easily understood are more persuasive than messages that do not have these attributes. Thus, issue claims that grab attention through the use of emotional intensity (Warr & Jackson, 1975) and novel information (Wyer, 1970) but have compelling evidence that support them (McCoskey, 1972) may draw greater top-management attention than claims that do not have these attributes.

*Proposition 10: The more an issue seller portrays an issue in emotional terms and with novel information, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in the issue.*

*Proposition 11: The greater the use of evidence or supporting facts in making issue claims, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in the issue.*

Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) also suggested that the succinctness of the message (i.e., how efficiently an issue can be expressed) is also an important factor in social problem claims. Succinctness may affect the ease of others' understanding of an issue and, consequently, the level of effort

that issue sellers must expend in attracting others' investment in the issue (Dutton & Duncan, 1987a). For top managers with constrained resources, strategic issues that are simply packaged may require less attentional resources for initial comprehension and for later issue updating. Work by Lyles (1987) substantiates the importance that top managers assign to the clarity of a problem's formulation. Hence,

*Proposition 12: The more an issue seller portrays an issue succinctly, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in the issue.*

Social persuasion theories also suggest that the way that claims are structured (e.g., whether they are two-sided or one-sided appeals) also affects their capacity to change a receiver's response to a message. For nonpartisan groups (in this case, for top management that does not have well-formed beliefs about an issue), the general finding is that two-sided appeals provide greater and more lasting attitude change than one-sided appeals (Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949; Lumsdaine & Janis, 1953). As applied to an issue-selling context, these findings suggest the following:

*Proposition 13: The more an issue seller uses two-sided arguments supporting issue claims, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in an issue (particularly if top management does not have well-formed beliefs about an issue).*

Another packaging option available to issue sellers is the extent to which to "bundle" their issue with other issues in the selling attempt. Issue bundling describes the degree to which an issue is portrayed as related to and interconnected with other issues. Research has shown that the perceived interconnectedness of an issue with other issues affects individuals' willingness to invest time and money in the issue (Dutton, Stumpf, & Wagner, 1990). Bundling an issue with issues posed by other sellers has advantages in that a broader range of individuals is likely to be activated. This broader support base increases the influence of any one seller on top management (power based in numbers) and decreases any potential impression-management costs (safety based in numbers). The advantages need to be weighed, however, against the costs of losing one's identification with an issue and losing issue succinctness. Although bundling provides safety in numbers, it also blocks a seller from taking full credit for selling an issue that reflects positively on the organization (and, hence, the seller). In addition, we argued previously that presenting an issue succinctly increases the chances of selling success. Through issue bundling, issue sellers dilute this succinctness advantage. Indeed, Weick (1984) has emphasized the importance of breaking up large social problems into small, "winnable" issues as a way to bypass bounded rationality and dysfunctional arousal levels. Accordingly, an issue seller who bundles an issue with other issues may overwhelm the cognitive

capacity of top management and/or cause dysfunctional arousal among members of that group. Thus, even though bundling offers the issue seller certain advantages, it is clearly not cost free. The trade-offs involved in issue bundling produce conflicting propositions for issue selling that invite empirical testing:

*Proposition 14a: The more an issue is bundled with other issues, the greater the number of issue sellers pressuring top management, and the greater the level of top management's attention invested in the issue.*

*Proposition 14b: The more an issue is bundled with other issues, the less succinctly the issue will be perceived, and the lower the level of top management's attention invested in the issue.*

*Proposition 14c: The more an issue is bundled with other issues, the less likely it is that the seller will lose credibility for future attempts if the issue produces negative consequences; also the less likely it is that the seller will gain credibility if the issue produces positive consequences.*

### **Selling Process**

Finally, issue-selling success is dependent not only on issue packaging but also on the choices sellers implicitly or explicitly make regarding how to sell an issue. This section briefly outlines three process options available to the issue seller and specifies their relationships to selling success. The three process options are not exhaustive; rather, they represent three options for which it is possible to develop testable linkages between the issue-selling process and selling success.

**Selling solo or with others.** In selling an issue, individuals can go solo (i.e., conduct the process by themselves) or get others involved in the selling effort. Note that this choice differs from the bundling choice discussed previously. For bundling, the question is whether a seller should link his or her issue with other issues (i.e., to present a "package deal"). In contrast, selling solo or not describes the seller's options for getting others involved in helping to sell an issue. Research suggests that there are direct political consequences of banding with others to exert collective influence that may encourage middle managers to build a coalition to promote an issue as opposed to promoting it alone. In a study of joint venture managers' attempts to gain authority from their parent firms, Lyles and Rheger (In press) found that seeking support from outsiders was a successful upward influence strategy. Dean (1987: 49) also found that successful selling of proposals for advanced manufacturing technologies was often done by proponents who sold "sideways" before securing top-level approval. Dean argued that securing lateral support for the technology was important given the broad-based effects of the innovation. By

building a coalition that sees and understands the importance of an issue, there is a greater chance that the coalition will include "articulate, persuasive sponsors who can make the case" (Burgelman & Sayles, 1986: 89) that an issue is important. These activities are likely to be equally important in successful issue selling. All of these studies suggest that selling with others is related to the political necessity of building a stronger coalition to articulate and motivate the investment of attention in an issue. In addition, a coalition also taps a broader range of resources (e.g., money and time) that can be used to convince top management that an issue is legitimate and important.

Of course, the relative potential for issue coalitions of greater size to secure the attention of top management effectively depends on the combined credibility of the individuals composing the coalition and the ability of the coalition to mobilize important organizational resources effectively. By inviting others into their selling efforts, issue sellers enhance the likelihood of gaining top management's attention (through greater visibility and collective influence).

In addition, involving others in one's selling attempt protects the seller from a specific impression-management concern, that of being the sole voice promoting a particular issue. Because top management gets information from various sources, if a seller is the only voice for an issue, he or she might look bad in the eyes of top management (e.g., as deviant or out of synch with the organization). If sellers involve others in their efforts, they protect themselves against this possible loss of image. At the same time, issue sellers dilute their own credibility gain if they go with others (assuming that the issue sold produces positive organizational results). In this scenario, the seller must share the credit for positive results with other individuals. Clearly, however, if the issue is sold and produces negative organizational results, an issue seller will suffer less credibility loss than if he or she were to promote the issue alone. The following propositions capture these arguments:

*Proposition 15a: The more an issue seller brings others on board to help sell his or her issue, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in the issue.*

*Proposition 15b: The more an issue seller brings others on board to help sell his or her issue, the lower the likelihood of change in the seller's credibility for future selling attempts.*

### **Selling Channel**

Sellers also have choices to make about the channel to use for their selling efforts. Selling channels may be public (such as weekly staff meetings, quarterly strategy meetings, annual stockholder meetings) or private (including one-on-one appeals to the seller's boss, or private meetings

with one or a few relevant top managers). A choice to sell using a public versus private channel yields trade-offs for the issue seller. On the one hand, selling an issue to top managers in front of an audience (public channel) increases the probability that top management will spend time on the seller's issue. An audience places an impression-management burden on top managers—they may feel the need to show that they are open and responsive to subordinates' concerns. As such, using this channel increases the likelihood of being heard. Top management, as mentioned previously, is less able to simply avoid the issue. However, top managers also may resent being put in the position whereby they are forced to spend time on an issue that they might otherwise choose not to. The seller's image in the eyes of top management might suffer accordingly. Top managers also may move to discredit the seller's expertise or legitimacy based on the seller's place in the organizational structure. This discrediting allows top managers to avoid a potentially painful issue—but at some cost to the seller's image. Thus,

*Proposition 16a: The more an issue seller uses public channels to sell his or her issue, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in an issue.*

*Proposition 16b: The more an issue seller uses public channels to sell his or her issue, the greater the likelihood of change in the seller's credibility for future selling attempts.*

According to Proposition 16b, there will be a greater likelihood that the seller's credibility will be affected by the public selling attempt. The direction of that change (enhancement or detracting) will depend on various factors, including the outcome of the issue (i.e., Did it yield positive or negative benefits for the organization?), the status of the issue seller, and the nature of the seller's relationship with top management. Our proposition simply asserts that the use of public channels in selling issues is more likely to affect a seller's outcome (relative to private channel use) due to the impression-management pressures such episodes place on top management.

**Formal versus informal selling attempts.** The upward influence literature emphasizes the choices that individuals have regarding the formality of their influence (in this case issue selling) attempts (Ansari & Kapoor, 1987; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980). Although the primary informal tactic referenced by Ansari and Kapoor (1987) was ingratiation, in the issue-selling context, informal tactics might involve personal appeals, behind-the-scenes negotiations, or discussions in halls and at company functions. In one study of organizational problem formulation, Lyles and Mitroff (1980) found that problems were more often identified through informal as opposed to formal means. This finding is somewhat surprising because formal tactics are thought to be more rational and reason based (Ansari & Kapoor, 1987). In the issue-selling context, formal tactics might



involve generating a formal report, making a scheduled formal presentation to top management, or formally setting up private one-on-one meetings with others.

This process dimension is independent of the public-private dimension just discussed. That is, a seller could give a formal appeal in a public setting (e.g., present a prepared proposal at a meeting) or private setting (e.g., schedule a meeting with a colleague to present a proposal to him or her). Sellers also could make informal appeals in public or private settings (e.g., raise the idea with a colleague in front of others at lunch or raise the issue when walking with one colleague in a hallway, respectively).

We propose that the degree to which formal versus informal issue selling relates to outcomes depends upon the fit between the formality of the selling effort and the organization's cultural norms. An informal selling effort in a formal culture and vice versa will be less likely to gain top management's attention for the seller's issue than will a culturally appropriate appeal. This assertion is consistent with rules-based theories of persuasion that emphasize that individuals will be more effective in their influence attempts if they choose influence behaviors that are appropriate, consistent, and effective in the situation (e.g., Reardon, 1981). We would also expect that sellers engaging in normatively sanctioned tactics (e.g., formal tactics in a formal culture) would be more likely to maintain or enhance their credibility for future selling attempts. Counternormative selling attempts may have attendant impression-management costs due to the way the issue was sold, even if the content of the issue (what was sold) was attractive. Thus,

*Proposition 17a: The more a seller tailors the formality of his or her selling attempt to match prevailing organizational norms, the greater the level of top management's attention invested in an issue.*

*Proposition 17b: The more a seller tailors the formality of his or her selling attempt to match prevailing organizational norms, the less the likelihood of change in the seller's credibility for future selling attempts.*

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The actions of middle managers affect organizational actions through their effect on what, when, and how issues claim top management's attention. We enhance our capacity to understand the timing, process, and success of these efforts by considering that these behaviors are simultaneously upward influence, claiming, and impression-management activities. The literatures tied to each of these perspectives identify different motivations that individuals bring to the task of issue selling, and they enrich and enliven our understanding of both the form of this process and its relationship to the role and organizational contexts of the issue sellers.

Even though we have begun to articulate the embeddedness of issue-selling behavior in our model, much work remains to be done to understand how context affects this process. The organizational context makes some paths for selling issues more easily accessible and routinized (the bureaucratic context); it creates the backdrop against which such activities are interpreted and evaluated by others (the normative and political contexts); and it provides organizational members with different resources and capabilities for engaging in issue selling and for marketing some issues and not others. We need research on how the role characteristics of an issue seller affect issue selling and on how the organizational context affects employees' willingness to promote issues.

Our model has oversimplified the depiction of issue selling to enhance the understanding of its core ingredients. However, future work also will need to address other important complications. For example, middle managers compete with a wide array of constituents to claim the attention of top management. External constituents such as customers and suppliers, as well as other internal constituents, such as the board of directors and lower level managers, all have a role to play in strategic issue processing in organizations (Jackson, 1992). Future work will need to assess the relative impact and interplay of various groups in promoting issues, perhaps applying the type of analysis used by Laumann and Knoke (1987).

Our account of issue-selling processes stops short of showing the various and sometimes complex paths by which top management's attention allocation relates to substantive issue-related action. In many organizations, bureaucratic or sociopolitical processes may interrupt the direct translation of top management's attention into substantive, issue-related action. In other cases, turnover of the top-management team or the emergence of clear crisis issues may prevent the generation of effective issue action, even after an issue has received top-management attention. Future research will need to develop and test the relationship between the attention allocation of top management and the generation of effective issue action. However, by taking the allocation of top management's attention seriously as the dependent variable of interest in issue selling, we can more easily see the role of interpretive and framing processes in setting the foundation for instrumental, issue-related action. One can also see more easily how the legitimation of an issue by top managers through the attention they devote to it becomes an important impetus for subsequent patterns of upward influence and impression-management activities of middle managers.

The framework also simplifies the mechanisms by which framing and process choices affect issue-selling success. For example, research has shown that the personal relevance or level of involvement of an issue to top management should affect how closely a claim about an issue is scrutinized, or how much situational factors versus issue-specific content affect the success of issue selling (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). A differ-

ent avenue for future research would be to develop and test hypotheses about how characteristics of top management beyond those proposed here affect the initiation, form, and success of issue-selling episodes.

All three literatures suggest that the nature of an issue and its packaging will be critical for determining how an issue can be sold and the probability that it will be "bought" by top management. Social problem theory literature, in particular, emphasizes that issue characteristics are mutable and the way an issue is framed is highly situation sensitive. Empirical research that addresses how issue characteristics or situational factors affect both the way issues are sold and attention investments of top managers in different organizational settings is particularly warranted, given the political and social maneuvering that typifies the issue-selling process. Our model of issue selling suggests that when top managers devote attention to an issue, they may activate other organizational members to try to initiate subsequent issue-selling episodes that shape both the way top management understands an issue and the likely course of action that they take with respect to it. Thus, a future research challenge is to develop further conceptual frameworks and research strategies that capture the iterative and cyclical nature of issue framing as the process of issue selling, and the decision-making process more generally, unfolds.

From a prescriptive point of view, a focus on issue characteristics suggests that the management of the meaning of issues in organizations is an important vehicle for strategic change (Dutton, 1988). However, rather than emphasizing the management of meaning by upper level managers (e.g., Pfeffer, 1981), an issue-selling perspective underscores the roles that middle-level employees play in the meaning-creation process. Although individuals vary in how skillfully they can frame issues, these skills can be taught to lower level managers by organizations interested in empowering their lower ranks in order to create a more adaptive organization.

Several research strategies can provide insights into the issue-selling process. First, additional qualitative research would be helpful to both assess the relative importance of the dimensions offered here to issue sellers and to generate additional relevant dimensions. Second, field comparative studies that contrast episodes of successful and unsuccessful issue selling in various contexts also would be valuable. A second set of field comparative studies might examine how a single issue is sold in different contexts. This type of study would allow the testing of contextual influences on the issue-selling process. Finally, given the importance ascribed to the nature of the issue, more controlled studies are also possible for testing the proposed hypotheses. For example, researchers who utilize management simulation or laboratory methodologies could manipulate the content of the issues and empirically test how issue content affects the process managers use to sell an issue.

In sum, we believe that this article advances theories of organiza-

tional action by suggesting a framework for capturing, describing, and studying the process by which middle-level organizational members direct and shape top management's attention to issues. The spirit and prescriptions that flow from this perspective build directly on strategy researchers' claims that top management plays its most important role by managing the context in which strategic processes unfold (Bower, 1970; Bower & Doz, 1979; Burgelman, 1983a, 1983b). Further, this article begins to identify a set of variables that should affect the occurrence, form, and success of issue selling.

Choosing what issues should receive attention in organizations and understanding how they should be interpreted remain critical yet difficult processes for top management to do alone or to control explicitly. In some organizations, these processes may work effectively because the issues that are truly important and pervasive capture the attention of top management. However, in other organizations, top management may get sidetracked by irrelevant or nonstrategic issues. An organization's adaptation success may depend upon, in part, an organization's capacity to discover, explore, and institutionalize an issue-selling process that enables individuals outside of top management to be involved effectively in the identification and communication of important issues. Top managers can encourage this capacity by reducing barriers that prevent individuals who would be most likely to sell issues from doing so, by empowering issue sellers, by providing skills in issue framing, and by removing implicit constraints on the processes that individuals can use to package and sell issues. Top managers who create this capability may gain an adaptation advantage as they lead their organization within increasingly complex and turbulent environments.

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