

How to make your CEO a massive tech advocate

by Marc J. Schiller

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Building a strong relationship with the CEO isn't easy... *especially for IT leaders. CEOs are pressed for time and technology is generally not considered a critical topic for them, but there's an approach coupled with some new research findings, that will help change that.*

Many IT leaders complain about the difficulty they experience when trying to cultivate a strong rapport with their CEOs. Unfortunately, most CEOs don't care all that much about technology. To boot, getting face time with the CEO can be difficult in itself. Nonetheless, a good CEO relationship is critical for you to be able to effectively promote your vision and strategy for IT, advocate on behalf of the IT group and its interests, and not to mention, to build personal reputation and influence in your company. This report covers a new way for IT leaders to address this problem.

WHY IT'S SUCH A TOUGH PROBLEM

What makes relationship building with the CEO so difficult is that the issues important to you as an IT leader are simply not that critical to the CEO. For most companies, IT represents less than 5% of the budget, so it's not a big blip on the financial radar screen. Also, IT systems and processes often get treated like the building the company's housed in—as long as they're intact and not crumbling all over, they become background thoughts. Of course, when there are problems with the systems that get in the way of normal company functions, the CEO's all over you. But clearly, that's not the best time to focus on building a relationship.

THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH

To address this problem, IT leaders invest a great deal of time framing technology issues in business terms and advancing their agendas with special-purpose presentations to the CEO and executive team. I'm a big believer in this approach; it can yield great results. However, I often find that even when armed with top-notch IT vision presentations, IT leaders struggle to get an audience with the CEO. Breaking through the structural apathy so many CEOs have towards technology can be very challenging.

THERE'S A BETTER WAY

We all know the absolute best way to connect with someone is to focus on topics or issues they consider most important. When we demonstrate an understanding of things that are important someone else, he or she suddenly seems to have time for you and interest in hearing what you have to say.

This natural truth and straightforward social technique should serve as your foundation for building a meaningful relationship with your CEO. But the central problem remains—the CEO doesn't feel about technology the way you do. You'll have to find a new way to present matters technological in a way that touches what's most important to him or her.

Imagine having the following water cooler conversation with your CEO (we'll call him Jim):

"Jim, I know you're interested in our company's reputation and financial performance, which is why I want to speak with you about some important industry data that has recently come out.

It turns out a company's reputation, financial performance and even CEO pay can all be directly linked to how the company approaches certain kinds of IT investment.

What I think we can learn from the study is that there are some really easy, no- or low-cost things we could to immediately start getting these benefits.

When should I make an appointment to see you to talk about this?"

After a chat like this, you should have your CEO's undivided attention. In fact, I'd be shocked if he didn't respond with "I've got a few minutes now. Let's go for a short walk." Your goal at that point will be to set up a follow-up conversation.

Thanks to a recently-published study, you'll be able to pick up where that conversation leaves off. One of the reasons the research results I'm about to review with you are so powerful is because they directly connect IT to issues your CEO inherently cares about—namely, the company's reputation, its performance and surprisingly, his or her own salary. Using these points as the basis for a follow-up meeting will demand your CEO's attention and get him massively interested in technology at the same time.

Before I suggest how you should approach the follow-up meeting with your CEO, let's take a look at the research I've been talking about and what it shows us.

WHAT THE STUDY SHOWS

In his study entitled “Chasing the Hottest IT: Effects of Information Technology Fashion on Organizations,” Professor Ping Wang of The University of Maryland and his team identified the business impacts that correlate with the method and manner of adopting different types of technologies. Professor Wang and his associates found a very strong correlation between adoption of “fashionable” technologies (what we’ll call **Buzz Tech**) and increases in business reputation and performance. In other words, companies that approached and adopted Buzz Tech enjoyed important business benefits.

Sounds hard to believe? Check out the study for yourself and you’ll learn what I did—that the research is rock solid and backed by public data from 1971 through 2002. You can read the entire study and about results in detail, [here](#).

Towards the goals of building a stronger relationship with the CEO and increasing his interest in technology, I’m going to focus on three critical findings of Professor Wang’s research.

Finding #1: Being associated with Buzz Tech correlated with an increase in a company’s reputation - The more often a company’s name appeared in articles that also mentioned an IT innovation considered Buzz Tech at the time of mention, the higher the reputation score that company had in the subsequent year’s list of America’s Most Admired Companies published by Fortune Magazine. More specifically, for each 1% increase in the company-Buzz Tech associations, a reputation score increase of 0.52% was reported.

And if that’s not interesting enough, the reputation bumps occurred *whether or not* the company actually followed through with an investment in the technology discussed.

Finding #2: Investing in Buzz Tech correlated with increased company reputation & linked to improvements in bottom-line performance - When companies actually invested in Buzz Tech, their reputation scores increased even more substantially. Every \$1 million investment was associated with a bump of 0.66 points in a company’s reputation score (measured from 1 to 10) for the following year.

Additionally, the companies that actually made investments in Buzz Tech experienced better bottom-line performance by the third year, as measured by the sum of return on assets, equity and sales.

Finding #3: CEO compensation went up in proportion to the size of the Buzz Tech investment - That’s right, you read that correctly. A company’s association with hip IT correlated to an increase in the CEO’s pay. For every \$1 million a company invested in Buzz Tech, the CEO received a

\$45,000 bump in total compensation, on average, for the following year—regardless of how the company actually performed.

USING THIS RESEARCH TO BUILD YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CEO

Learning to talk IT in CEO-speak is a multifaceted skill that takes time to learn and polish. Properly employed, that skill will help to bridge the gap between IT matters and the CEO’s interest. Now that you’re equipped with great data towards that cause, you’re probably wondering: “What exactly do I do with this info?”, “What’s the best way to present it to my CEO?”, and “How do I use this to advance my agenda?”

I suggest you start with a two-part approach:

Part I: Have that short, attention-grabbing conversation with the CEO that puts forth the basic promise of Buzz Tech to pique his interest (like the one with “Jim” above.) Then, schedule a follow-up meeting.

Part II: Use the follow-up meeting to make your case and to begin a new relationship with your CEO.

OKAY, I’VE GOT THE CEO’S ATTENTION — WHAT NOW?

Let’s continue the discussion on the assumption that the CEO has “taken the bait”. You’ve scheduled a meeting with the CEO to talk about improving the company’s reputation, improving bottom-line performance and ultimately driving CEO compensation. There couldn’t be three more juicy topics for an IT leader to dig into and to really talk business with the CEO. Now it’s time to put together and deliver your presentation on the research and how it supports the realization of the stated business benefits for your company.

Generally speaking, IT leaders assume the CEO will want to personally verify the authenticity of the information, the analytical rigor, the methodology, the results, the possible conclusions, and so on. And then finally, after having reviewed all the material, he or she will be interested in a discussion about the findings and how they might apply to the company.

Wrong. That’s how most IT leaders would approach this sort of topic. And fair enough, it’s the way you should. But don’t make the mistake of thinking it’s how your CEO would approach information like this.

WHAT DOES THE CEO REALLY WANT?

It’s actually not too hard to figure out what the CEO (or any senior executive for that matter) wants to know, because it’s nearly the same in every situation.

Picture a day in the life of a typical CEO; all day long he or

she is in meetings with people saying different things about different topics—Finance meeting to start the morning; PR before noon; Outside counsel for lunch; Production scheduling in the afternoon; Brand managers' conference in the evening. In each and every one of these meetings people are *telling* the CEO things, but they aren't just delivering information. They're all trying to convince him to do or not do something, even if that *something* is simply not to yell at them for bringing bad news. It's not hard to imagine how mentally exhausting it can all be nor is it tough to understand the CEO's desire for concise, targeted information framed in a way he or she can immediately digest and respond to.

If things go well in the meeting and the CEO likes what the other side of the table is saying, he'll generally ask the only question that's been on his mind since the meeting began: "So, what would you like me to do about this?" And that's the magic question. It's precisely what's on the CEO's mind when you go into a meeting with him. And the answer to this is all he really wants to know. The faster and better you can answer this question for the CEO, the more in sync you will be with his way of thinking. This begs the question...

WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM THE CEO?

While framing your discussion with the CEO, it's important to keep in mind that the promise of Buzz Tech (ostensibly the topic of the discussion), while important, is only the lever for achieving a greater objective; not the objective itself. Remember, the objective that got us here in the first place is making your CEO an advocate of technology while improving your standing and influence along the way.

With that in mind, your task is to use the Buzz Tech research to demonstrate the value, for the CEO personally and the company, in adopting a new approach to technology. In particular, you'll likely come to the conclusion that your company ought to take three specific actions to capitalize on what the research reveals; these are:

- I. More aggressively use a variety of PR tactics to get the word out about your company's interests and investments in Buzz Tech.
- II. Position, encourage and arm your CEO to be an advocate for Buzz Tech as it rightly applies to your business both within your company and externally (supported by you, of course.)
- III. Fund some R&D in this area so that your group can investigate current and potential Buzz Tech opportunities for your company.

As a result of taking action in these three areas, not only will your company and CEO benefit, but you'll enjoy a reputation boost and will have the opportunity for more frequent and

meaningful discussions with your CEO about technology. In short, everybody wins.

PUTTING TOGETHER THE RIGHT PRESENTATION

Now that you have clarity on what you'd like the CEO to do, you can structure the appropriate presentation for your follow-up meeting. Essentially, it should contain three main sections:

1. **Objectives:** High-level overview of the meeting's purpose and goals
2. **Opportunity:** Review of the opportunity *you* uncovered from the recently-published research
 - 2a. Brief summary to establish the study's credibility
 - 2b. Coverage of the key findings (highlighting the potential benefits for the company and the CEO)
3. **How to Capitalize:** Presentation of your action plan for which you want the CEO's support (i.e. what you want him to do about what you just told him.)

Keep it clean, simple, straightforward and direct; exactly the way CEOs like it.

HERE'S SOME HELP TO GET YOU STARTED

I realize that the tough tasks are crafting the words to fit this outline and making the research concise and direct enough while firmly supporting your desired action plan.

To help you get this done quickly, I've included with this report a PowerPoint template for the presentation with the research summarized and supported by a reference section.

By now, you're clear on why IT leaders typically have so much trouble getting through to the CEO and you've been equipped with some really interesting research findings to pique your CEO's interest and some tips on how to spin the information so that he or she can't resist a conversation about them. This jumpstart will make it easier to get the ball rolling and continue building your profile as an IT leader while making your CEO a massive advocate of technology at the same time.

Time to get to work. Good luck.