

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Construction of A Strategic Issue: Issue Selling as A Narrative Process

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## Abstract

For the past 30 years, the issue-selling movement has uncovered the vast repertoire of actions by which 'sellers' persuade a decision-maker that an issue is strategic. While these works have a rational and teleological conception of this phenomenon, implying that the strategic scope of the issue is given ex ante, other research in strategy shows that such scope is a social and discursive construction based on interactions between various actors. This article proposes a model of issue selling as an emergent narrative process. Based on a qualitative survey of 42 middle managers, using semistructured interviews, we show this process starts with a phase of incremental elaboration, in which the seller informally shares narrative fragments with a network of actors, followed by a phase of interpretation, in which the seller formally presents his or her narrative to a decision-maker, coherently articulating previously collected narrative fragments. We also show that the passage between these two phases is allowed by what we call the 'strategic construction' of the narrative. These results help to show that issue selling is a less solitary and rational process than previous work suggests.

**Keywords:** *Issue selling; Narratives; Strategic processes; Middle management*

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What is the value of a brilliant idea if decision-makers do not pay attention to it? For the past 30 years, research in strategic management has shown that actors other than leaders influence the strategic decision-making process of companies: intrapreneurs (e.g., Burgelman, 1984), middle managers (e.g., Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992), and actors at the periphery of the organization (e.g., Regné, 2003). These works propose a reading of organizations as 'marketplaces of ideas' whether they are development opportunities to be seized or threats to be averted. However, the strategic scope of these ideas remains only hypothetical. On the one hand, the attention span of managers is naturally limited, and the scope only materializes when they become convinced of the idea (Daft & Weick, 1984; Laamanen et al., 2017). On the other hand, because strategic decision-making processes are opening to an increasing number of actors inside and outside organizations, the ideas exchanged are becoming more numerous and more rapidly renewed (Birkinshaw, 2017). In this context, the attention of decision-makers is a conquest issue for actors who carry ideas that they consider strategic to their organization.

The issue-selling stream in the literature elucidates just how these actors seek to 'sell' a potentially strategic idea to their decision-maker(s) (Dutton et al., 2001; Dutton & Ashford, 1993) in relation to, for example, competitive (Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2016; Dutton et al., 2001), social (Alt & Craig, 2016; Sonenshein, 2006, 2009; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018), or environmental issues for their organization (Andersson & Bateman, 2000). This vein of work agrees that issue selling is composed of two phases conducted successively by a 'seller' to influence the decision-maker (see Dutton & Ashford, 1993): packaging, when the strategic issue is shaped, and then selling, when it is 'sold' to the decision-maker. However, this rationalist and sequential vision of issue selling still seems too simplistic and does not reflect all the inherent complexity of strategic processes. This is for two reasons. On the one hand, this vision presents the seller as the sole bearer of rational and sequenced choices throughout the process, as if the issue had a strategic scope from the start. On the other hand, although some studies suggest that issue selling covers a certain number of discursive actions, these are limited to a purely rhetorical function.

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However, research on strategy has recently shown that narratives are not merely vehicles for ideas that are strategic a priori: they participate fully in constructing the strategic scope of these ideas through the repeated interaction between multiple actors (Balogun et al., 2014; Cooren et al., 2015; Gond et al., 2018; Knights & Morgan, 1991).

In this article, we propose a narrative approach to issue selling. Narratives constitute a fundamental action that makes sense of an event and connects the perspectives of various actors within a unity of meaning (Gabriel, 2004; Vaara et al., 2016). They thus offer a prime framework for studying emergent strategic processes such as issue selling, which, by definition, aim to construct for organizational actors a shared framework of action from an event whose meaning is not clear a priori (Aggerholm et al., 2012; Barry & Elmes, 1997; Denis et al., 2007). In this research, we do not focus so much on discursive content as on the way a seller will put a strategic issue into a narrative. We ask the following question: *how does a seller put a problem (issue) into a narrative to convince a decision-maker (target) of its strategic importance?*

The investigation of this question was carried out through a qualitative study based on 42 semistructured interviews with middle managers working for companies in different sectors. Our analysis presents the selling issue as a process of narrativizing a strategic problem, which is elaborated through two phases. The first phase shows how the strategic scope of a problem emerges incrementally. At this stage, the issue is not the subject of a clearly articulated narrative. In contrast, it exists in the form of fragmentary narratives, exchanged orally in informal situations with a network of actors with a relatively strong degree of affective or professional proximity to the seller. We show that it is only in a second phase that sellers present a narrative constructed in formal selling situations—such as a management committee—to convince the target, that is, the decision-maker, of the selling process. Finally, we identify three necessary actions for the seller—called ‘strategic narrative building’—thanks to which the nebula of fragmentary stories of the initial phase takes the shape of a coherent and convincing narrative interpreted by the seller in formal selling situations: associating interests, strategically framing, and illustrating.

This research contributes to the advancement of knowledge on issue selling in three ways. First, we show that issue selling cannot be reduced to a simple dyadic relationship between a seller’s rational action and the target’s evaluation, as if the seller already had a clear idea of the issue by him—or herself. In contrast, our analysis indicates that the strategic scope of a problem emerges in informal situations where the seller exchanges, confronts, and conjoins fragments of narratives with a multiplicity of actors organized in networks around him. We show the central role of the narrative as an operator in the constitution of this strategic scope. While few studies

highlight the success factors of issue selling, we show that the passage in time from narrative fragments to a narrative mature enough to be interpreted for the target goes through a mechanism of strategic narrative construction. In this, we propose a set of mechanisms that, in a complementary way, will generate the construction of a narrative that is more convincing. Finally, we contribute to narrative approaches in strategy by improving the understanding of how strategic narratives are formed. We show that these narratives are constructed between two ‘relational spaces’ called the ‘backstage’ and the ‘stage’.

## Literature review: A narrative approach to issue selling

### *Issue selling as an activity to influence strategic decisions*

No new idea or problem that appears in an organization is spontaneously strategic in the eyes of its leaders. The attention span of decision-makers, who are responsible for prioritizing and selecting ideas of strategic importance, is inherently limited (Ocasio, 1997; Simon, 1976). This capacity for attention is put to the test all the more since strategic practice within organizations is no longer reserved for leaders, the traditional decision-makers. Instead, it is open to a plurality of organizational members from different hierarchical levels, such as middle managers (e.g., Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992) and to external stakeholders (Whittington et al., 2011), as these organizations are placed in increasingly complex and competitive environments. As a result, organizations today are veritable marketplaces to circulate an increasing number of potentially strategic ideas (Dutton et al., 2001, p. 716). In this context, understanding how actors other than decision-makers—whether middle managers, on whom much emphasis has been placed in the literature, or other internal or external actors—participate in developing strategic problems and having them recognized as such by decision-makers is therefore a very topical research theme (Aggerholm et al., 2012; Cooren et al., 2015; Gond et al., 2018; Lauche & Erez, 2023).

It is precisely this question that the research stream of issue selling is interested in. It emerged in the 1990s and is an extension of strategic issue management, which refers to the way in which organizations anticipate transformations in their environment and translate these changes into strategic issues (Ansoff, 1980; Laamanen et al., 2017). More specifically, issue selling describes the process by which actors—called ‘sellers’—who do not hold strategic decision-making power in these organizations nevertheless manage to persuade decision-makers—called ‘targets’—that a given issue has strategic significance for their organization (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). This issue is presented in the form of new information or a new event that the seller believes a priori could positively or

negatively affect the organization's competitiveness or even threaten its survival (Ansoff, 1980; Dutton et al., 2001).

Following the seminal work of Dutton and Ashford (1993), numerous studies have uncovered the vast repertoire of actions that 'sellers' deploy to influence their 'target'. Alternately referred to as 'moves' (Dutton et al., 2001; Howard-Grenville, 2007), 'tactics' (Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2016), 'strategies' (Gammelgaard, 2009; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018), or 'practices' (Mayer, 2016), these actions follow the initial phase when the actor decides to carry a strategic issue and can be grouped into two dimensions: the 'packaging' and 'selling' of the issue (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). The vast majority of existing work suggests that these actions are carried out by the seller in a rational and linear way toward his or her target (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 2001), simply acknowledging certain iterations in case the first attempt fails (Dutton et al., 2001; Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2016; Howard-Grenville, 2007).

This dominant conception is, however, questionable. It tends to assume that an issue has a priori strategic value solely because of the rational analysis of the seller and is therefore independent of the meaning that the actors collectively construct (Boje et al., 2004). However, the strategic scope (of projects, ideas, plans, etc.) is an emergent construction at the crossroads of the meanings produced by the actors through their interactions (Gond et al., 2018), based on cognitive, relational, and material elements that are not defined a priori by the actors involved in the process. Howard-Grenville (2007) also shows that this process is based on an emergent and nonlinear dynamic of learning and adjustments between actors. Thus, if the rational and linear approach of the packaging-selling model that dominates the work on issue selling accounts for the diversity of actions at work in this process, it seems necessary to pay more attention to the way in which the strategic scope of a problem emerges at the crossroads of interactions between actors involved in the selling process.

### ***Issue selling as narrative elaboration***

This article is based on the assumption that discourse, and one of its particular forms, narrative, is central to this process. In line with the research that has demonstrated the centrality of discourse in strategy since the 1990s (e.g., Hardy et al., 2000; Knights & Morgan, 1991), some recent works argue that discourse is a central persuasive tool in the process of issue selling (Sonenshein, 2006, 2009). For example, Sonenshein (2006) has shown that sellers use discourse to mask their personal reasons for bringing a specific issue to the attention of their hierarchy to avoid being accused of defending the issue for their own benefit. Complementing the instrumental and rationalist conceptions in studies articulating strategy and organization, discursive approaches show that objects (activities,

projects, actors, etc.) are not a priori either strategic or not but that they become either strategic or not according to the meaning that organizational actors give them through their relationships. For example, approaches to the 'communicative constitution of strategy' (CCO) have shown that strategy is constructed through a sequence of discursive episodes in which decision-makers deliberate on elements that have a strategic or nonstrategic scope (Bencherki et al., 2019; Cooren et al., 2015).

Furthermore, a particular form of action, ignored by the literature on issue selling, could enhance the understanding of this process. This is narrative (Boje et al., 2015; Gabriel, 2004), which constitutes not only the medium but also the action through which organizational actors make sense of new strategic situations (Gond et al., 2018). Over the past two decades, a large body of work has shown that narratives are the basis for the creation and communication of new meanings in organizations (Boje, 2008; Giroux & Marroquin, 2005; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Vaara et al., 2016). A narrative is a discursive form that configures a plot of events around a storyline. By narrative, we mean here not only content, which can take various forms such as writing, oral discourse, or even a visual document such as an image or film (Lorino & Peyrolle, 2005) but also the action of constructing such content, that is, of putting into narrative. To put into narrative is to give form to a new reality that, without it, would not have existed. As a configuration of scattered events and representations as a coherent whole, narrative is particularly present in strategic processes (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Vaara & Tienari, 2011), which require the arrangement of various representations into a common long-term framework of action (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Giroux & Marroquin, 2005). This is all the more true in the case of emerging strategic processes such as issue selling, where actors at intermediate or even operational levels seek to persuade their decision-makers of the strategic significance of new events. There are two reasons for this.

On the one hand, it is through narrative that organizations achieve recognition of a general impetus as strategic along with the direction they wish to give themselves (Fenton & Langley, 2011; Vaara & Pedersen, 2013) because narrative is the primary means of 'conveying a particular perspective to a particular audience that can grasp and shape its meaning' (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 57). It is therefore an action not only of description but also of persuasion on the part of an author pursuing some goal toward one or more audiences (Ricoeur, 1983), as can be found between a 'seller' and his 'target'. For example, Rouleau (2005) has shown that middle managers implicitly legitimize a new strategy to external audiences such as their customers by constructing narratives. The ability to narrate is thus crucial to converge the perspectives of different audiences in situations of proven or possible changes, such as issue selling,

that, without a 'good narrative', would otherwise have been considered illegitimate, irrational, or unnecessary (Boje et al., 2015; Logemann et al., 2018; Rhodes et al., 2009; Vaara & Tienari, 2011). On the other hand, we said earlier that narrative entails creating concordance from discordant events, such as information or a situation. The process of issue selling is based precisely on the appearance of such events as discordant to the point that can, in the eyes of an individual—that is, a seller—affect the established strategy, either by threatening its proper implementation or, in contrast, by providing an opportunity to develop it. Generating upheaval in the usual meanings of a strategic plan, such events indeed require interpretative work of narrativization to arrange it in a new meaningful narrative, which will put an initial status quo in tension with the occurrence of this breaking event (Michel, 2016). While some works note that the temporal shaping of a strategic problem is essential in issue selling (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), they do not follow through the end of this process to explore how this shaping develops a narrative nature. For these reasons, conceiving the process of issue selling as a narrative seems particularly appropriate and allows us to move away from a rationalist and sequential model. Our research therefore proposes to understand how a seller (seller) puts a problem (issue) into a narrative to convince a decision-maker (target) of its strategic importance.

## Methods

This research is based on a qualitative study of how sellers construct a narrative to convince their manager to implement a solution to address an issue (opportunity or threat) that they consider strategic for their organization. The aim is thus to better understand the development and presentation of this narrative and not to conduct content analysis of the narratives (see, e.g., Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

From this perspective, we collected and analyzed 42 semistructured interviews of middle managers conducted in a retrospective manner. The choice of this design is based on two reasons. First, the fact that we had issues from a wide variety of company sizes and sectors of activity gave robustness to our analysis of common salient features between these different cases (Garreau, 2020). Second, the retrospective nature of the interviews allowed us to cover the entire process of issue selling, which can sometimes last several weeks, months, or even in some cases several years (Gond et al., 2018; Howard-Grenville, 2007), and thus to work on situations for which we knew in advance what the outcome would be, that is, whether the issue was recognized as strategic or not by the target. In this context, and to remain in line with the chosen narrative approach, the field of investigation was limited to the individual level as well as to the seller's

point of view. The reception of the problem by the target was therefore analyzed through the point of view of the sellers. The following paragraphs detail how we collected and analyzed our data.

## Data collection

To develop an integrative model (Garreau, 2020), we chose to have a diversity of respondents and issues. Forty-two middle managers (sellers) were interviewed. At the time of the interview, their position was between one and four levels below the general management of the organization, thus corresponding to the actors traditionally studied in research on issue selling. To cover a wide range of issues (Mantere & Vaara, 2008), we interviewed managers from organizations of different sizes and sectors of activity: agribusiness (coded in the results E1 to 9), automotive (E10 to 14), BTP (Building and Public Works) (E15 to 18), education (E19 to 22), energy (E23 to 27), media (E28 to 31), health (E32 to 35), culture (E36 to 38), and business consulting (E39 to 42). Table 1<sup>1</sup> lists the sellers interviewed, including the sector and activity of their organization, their function within the organization, and the issue they advocated to their superiors.

We chose a form of semistructured interview (Romelaer, 2005) called episodic narrative interview (Mueller, 2019) based on the way the respondent describes a specific phenomenon situated in time, here the narrative of issue selling. We have chosen to use exclusively retrospective interviews to address how a seller (seller) gives a strategic scope to a problem (issue) to convince his target. The uncertain and emergent nature of selling processes gives them shifting spatial and temporal boundaries in organizations, and these processes can take place in different places and at different times (Howard-Grenville, 2007). Placed at the end of the issue-selling processes under analysis, retrospective interviews make it possible to embrace the whole of each process to grasp the main events and the overall coherence from the perspective of the sellers. The interviews lasted between 40 min and 1.5 h and were conducted, recorded, and transcribed during a qualitative methodology course with students from two classes that were part of the curriculum for a research master's degree in strategy. With a view to conducting active pedagogy (Wren et al., 1994), the students were informed a priori that their work consisted of

<sup>1</sup> For the market sector, our company categories are based on the INSEE categories. Microenterprises (MICs) employ fewer than 10 people and do not exceed 2 million euros in revenue. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs—excluding MICs) employ fewer than 250 people and have sales of up to 50 million euros. Intermediate-sized companies (ETI) employ less than 5,000 people and have sales of less than 1.5 billion euros. Finally, large companies (LCCs) are companies that do not appear in any of the previous categories.



**Table I.** Synthesis of interviews

Organization sector	Core activity	Nb. of employees	Seller's function	Type	Purpose of the issue	Result	Duration of the interview (in minutes)
Agri-food	Canned seafood products	<5.000	Digital Marketing Manager	Risk	Proposal to use a platform to monitor the company's reputation and protect it from scandals	Success	44
	Pig breeding	>5.000	Head of nutrition	Risk	Proposed transformation of a subsidiary's livestock feed production process (Russia)	Success	45
	Generalist agri-food company	>5.000	Nutrition Development Manager	Opportunity	Proposal to merge marketing and sales budgets to optimize financing of e-commerce projects	Success	49
	Generalist agri-food company	>5.000	Marketing Director for instant coffee	Opportunity	Proposed recipe change for a star product, involving a major reorganization	Success	36
	Trade of fine wines	<250	Purchasing-Offer Manager	Risk	Proposed reorganization of the Purchasing and Sales departments	Success	45
	Trade of phytosanitary products	<250	Accounting expert	Risk	Automated billing system	Success	51
	Collection and trading of supply cereals	<250	Regional Sales Manager	Opportunity	Proposal to create a 'special crops' business (buckwheat and lentils) in a new market (Russia).	Success	40
	Collection and trading of supply cereals	<250	R&D project manager	Opportunity	Proposed reorganization to optimize R&D results	Success	44
	Manufacturer of vegetable fats	<250	Marketing Manager	Opportunity	Proposal to reposition the business in the 'Organic' market	Failure	41
Automobile	Automotive equipment manufacturer	>5.000	Technical and functional manager	Risk	Denunciation of a major malfunction on a flagship product (braking system)	Success	40
	Car manufacturer	>5.000	Chief financial officer	Opportunity	Proposal to set up a credit solution in a foreign market	Success	49
	Car manufacturer	>5.000	Product line manager	Risk	Denouncing the underperformance of a recently launched car	Success	64
	Car manufacturer	>5.000	Design Engineer	Risk	Request for redesign of automotive project deliverables management application	Success	44
	Car manufacturer	>5.000	Electronics and software innovation manager	Opportunity	Request to study the relevance of developing new driver assistance software in-house (in light of existing offers on the market)	Success	61
Construction industry	Construction and maintenance of transport infrastructures	>5.000	Innovation project manager	Opportunity	Proposed optimization of the strategic decision-making process	Success	43
	Construction of buildings and public works	>5.000	Chief engineer of works	Risk	Major correction to the construction of the 'shell' budget for major projects	Success	47
	Construction of buildings and public works	>5.000	Construction Manager	Risk	Bad workmanship on a major site	Success	52
	Construction of buildings and public works	>5.000	Chief nuclear engineer	Risk	Alert on non-conformity of construction equipment to be replaced	Success	45

**Table 1.** (Continued)

Organization sector	Core activity	Nb. of employees	Seller's function	Type	Purpose of the issue	Result	Duration of the interview (in minutes)
Consulting	Management consulting	<5,000	Consultant	Opportunity	Proposal to create a 'CSR' activity within the firm	Success	55
	Management consulting	<5,000	Manager	Risk	3% reduction in operating budget to maintain profitability	Success	67
	Management consulting	>5,000	Senior Consultant	Opportunity	New customer segmentation project for a telephone operator	Success	45
	Management consulting	<250	Manager	Opportunity	Complete redesign of the working environment	Success	48
Culture	Theater Company	Association	Actor	Risk	Proposal for a new interpretation (boulevard play)	Failure	43
	Theater Company	Association	Actor	Risk	Proposal for a new post-staging interpretation	Success	45
	Theater Company	Association	Director	Opportunity	Proposal to theater management for a new stage direction	Success	51
Education	School support	<10	Community manager	Opportunity	Proposal to overhaul the way organizational problems are reported to management	Success	75
	Music Conservatory	<10	Music teacher	Risk	Proposed arrangements for disabled music students	Success	49
	International educational cooperation	<250	Africa and Middle East Project Coordinator	Risk	Denunciation of several situations of sexist behavior in a partner country	Success	68
	Public university	<5,000	Professor	Opportunity	Proposal for a strategic diagnosis of international mobility for university students	Success	52
Energy	Design of nuclear power plants	>5,000	Director of Strategy and M&A	Risk	Denunciation of industrial espionage by a financial partner on the sidelines of a board meeting	Success	48
	Production and distribution of industrial gases	>5,000	Program Director Major Programs	Opportunity	Proposed reorganization of a strategic program	Success	52
	Energy management hardware and software solutions	>5,000	Human Resources Director	Risk	Reporting cases of harassment in the workplace and proposing new monitoring mechanisms in this area	Success	44
	Electrical distribution network manager	>5,000	Innovation Manager	Opportunity	New functionality proposed for an electricity meter currently being launched	Success	91
	Specialized consulting	<250	Consultant	Opportunity	Proposal to create a new offer	Success	41
	Medias	Specialized media	<250	Journalist	Opportunity	Proposed strategic analysis of the future of the print media in France	Success
Radio		<250	Journalist reporter	Opportunity	Request for more environmental topics in the editorial department	Success	60
Radio		<250	Regional Director (Hérault)		Calls for radio to get involved nationally in projects to develop working-class neighborhoods	Failure	52
Production of radio programs		<250	Innovation Director	Opportunity	Proposal of a new customer offer	Success	46

**Table 1.** (Continued)

Organization sector	Core activity	Nb. of employees	Seller's function	Type	Purpose of the issue	Result	Duration of the interview (in minutes)
Health	Design and marketing of pharmaceutical products	>5,000	Medical Director	Risque	Proposal to re-measure the efficiency of a drug (treatment of childhood tumors)	Success	92
	Design and marketing of pharmaceutical products	>5,000	R&D Director	Opportunity	Project to integrate and strengthen our presence in the cancer drug treatment market	Failure	78
	National and regional health risk management	<5,000	Public health inspector	Risk	Request to launch a potentially highly controversial inspection in a public healthcare facility	Success	52
	Distribution of pharmaceutical products	<250	Marketing Manager	Opportunity	Proposal to create two new sales outlets	Failure	62

collaborating with the teacher on a research project in which they took full part. Each class received a training session on conducting semistructured interviews. Finally, three interviews that were not conducted according to the rules defined *ex ante* were excluded from the study.

During the interview, each seller-interviewee was asked to describe an issue that he or she had encountered during his or her work that he or she felt was strategic, focusing on how he or she had tried to convince senior management of it. To this end, each interview began with the following open-ended question: 'Can you tell me about the last time you tried to convince your manager about an issue that you felt was important?' As a result, each interview provided us with data on a single issue, although the seller-interviewees were naturally able to refer to other issues, for example, to compare actions. Care was taken not to use the terms 'narrative' and its possible derivatives (e.g., 'storytelling'), which might have indicated too explicitly to the seller-interviewees the form of the data sought in our study and guided their response accordingly. They were then given the freedom to choose their own words to facilitate the production of rich data that accurately reflected their experience (Slay & Smith, 2010). As a complement, thematic follow-up questions (Josselson, 2013) were also prepared based on Dutton and Ashford's (1993) processual model of issue selling and mobilized as needed during the interviews to focus the data collection on how the seller-interviewees had proceeded to convince their target.

In doing so, we were able to collect data of two different natures intertwined in the thread of the interviewee's remarks. First, the sellers we interviewed systematically told us about the content of the problem, that is, the reasons for its emergence, the stakeholders involved in the selling process, and the arguments put forward that may or may not have attracted the

attention of the decision-maker. Then, the seller-interviewees related more precisely the actions and situations in which they constructed their account of the problem as an instrument for selling it to the decision-maker.

### Data analysis

Consistent with a processual view of issue selling present in both the functional and discursive dimensions of the phenomenon (Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Garreau, 2020; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Sonenshein, 2006), our starting point for analysis was therefore to seek a response in the form of a process (Langley, 1999). Our data analysis method was divided into three consecutive steps.

The purpose of the first step was to verify the data collected that it was indeed a selling process. To do this, we carried out thematic coding based on the conceptual categories established in previous works describing this process (e.g., Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Requiring a low level of abstraction, this step allowed us to break down the content of the interviews. During this stage, we observed that the seller-interviewees all gave discourse, and in particular narrative, an important place in the success of the selling process. For example, several of them mentioned the importance of 'telling a narrative' or 'putting their problem into a narrative' in front of decision-makers. These initial elements led us to consider the issue-selling process as a narrative process. At this stage, we perceived in our data that the narrative was a central instrument used by an author (i.e., 'seller') to influence a receiver (i.e., 'target') (Ricoeur, 1983).

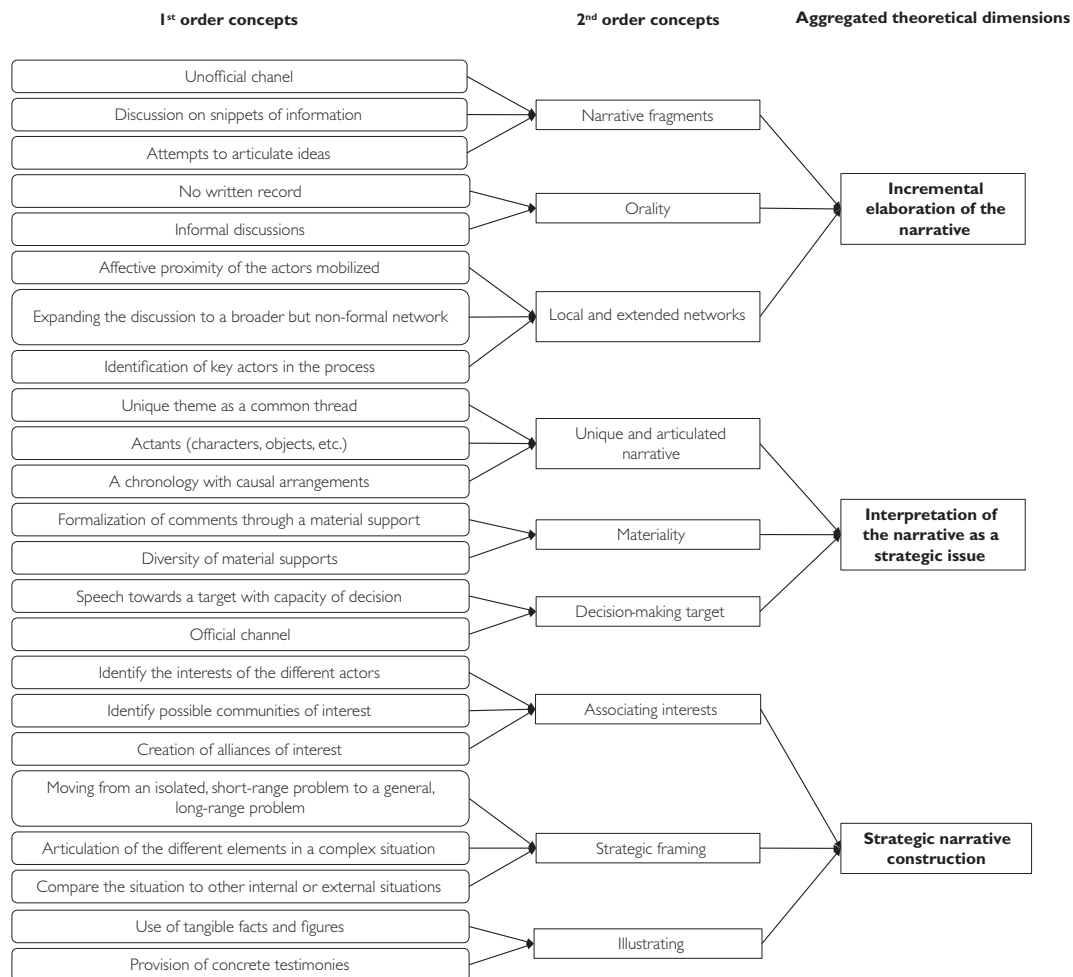
Once the narrative approach had been adopted, the second stage of our analysis entailed reconstructing the chronology of the selling process for each interviewee. This step was necessary because the statements of events by the seller-interviewees

were not linear as the dynamics of an interview inevitably lead to recursive moments with clarifying or exploratory questions to answer in greater depth when they seemed important to an interviewee. We have therefore systematically put in order the events reported by the interviewees that make up the selling process of the problem they were dealing with. Once we reconstructed the chronology of each process, we then identified the actions in this flow of events that were specifically related to the narrative construction of the issues. It then became apparent in each interview that the narratives developed in the context of the selling processes took shape progressively.

On this basis, in the third stage of our analysis, we finally inductively identified categories that allow us to structure our overall understanding of the narrative process of selling an issue from the emergence of the problem to the recognition by the target of its strategic scope or its abandonment by the seller. Combining content analysis and chronological analysis, this bracketing stage (Langley, 1999) revealed two distinct phases. First, the narrative was incrementally elaborated. This

phase is based on three properties: narratives that are fragmentary, oral, and collective. The seller used a network of actors around him or her to orally develop the narrative. Then, we identified a phase of interpretation of the narrative—in the theatrical sense of interpretation—as a strategic problem. In this phase, the narrative is presented in an articulated way, anchored in materiality, and aimed at a particular target. Our analysis has allowed us to complete our processual understanding of issue selling by identifying three mechanisms for moving from the first to the second phase. We have grouped these three mechanisms under the term strategic building. Figure 1 presents the final structure of the categories that emerged from our analysis.

This structuring of the data into categories emphasizes the dynamic dimension of the narrative under construction in the process of issue selling, and the ‘setting to music’ of these categories has led to a generic model of narrativization around a strategic issue that we present as an introduction to our results below (see Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Data structure.

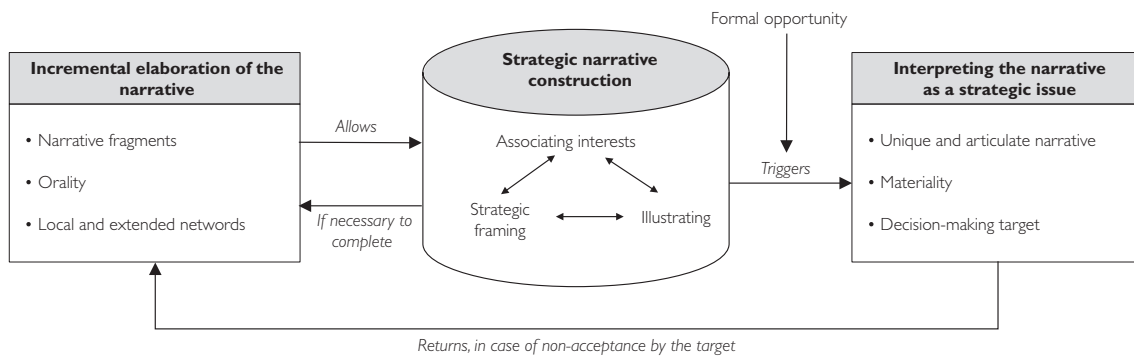


Figure 2. Narrative process of issue selling.

**Results: Unpacking the narrative elaboration of a strategic issue**

Our results propose a description of the process of issue selling from the point of view of narrativizing a strategic issue to convince a target. Based on the interviews and our analysis, we have identified two phases in this process: (1) an upstream phase, of incremental elaboration, in which the actor uses social interactions to constitute the fragments of his narrative, and (2) a downstream phase, of interpretation of the narrative as a strategic problem during a formal presentation to the target. The transition from one phase to the other is made possible by a strategic construction of the narrative where the seller articulates the various elements of the narrative to give it a strategic twist. Figure 2 below represents this process. The following paragraphs support the results underlying this representation, and the vignette at the end of the section shows how these categories are articulated in a given issue selling situation.

**The incremental elaboration of the narrative**

Our data show first that there is a significant time gap between the emergence of the problem and its presentation by the seller in the context of the strategic decision-making bodies of his or her organization. This gap shows that issue selling is a gradual process of ‘maturation’ [E29] that often requires ‘time’ [E29] and ‘patience’ [E34]. During the analysis, we identified a set of similar situations characterizing a phase of the process where a seller is groping for the development of his or her narrative. In this stage, the narrative is not yet fully formed. It emerges incrementally through fragments that develop in informal situations (property No. 1), governed by orality (property No. 2), between the seller and a multiplicity of actors forming a support network around the issue (property No. 3), subdivided into two types: a proximal network and an extended network. Additional data to those presented in the body of the text are provided at the end of each aggregated

dimension. Table 2 provides additional and representative citations for each of the three second-order concepts developed below.

**Narrative fragments in informal situations**

The strategic scope of an issue is not spontaneous but constructed. Our data show that this begins and is largely achieved in the context of situations that take place outside and before the official moments of testing the issue, such as presentations which aim to have the strategic scope officially recognized by boards of directors, management committees, or steering committees—the target decision-maker. These situations are presented as ‘informal’ [E26] or even ‘intimate’ spaces when close to the target [E2], where the issue is discussed between the seller and other audiences (presented below). The face-to-face or ‘small committee’ format is favored, as well as the use of the personal pronoun ‘tu’<sup>2</sup> [E2]. In these situations, we observed from our interviews that it is not a well-constructed narrative that is communicated by the seller but rather several narratives in a fragmentary state, not totally and always coherent, that are exchanged back and forth between a seller and various actors. In these situations, the seller is not only a sender but also a receiver. These fragments can be composed, for example, of proven or supposed facts related to the problem, information related to the existing strategy, or attempted explanations articulating elements. We have observed that these fragments are also often embedded in conversations with a broader purpose. Indeed, not all these situations have the primary objective of discussing the problem.

Further on, interestingly, several sellers indicated that they make instrumental use of this type of situation to construct their problem, particularly at the beginning of the process

<sup>2</sup> In French, the use of the second person singular (‘tu’) and plural (‘vous’) is different. The personal pronoun ‘Tu’ is generally used in a colloquial register, for example, with a relative or a friend. The personal pronoun ‘You’ is generally used for people with whom you wish to show a certain respect or maintain a certain social distance.



**Table 2. Additional quotes representative of the incremental elaboration of the narrative**

2nd order concepts	Additional citations
Narrative fragments	<p><i>It's in moments of intimacy that we can ask questions about how we feel and how things are going in the company for each employee, and we are more likely to open up when we are on first-name terms and drinking coffee rather than when we are in our office with other employees. [E2]</i></p> <p><i>We sometimes prefer the informal because when we want to present things in a more formal way, there are problems of rank and hierarchy in the company. We get into ego wars... We like to identify people in entities that are rather close to the business or the need and with whom we can discuss without really asking the question of hierarchy. [E26]</i></p>
Orality	<p><i>It was direct communication, there I didn't talk through email. I worked in direct communication. [E4]</i></p> <p><i>It often happens that it's informal and without a paper trail. Because when you want to present things in a more formal way, there are also issues of rank and hierarchy in the company that come up. [E20]</i></p>
Support networks (local and extended)	<p><i>Even though sometimes you think it would be better with a little more formal relationship, overall it's still more beneficial to know each other well. [E18]</i></p> <p><i>Even if in general you have to talk about it [the problem] with the people it concerns, there are people with whom you are more at ease, even in middle management. We'll often talk about it with the person with whom we have the most ease, or affinity, or proximity. [E33]</i></p> <p><i>Before sending an email and copying people, I can ask my colleague a question, say: 'Do you think I have formulated it well? In fact, colleagues from the same hierarchical level can sometimes help us, not so much by making a decision, but by giving us an outside view... because just asking your boss for an outside view might as well be asking someone else who isn't necessarily in a higher stratum. You don't necessarily need him for that.' [E17]</i></p>

when there is uncertainty about the reality of the associated event(s) and its strategic significance, as we have observed in most of our cases. These situations allow sellers to collect fragments of the problem's narrative from specific interlocutors who have information that they do not have access to and who they think might be important to construct the strategic problem. As one respondent notes, 'the first resource is the information we don't have' [E20]. This is often done through hypothetical formulations to encourage interlocutors to 'give their opinion' [E3]. These situations can also allow sellers to 'test' [E20] various fragments of the problem. These situations then form an 'unofficial channel' [E30] of communication about the problem, the purpose of which is to 'prepare the ground before getting management's approval' [E6]. This allows the sales assistant 'not to ask about the hierarchy' [E26] and the conventions that prevail in the 'official channel' [E30]. The 'coffee breaks' [E2; E3; E4; E23] are the most typical example of these situations that we have identified. As one respondent [E2] summarized, 'You are more likely to engage in a conversation over coffee than in an office meeting with several people'. In contrast, several interviewed managers pointed out that the more formal 'official channel' situations [E30] can sometimes introduce 'rank and hierarchy issues' or 'ego wars' [E26].

### Orality

Our data indicate that these informal situations for exchanging fragments of narratives are governed by an oral mode of communication that we will show is itself at the root of the regime of interpretation of a narrativized strategic problem. 'Work in

direct communication' [E4] represents a significant part of the selling process for the seller: Conversations take place in informal and often banal situations without the mediation of text and with little requirement for coherence. In these situations, the problem is often mixed with other subjects connected to it and associated with the professional context. Our respondents also indicated that orality has several advantages for developing the strategic scope of a problem, especially at the beginning of the selling process. On the one hand, avoiding the mediation of text saves the seller time, as it allows him or her to share an initial account of the issue more quickly. On the other hand, the absence of material traces has the advantage that the sales assistant can test not just one but several narrative fragments without 'making a subject of it' [E7], that is, making the problem less visible in the organization and reducing the risk of having discrepancies pointed out between different accounts, which would then diminish the credibility of the problem. As one respondent pointed out in a way that we found particularly illuminating:

*Before I send an email and copy certain people, I often ask my colleague the question. I ask him: 'Do you think I have formulated the problem correctly?' Because that can be important in the strategy, in the way you communicate a message to the client, to the prime contractor or whatever... [E3]*

### Local and extended networks

Finally, our data show that the informal situations characteristic of the incremental elaboration of the narrative are based on a network of actors in the organization who participate in the

construction and dissemination of the problem and who form what one manager described as 'an unofficial rather than an official channel' [E30]. This network is composed of two levels of actors: (1) a proximal network, largely predating the appearance of the problem and mobilized first by the seller most of the time, and (2) an extended network, after the appearance of the problem and mobilized next by the seller to propagate awareness of the problem in the organization. We have distinguished between these two levels of networks because affective proximity appears to be a discriminating factor in the way the seller selects his or her contacts, depending on whether he or she is at the beginning of the selling process or later.

We observed from our data that the problem is often discussed by the seller initially with people close to him, which we called a 'proximal network'. The main purpose of this network is to test different interpretations of the problem and to put the seller in touch with other actors (see 'extended network'). Sometimes considered 'friends'—although still considered 'professional relations' [E30]—close relations are people whose sentimental or intellectual affinities with the seller offer him or her possibilities of interacting with more ease and freedom of speech than they would have had in formal and codified situations. This offers the seller the possibility of 'testing [different versions of stories]' [E16]. This is because these 'intimate' relationships [E2] effectively suspend what might be calculating and self-interested motives in 'more formal' selling situations [E18], as one interviewee noted:

*Even if in general you have to talk about it [the problem] with the people it concerns, there are people with whom you are more at ease, even in middle management. We often talk about it first with the person with whom we have the most ease, affinity, or proximity. [E33]*

Finally, our analysis indicates that support from a network of close friends and family is complemented by support from an extended network. This network has 'different objectives' [E30], which are to collect information and to disseminate the problem widely within the organization. These supports are often 'very different' for two reasons. First, because they share less sentimental or intellectual affinity with the seller, they can potentially encompass more people with more diverse functions, not only within the organization but also potentially outside of it. External supporters can be service providers for the organization [E3; E6] or key audiences such as customers [E30], who can provide the seller with elements of analysis or an illustration of the problem. Our data reveal that there are four types of internal support. First, colleagues are in the same hierarchy line [E34; E17; E22; E26; E33; E4; E35]. These are the most frequently mobilized supports. They mainly provide 'an outside view' [E18] and complementary expertise. They are also (1) direct supervisors who are not decision-makers [E2; E17; E33]. This support is essential for two reasons. On the one hand,

they can provide the seller with information that helps him or her to 'understand the strategies adopted' [E29] or potential strategies for the organization—of which he or she is not always aware—and which he or she can link to the problem he or she is dealing with. On the other hand, they are in a privileged position to help relay the issue to the target when the seller does not have direct access to it. They are therefore valuable 'relays to the hierarchy' of the organization, encouraging it to 'position itself' regarding the issue [E26]. There are also (2) the seller's subordinates [E34; E35], who allow the seller to take advantage of a competence that the latter does not possess, for example, to produce financial analyses. Finally, in much more marginal cases, (3) the target decision-maker [E33], him or herself, can also sometimes be directly solicited by the seller. First, finding relevant support requires 'knocking on the right doors' [E4]. The participants note how the absence of communication or 'communication to the wrong actors' [E26] or 'to the wrong people' [E4] can in turn be fatal for the future of the issue. In general, this network brings together 'sponsors who communicate about the benefits of the project at any level and everywhere in the company' [E26], allowing the issue to spread—'to make little ones' [E3]—in the organization. Respondents indicate that the size of this community is central to building a common representation of the problem, stressing that 'the more people there are to carry the problem, the more visibility it will gain' [E35]. As one stated,

*There are people who will take the concept and defend it at levels that are not ours, even if they don't understand the whole concept, and who will sell the concept for us. [E26]*

### Strategic narrative construction

The second stage of our process is not a time phase per se but the combination of complementary mechanisms that allow sellers to move from upstream to the downstream phase. We have identified three mechanisms that allow sellers to confer sufficient strategic significance to be able to shift the narrative to the phase when the seller will most likely attempt to persuade the target through the interpretation of their narrative on a formal occasion. Table 3 provides additional, representative quotes for each of the three second-order concepts developed later.

### Associating interests

Our data indicate that the strategic valorization of an issue rests first on the association the seller makes of various interests in the organization. Not only those of the seller him—or herself but also more broadly those of people located in the networks, close and extended, of the 'regime of incremental elaboration of the narrative' that we presented previously. These interests can

**Table 3.** Additional citations for the strategic narrative construction

2nd order concepts	Additional citations
Associating interests	<p><i>There was a demand from these farmers [to develop more profitable crops], to move towards crops that were a little more special and a little more remunerative [...]. Afterwards, during the campaign launches, the sales representatives had the same expectation and did not hesitate to say it out loud, to ask for it. [...] The operations manager also had a budget to present in relation to the installations and he took my wishes into account. And so in the end, that unit helped us [the seller department] to get it accepted by management [the target]. [E4]</i></p> <p><i>There are colleagues I call and say, 'There's such and such a thing, what do you think? I think we should do this... We discuss it: "yeah, you're right," "well, okay" and then we move in the same direction so that the hierarchy hears two concordant sounds of bells. [...]. Finding allies, that's important'. [E36]</i></p>
Strategic framing	<p><i>We were dealing with a global problem for the company. We weren't just talking about the business aspect, because everything depends on the quality of the product, and we argued a lot about that with the management. [...]. The fact of saying that the organization of the lab was a challenge for innovation and for the marketing of new products. Financially as well [...]. I showed costs because it was one of the general objectives of the company to reduce its costs at that time. [E6]</i></p> <p><i>I had heard similar things before, situations that had gone wrong. Yes... One of my colleagues had already pointed out to me that in the field she had heard things like that, that the experts that we sent out into the field were sometimes a bit borderline. So this was obviously not a first, even if it was not necessarily the same people. And then my friends/colleagues had told me about it when I got back so well... [E22]</i></p> <p><i>No I didn't do comparisons with other applications in [my company] and in the end it missed my point when it came to making a decision. [E11]</i></p>
Illustrating	<p><i>Giving evidence, especially, quantified is important. You know, humans need evidence to see and believe. Just stating things verbally or scribbling a few remarks on a piece of paper in a meeting, it's not enough. [E33].</i></p> <p><i>You have to try to get the right testimonials that make you understand. For example, 'I saved 10% of my working time today' and so on and so forth. These are testimonials that are interesting arguments. [E16]</i></p> <p><i>Between the end of September and the end of November we got the results [of the complementary study] and in December we started to exchange again on the basis of the first results to show that we had a problem with a part of the consumers, and that for France it is absolutely necessary to go back to the previous recipe [...] On the basis of that, it gave us factual arguments to make this recommendation. And then [...] we were authorized to go back to the previous recipe and make a French exception. [E1]</i></p>

be located both at the group level, such as strengthening the political position of a department, and at the individual level, such as access to a 'position' or a 'promotion' [E33]. For example, one respondent observes, 'They are motivated to sell that thing because they will be able to say in their annual interview in their development "I helped create that thing" or "that thing was successful because I was there"' [E26]. For the seller, associating interests involve forging 'alliances' [E36] from the two networks above. These alliances add to the community of attention around the issue, which can 'speak with one voice' [E3; E1]. By limiting the risk of dissonance, they in turn reinforce the impression of coherence of the narrative and add the strength of conviction. As one respondent states, 'There is strength in numbers!' [E8]. The following example illustrates both the multiplicity of interests that can be included in an issue and the ability of a seller to articulate them and bring them together in a single narrative:

*There was a demand from these farmers [to develop more profitable crops], to move towards crops that were a little more special and a little more remunerative [...]. Afterwards, during the campaign launches, there were also sales representatives who had the same expectations and who did not hesitate to ask for it out loud. [...] The operations manager also had a budget to present in relation to the installations and he took my wishes into account. And so in the end, that unit helped us [the seller department (seller)] to get it accepted by management [the target]. [E4]*

Moreover, we observe that this union of interests is facilitated by the seller's involvement of the actors in the elaboration of the problem narrative. One interviewee explains:

*We set up this project with another colleague who complemented the technical aspects to my skills. We thought a lot between us about how to tell the story. This is very important. We must agree. [E26]*

As a result, as they invest in writing the narrative, these actors become characters in the problem narrative and act out the narrative themselves. In fact, several sellers indicated that not being able to 'shine the light on each other's interests' [E10] in the problem narrative is a hindrance.

### Strategic framing

In analyzing our data, we also found that the association of interests in a single, articulated narrative is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for an issue to be perceived as strategic by the target in formal decision-making situations. Sellers couple the action of associating various interests with the action of 'strategically framing' the issue. This action consists of articulating the issue as transcending the particular association formed by the seller. In other words, it amounts to transcribing a triggering event that may sometimes seem trivial into an issue that

has positive or negative consequences for the long-term functioning of one or more of the company's strategic activities, such as its 'turnover' [E1], 'innovation' [E8], 'new product commercialization' [E8; E6], or its reputation. Our data show that sellers do more than seek to defend one or more particular interests through their narrative. They put 'the interest of the organization' [E30] at the forefront of their narrative by associating the issue with a desirable or feared future. For an opportunity, for example, some focused on showing how their idea could 'benefit everyone [in the organization]' [E26]. For a threat, others focused on demonstrating its serious actual or potential consequences, such as the 'loss of customers' [E4].

*When you have a great idea in a big company, it doesn't belong to you in some way. It belongs to the company. So we have to try to make it benefit the company, which is multiple and belongs to many groups, many people. We must try to make it benefit everyone if we want it to be carried collectively. The worst thing is for a small group of people to appropriate a great idea and not want to share it. The best way to kill the idea is to say 'I own it' [...]. You always must try to show how the idea is beneficial to the whole company so that you don't stir up wars between one clan and another. [E26]*

The main way to scale a problem is to include elements of 'comparison of the problem with other similar situations' [E22; E11] past or present, which may be internal or external to the organization. Several respondents point out that the absence of such comparisons is likely to be 'missed' [E11] by the target when deciding about the problem. However, associating an issue with a collective cause through equivalence is not enough.

### Illustrating

We identify a final mechanism that complements the previous two. We observed that sellers systematically illustrate their stories with 'evidence' [E33]. These 'factual arguments' [E1] bring concrete knowledge to the general ideas about the future of their organization. This knowledge can be presented in the form of not only quantitative empirical data but also qualitative data. As far as quantitative data are concerned, illustration consists in particular of integrating 'figures' [E6; E33; E35] into the narrative to 'make things objective' [E4]. With regard to qualitative data, illustration consists of integrating, for example, a few 'good testimonies' [E1], such as 'feedback from a client' [E33]. Combined with the previous mechanisms, illustrating gives the narrative its full argumentative power by providing the target decision-maker with 'more concreteness' [E7; E3], thus anchoring the problem. Many sellers confirm that such a combination makes the issue 'more interesting [to the target]' [E1] and maximizes its chances of being perceived as strategic.

### Interpreting the narrative as a strategic issue

Once the incremental elaboration of the narrative is sufficiently advanced and strategic construction has been achieved,

a second phase of the selling process unfolds: the 'interpretation of the narrative as a strategic issue'. This describes the moment of interpretation—in the theatrical sense of the term—by the seller of his or her narrative to convince the decision-maker of the strategic significance of the issue.

*Communication of an idea is the first engine to get the guys upstairs to hear a new solution, a new idea [E26].*

Our data indicate that this interpretation is defined by three properties that respond symmetrically to those of the 'incremental narrative development' phase. We describe these properties in the following subsections of our results: (1) the presentation of a single, articulated narrative of the problem in formal selling situations, (2) in a material form, and (3) to the target. Table 4 provides additional and representative citations for each of the three second-order concepts developed later.

### Unique and articulated narrative

In this phase, in contrast to incremental narrative construction, when fragmentary narratives are informally exchanged between the seller and a plurality of actors, a well-formed narrative is primarily and univocally presented by the seller. This narrative is the concrete product of incremental elaboration and the three mechanisms previously identified that we have called 'strategic narrative construction'. Our data show that at this stage, the problem narrative has three canonical characteristics of a narrative: (1) a theme, (2) a chain of explanations, and (3) characters. Emerging as the narrative progresses, the theme of the problematic is essential because it allows the target decision-maker to imagine 'what we are talking about' [E31]. This amounts to associating a general category with one or a set of events included in the narrative. Two possible themes emerge from such narratives: an opportunity for the company, such as the 'development of a new product' [E4], or a threat, such as the 'risk of industrial espionage' [E27] or the 'loss of customers' [E4].

The identification of a theme is linked to a second operation: the attribution of a chain of explanations. In other words, the narratives of the issues are structured sequentially in the form of events generating cause-and-effect relationships organized around a plot. These causality are essential because they ensure a logical progression of the narrative. Moreover, our data highlight an element specific to the processes of issue selling. In the analyzed stories, the explanations are actively directed toward the future and a dynamic of action. Indeed, most of the managers insisted that it was important to conclude their stories by stating the potentially favorable or unfavorable consequences for the organization, in accordance with the issue perceived as an opportunity or a threat, and by proposing appropriate responses. For example, one manager interviewed stated:

**Table 4.** Additional citations for interpreting the narrative as a strategic issue

2nd order concepts	Additional citations
Unique and articulated narrative	<p>[Initial situation] Today, we sell a range of nutrition for very young animals. [Intrigue] Today on the Russian market, they do not have the technical expertise for these products from a nutritional point of view but also from a technological point of view. [This means that when we offer our products, given their technical nature, we see a difference in the performance of the animals. In Russia, there are very large farms, large companies, companies that raise 10,000, 20,000, 50,000 animals, when the average size of a French farm is 200. [Causality] So we can really reach the large industrialists who have a large consumption potential and who are obviously very attentive to profitability. [Theme—Opportunity] And so we had an opportunity to develop our 'Nutrition' activity in Russia. [...]. [End—Action dynamics] We had to seize it!. [E6]</p> <p>I'll use the example of a new product development opportunity. I had a demand that was starting to be made and I saw for myself the risk of losing customers. I mostly expressed that this was the shift we wanted to make and the risk of not making the shift was losing customers. [E4]</p> <p>It would affect our work and its quality and in our field it is unthinkable. We can't imagine reducing the quality of our research, it would lead to putting on the market non-compliant or dangerous drugs. [...]. When we work for public health, it is not our interests that count! [E35]</p>
Materiality	<p>When we go to try to convince the CEO, at that point, we do it in the form of presentations... [E3]</p> <p>It's clear that we didn't prepare well for the operation because we left little paper trail. You must know the quote: 'Words fly away, writings remain.' [...] It is true that often few reports were made. This meant that we arrived in front of the R&amp;D director without formal proof of what we were saying. We should have had figures, graphs, proof in fact [...] (Silence). [E35]</p> <p>We were clearly in a meeting [to present the problem], and so I formalized it. We wrote it down. It's written down in a document and it leaves a record. [E20]</p>
Decision-making target	<p>At some point you need a concrete commitment from guys at a very high level to say 'we're going ahead' or 'we're not going ahead' [...]. Otherwise the thing weakens. If it's not officially framed, the thing just goes away with the person. [E26]</p> <p>It is very important to make it clear that it is part of the managers' roadmap [...] So we have to make them understand that it is good for the company and that they will benefit from it at some point [E10].</p>

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity, we have inserted into this situation the coding categories that allowed us to highlight the properties of the problem narrative.

*From a threat of losing the market I presented the opportunity to continue our development and to bring to our Russian customers products at more competitive prices than what we could do here in France. [E6]*

Finally, we find *actants*, human or nonhuman, engaged in the narratives who have their own logic of action. They represent the characters of the problematic narrative.

### Narrative materiality

The regime of interpretation of the narrative as a strategic issue is characterized by a presentation supported by material aids, which can include both textual and visual elements, such as 'graphics' [E35] or 'models' [E11]. These can be 'presentations' [E3; E22] of the 'PowerPoint' type [E34], 'notes' [E26; E24], or 'emails' [E17; E26; E27; E4]. These often take the conventional form of 'studies', 'benchmarks' [E3], or 'business plans' [E32], often standardized by the organization, for example, in the form of 'profiled templates [...] that go through a computer system' [E15]. More fundamentally, the respondents stressed that it was necessary during this phase to 'formalize' [E6; E26; E20] and 'leave a written trace' [E17; E26; E27; E4; E24]. The narrative must be extracted from a fragmentary oral state proper to incremental elaboration by materializing it with the formal proof devices of the regime of interpretation in an expected manner. Materialization has

two advantages. First, it makes it possible to 'easily find the information communicated [about the problem] at a given moment' [E17] to 'actually see what has been done' [E24]. Second, it makes it possible to 'create a precedent' [E22] that is 'dated' [E24]. It allows 'remembering that we had already talked about it [the problem] before' and [...] that it was already a problem for which a solution must be found' [E22]. However, beyond this reminder function, formal materialization makes it possible to create a reference point that is collectively binding over time because it is visible to all. 'Words fly away, writings remain!' [E35] one of the respondents indicated to us. As in this ancient proverb, not leaving any written trace of the narrative constitutes an act of 'bad preparation' [E35]. Without this, 'the subject [the problem] turns around and nobody answers' [E24].

*It's important to crystallize at some point, to leave a trace. Otherwise, we are... Well, nobody answers and the subject goes on like that. If you just ask people verbally: 'Oh well, I didn't get your answer, what do you think?' well, in fact the subject tends to spin, and nothing much happens. And I also consider that the more actors are concerned, the more it is absolutely essential to formalize in a note or even in an email, to propose scenarios... [E24]*

However, others mentioned two risks associated with materialization. There is the risk of the loss of 'control' [E26] over communication once the trace has been produced and the



risk of 'bias [of understanding]' [E11] when this trace is interpreted by others to whom the seller has no access.

### Decision-making target

The target decision-maker's positive assessment is essential for its strategic significance to be endorsed. Recognition of the strategic scope of the issue by the seller's direct supervisors does not mean that the target decision-maker will also recognize it. In most cases, the target is the only one in a position to decide to act and to mobilize the necessary resources in the face of an issue, such as financing a 'feasibility study' [E30] in the case of a strategic opportunity. This final evaluation has a decisive effect on the future of the issue.

Moreover, this well-formed narrative takes place in the context of formal strategic decision-making situations specific to each organization, such as boards of directors, executive committees, or management committees. These bodies constitute moments of 'selection of what is important [for the company]' [E22]. Although their number varies according to the culture of the organization, they are systematically present. They form the 'official' [E30; E22] and 'solemn' [E19] channel for selling the issue where 'information is transmitted in a formal way and not 'between two corridors' [E19]. In these highly codified situations, it is necessary to 'explain a diagnosis [...] in a convincing way' [E19].

### From a cumulative model to a model as an analysis grid

The model we have presented is based on a cumulative approach (Garreau, 2020). To bring the model to life by 'setting it to music' (Gioia et al., 2013) with the emergent categories that constitute it, we present in Vignette No. 1 below a case of issue selling from the interview [E10] that articulates all the categories described earlier (i.e., second-order concepts and aggregated dimensions). This vignette allows us to better understand how an issue-selling process unfolds in context and to demonstrate the replicability of our model from one issue-selling case to another. We start by describing some contextual elements and then highlight how this strategic situation can be understood through the different categories of our model. In particular, we see how the different categories—indicated in square brackets—within each of the model's dimensions are articulated in the sale of the strategic issue to its management.

In the incremental development phase, narrative elements are based on multiple oral interactions that iteratively feed into the development of fragmentary stories. These narratives develop outside of hierarchical principles because an immature idea would have been nipped in the bud before it was given a chance. The strategic building phase then shows that the seller will identify the actors who may have an interest and prove how the solution, beyond serving the interests of some, may

prove vital to the company. The seller then develops a draft solution that illustrates the proposal. The interpretation of the narrative in the form of a strategic problem can then take place in the classic way, with a PowerPoint presentation articulating the diagnosis, the issue, and the possible solution to management.

### Discussion

This article contributes to the work on issue selling by asking *how sellers create a narrative to convince decision-makers of the strategic importance of issues*. It makes three contributions. The first is to provide a more collective and emergent view of issue selling than existing work, which occurs through the fabrication of a narrative. The second is to highlight strategic building as an articulation between the preparation phase and the formal presentation phase. The third contribution of our article sheds light on the backstage preparation of strategy narratives.

### Issue-selling as a collective narrative process

While seminal work on issue selling has shown that different actors around the seller help him or her sell a strategic issue (Dutton et al., 2001; Dutton & Ashford, 1993), our work is in line with the most recent findings evoking the complexity of the relationships between these actors throughout the process (Lauche & Erez, 2023; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018). Our results support that issue selling is a relational process supported by narrative work (Gond et al., 2018; Howard-Grenville, 2007). While the seller remains the main architect of these relationships, his or her ability to act is the result of a much earlier, distributed, and reciprocal construction of meaning than existing work has shown to date. The work occurs earlier than previously thought, in that it largely precedes the formal moments of sale (i.e., presentation). Many peripheral actors play a key role from the very beginning, as they provide the seller with the information that is essential for him or her to form the conviction that the problem does or does not have a strategic scope. Very early on, the seller and peripheral actors develop, confront, and reposition different interpretations of the problem in the form of narrative fragments during the 'incremental narrative building' phase. This work is also more distributed than previously thought, as we clarify the way in which these actors relate to the seller. We show that they are organized in two types of networks. The first is based on affective proximity to the seller (i.e., proximal network) and the second on professional proximity (i.e., extended network). Finally, this construction is more reciprocal than current studies have shown, insofar as the strategic valorization of a problem is partly based on linking the interests of these different actors in the narrative. In this way, the seller ensures a collective dependence on the fate of the issue, which guarantees allies who can

### Vignette I. Synthesis of the model from one case of issue selling

As 'innovation project manager', the 'seller' interviewed has the job of identifying new technologies and solutions that his company [in the energy sector] should develop, and of defending them to his management without whose approval 'nothing is done', as he confided to us. During the interview, he explained to us the sale of a project consisting of replacing an energy consumption data processing solution with a new solution that he considered to be less costly. According to him, this sale was 'his best success', on the one hand, because the new solution he proposed 'did not come from above' and, on the other hand, because it 'collided' with the existing solution, which had been under development for 10 years. This generated a lot of resistance in the organization. The narrative dimension quickly proved to be decisive in 'creating buy-in' during this sales process. We had to 'tell the right story' to 'find the right words'.

[*Incremental elaboration of the narrative*] Selling the solution first required a significant amount of preparation time. It was necessary to 'give time to time' to present a sufficiently convincing story to the organization's decision-makers. [*Orality*] First, because our salesperson had to 'convince himself' of the strategic significance of this new idea, but also because at the beginning of the process, few people seemed convinced by this idea during informal exchanges, and therefore willing to take risks to defend it. [*Narratives fragments*] This time was made up of many 'informal moments' of discussing the solution on the fly and gradually stabilizing a narrative. [*Local and extended network*] This made it possible to avoid the 'problems of rank and hierarchy' that are particularly present in decision-making bodies and that could have weakened the idea at an early stage of maturation. [*Narratives fragments*] In the course of such informal exchanges, a group of actors gradually formed around the solution proposed by the salesman, and they proved to play an important role throughout the sale. First, to help the seller imagine the new solution, but also to carry it forward into the organization. [*Local and extended network*] Described by our seller as the 'first circle', these 'relays' were actors with whom he had 'ties and shared a common vision and way of doing things' in the organization. Other actors qualified as 'peripheral' such as external consultants were added and had an important role in the sales process by bringing a specific competence, for example, 'on the technical aspect'.

[*Strategic construction*] Three elements proved to be necessary at the same time to develop a story that was 'strong enough' to be presented to official decision-making bodies. [*Associating interests*] First, the seller quickly realized that the potentially strategic scope of the solution he was carrying was likely to affect many actors in the organization. He then chose to involve them in the construction of the story in order to 'have a communication that brings people together and not one that is cliquey, and to tell the same story' so that everyone 'finally finds their interest in it'. [*Strategic framing*] However, the seller felt that it was also important to show that the proposed solution was not simply the sum of interests. Transcending these interests was particularly important to avoid a recurring phenomenon according to our interviewee when selling a strategic idea: 'clan and ego wars'. To this end, he insisted in the story of the new solution that 'the solution was not just good for the company as a whole, but vital'. [*Illustrate*] At the same time, he felt it was necessary to show in the story what the solution looked like in concrete terms (here in the form of a proof of concept) and that it was already producing positive results. Stepping back at the time of the interview, he pointed out that managers know that there are a lot of 'nice ideas on paper; but they are really just flash in the pan and will never get off the ground'.

[*Interpretation of the narrative*] [*Materiality*] Once strategic construction was achieved, the seller finally felt ready to bring the story of his solution to the strategic committee, which he materialized in a short PowerPoint presentation. [*Unique and articulated narrative*] It was structured sequentially from an introduction presenting the problematic context to the conclusion presenting the positive effects of the solution and the next steps. [*Decision-making target*] With top management having only a few minutes to devote to each topic in these meetings, this robust storytelling contributed decisively to the success of the sale. Ultimately, this narrative allowed the executive to link the newly proposed solution to several strategic areas of the organization (e.g., self-consumption and grid quality) and ultimately to 'bend the [organization's] roadmap' by validating it.

provide valuable resources, such as contacts in the organization and information.

Finally, the narrative plays a key role because it offers the flexibility necessary to link different actors within the same unit of meaning (Gabriel, 2004). This flexibility allows the seller to combine various perspectives coherently around the issue. In this way, the narrative constitutes a mode of presentation of reality whose produced meaning exceeds the possibilities offered by simple argumentation (Bruner, 2004) to which existing works have too often reduced the issue selling process (e.g., Dutton & Ashford, 1993).

### The key role of 'Strategic construction' in issue-selling processes

Our model then reveals the mechanisms that allow the seller to give the issue a strategic scope through his or her narrative. This sheds light on the articulation, rarely explained in previous work (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), between 'packaging'—which we have called 'incremental narrative elaboration', where the

narrative emerges and is shaped from narrative fragments—and 'selling', on the other hand—which we have called 'narrative interpretation', where a well-formed narrative is presented in moments of formal decision.

In this article, we reveal that this articulation, called 'strategic building', consists of three mechanisms: associating interests, strategically framing the issue, and illustrating the issue in narrative form. By combining these mechanisms, the seller can tell a narrative to the target decision-maker with the best chance of convincing him or her of the strategic importance to the organization. By proposing the concept of 'strategic edification', we thus describe the issue selling as a less linear process than existing work has claimed by identifying the factors that condition whether an issue will be perceived as strategic in formal selling situations (i.e., the 'narrative interpretation' phase). These three conditions together can also provide a normative framework to help sellers construct a narrative that will convince their target about an issue they consider strategic.

Finally, these findings deepen our understanding of how a problem is labeled strategic in organizations more broadly. For

example, while Gond et al. (2018) highlight three forms of coupling (cognitive, relational, and material) in the work of 'strategizing', our research shows how this work is embodied by a seller:

### **Unpacking the backstage of strategic narratives construction**

By analyzing issue selling as narrative elaboration, this research also contributes to narrative perspectives on strategy (e.g., Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1991). As an emerging strategic phenomenon, issue selling offers fertile ground for understanding the process of constructing and disseminating such narratives, which are still only partially captured in strategy work (see also Fenton & Langley, 2011; Vaara & Pedersen, 2013).

Our results show that the strategic significance of a problem is conferred by a narrative that emerges from two 'relational spaces' (Mair & Hehenberger, 2014): the incremental development and the presentation of the narrative. We propose to refer to these two spaces as the backstage and the stage of strategic narratives. These two spaces highlight, among other things, that these two situations of narrative enunciation are not opposed as traditionally presented—an opposition found in what we call 'constructivist' and 'deconstructivist' conceptions of narratives (see Boje, 1991)—but that they coexist within strategic processes such as issue selling. On the stage (i.e., interpretation of the strategic narrative), it is a well-formed and materialized narrative (Rantakari & Vaara, 2016) of the 'grand narrative' type (Bakhtin, 1984) that is presented by the seller in formal strategic decision-making situations, such as a meeting of a board of directors or executive committee. However, 'incremental narrative development' in our model shows that strategic narratives are not immediately ready for the stage. There is another relational space—one that often escapes the attention of the researcher—that can be described as 'behind-the-scenes narratives'. While the research has highlighted that emergent strategic processes cover a part of the 'pathway' (Bouty et al., 2019) and concealment (e.g., Dutton et al., 2001) of issues through concepts such as 'ante-strategy' (see Dameron & Torset, 2012) or 'secrecy' (Toegel et al., 2021), we show that concealment is structured in relation to a scene through the production of a narrative. The backstage is characterized by a set of 'backstage conversations' (Ford et al., 2008, p. 372) with shifting contours. These conversations are less dedicated to the formal sale of the issue than to the preparation of this sale. Where the stage values the coherence of a univocal narrative, the backstage area is governed by a polyphony of narrative fragments that clash, respond to each other, and are repositioned by a plurality of actors that escape the control of any single actor such as a 'seller' (Benoît-Barné & Martine, 2021; Boje et al., 2015; Hazen, 1993). Providing a space for

experimenting with possible futures, the backstage area is the laboratory of emerging strategic processes, a prerequisite stage for the elaboration of a well-formed narrative that is primed to trigger the decision-making devices on stage. They are essential for the person who is responsible for the issue to understand the representations and interests of the different actors involved and for him or her to be able to articulate them in the framework of a well-formed narrative with a convincing strategic scope. For example, we have shown that the fragmented (through the support network) and tacit (without any material trace) circulation of information specific to these situations offers him or her better control of information and margins of maneuvering.

### **Limitations and research avenues**

This article opens new avenues of research. A first limitation of our research is that it was only based on retrospective accounts. A design in which the issue-selling process could be captured in real time in one or two organizations is an interesting perspective. This type of design is nevertheless difficult to implement. On the one hand, it implies privileged access for the researcher; and on the other hand, the future of each problem is not only very uncertain but can take a long time to develop. However, the combination of insider/outsider collaboration (Bartunek, 2008) and logbooks completed by field actors (Balogun et al., 2003) could help overcome these obstacles. Second, our attention to the initial phase called 'incremental narrative development' showed that the identified issue does not yet have a well-defined strategic scope. A research perspective could focus the analysis on this phase and in particular on the efforts of sellers to negotiate support from those who may ultimately agree to develop the final narrative. This approach to issue selling through the prism of negotiation seems to us to better explain how actors manage to bring strategic issues to higher levels of the organization. Finally, this article shows a collective dimension of issue selling, particularly in the phase of incremental elaboration when the seller relies on a network of close and familiar actors to develop fragments of the narrative. The fact remains that the seller always appears as a central figure in the process. Conversely, can we imagine selling processes without a central actor; where a collective would carry a narrative without crystallizing it through a central person? How would the collective narrative process unfold? These are all questions that our article raises, thus calling for future research to continue the analysis of issue selling as a narrative.

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