

# Just Say No

When doing nothing might be the right decision



By Roger Snow

In a doubleheader against the Chicago White Sox in June 1976, Toby Harrah of the Texas Rangers did something that had never been done before and has never been done since.

And it may never be done again.

He did nothing.

Harrah played 18 innings in the field that afternoon—at shortstop, no less—without a ball being hit or thrown his way. No grounders. No pop-ups. No liners. There was no need for Harrah to even tinker with his glove.

*Guinness Book of World Records* memorialized Harrah's non-accomplishment as the "Do Nothing Record." It was right there, next to a woman with fingernails so long she could play jai alai with them, and twin brothers so heavy they could crush the suspension on a motorcycle just by straddling it.

And, judging from the picture accompanying that entry, it looks like they just might have.

In baseball—on defense, anyway—you have to wait, chew your chaw, scratch your undercarriage, and wait for the ball to find you. You can't force the action.

But in business you can. Happens all the time. Companies start new projects, they find acquisition targets. They hire and fire, invest and divest, synergize and strategize.

But they rarely do nothing.

Though maybe they should.

At least occasionally.

Steve Jobs, the Oscar Wilde of modern industry when it came to quotable quotes, once said about his time at Apple: "I'm as proud of the things we didn't do as the things we did."

As proud. Think about that. As proud as he was of revolutionizing the way music is commercialized, as proud as he was of the iPod and the iPad, as proud as he was of transforming the way people interact with machines and each other, he was as proud of those roads untaken or ultimately abandoned.

Here's why.

Time, money and energy being finite, there are only so many things you can do. Or at least do well. The corollary being you can indeed pursue every opportunity, every initiative, every balloon-bubble thought that pops into your head, but it's

more likely than not you will end up wasting your time, burning your money, and squandering your energy.

How to undermine such overload? Just. Say. No.

In business, you have three cracks at this: in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end. It's just like poker. And, as in poker, the decision to dump gets harder—psychologically and mathematically—the further along you are. Pot odds creep into the mix. So does stubbornness.

But laying down is often the best move. Knowing when to do so, however, depends on which stage of the decision process you find yourself, and it all starts with the...

## Early No

In the movie *Casino*, there's a placard behind Robert DeNiro's desk that has two words on it. The first, written in the itty-bittiest, teeny-tiniest font, is "YES," and the other, spelled out in letters that in comparison look like sequoia trees, is "NO."

But with all due respect to DeNiro, aka Ace Rothstein, aka Lefty Rosenthal, those proportions are incorrect. In fact, in this, the opening phase of decision-making, you should say yes a lot more than you say no.

Unless the idea is so preposterous (the car periscope, the XFL, guaranteed-play video poker) that it can be dismissed out of hand, don't. Give it a think. Do a little research. See if it has potential, or if it has potential for potential under a different embodiment.

In other words, instead of finding 100 reasons why something won't work, find one reason why it can, because the real crucible is coming next with the...

## Middle No

Just as the default decision in the early going was "yes," the reflex here should be "no." As in "hell no." Because you are now past conception, past contemplation, past free or nearly free perusal of the idea, and are about to establish a budget and a timetable to make this thing—whatever this thing is—a reality.

Speak now or forever hold your peace, as

they say.

As a general rule of thumb, the same percentage of ideas that make it though the first stage should be killed at this stage. It just takes discipline. If you can't construct a beyond-reasonable-doubt argument for proceeding with the project, one backed by solid financial modeling, then abort. Because if you don't, you will end up facing the toughest no of all, the...

## Late No

You've spent months, maybe years, on this project, getting it ready for the marketplace. You've spent financial and political capital. You've beaten back the naysayers and coaxed those on the fence over to your side.

But there's a rub to all this.

Inherent in any endeavor with a long gestation period is the possibility—more so the likelihood—the world will have changed by the time it's ready. Take the banana. Crisp and ripe and yellow with a hint of green. But what if you waited two years to eat it? Yuck. It will come out the same way it went in, and twice as fast.

The problem is that, by this point, you're pot-committed. In for a pound, what's another penny? Which explains why the late-stage no almost always yields to the crying-call yes.

Which in turn explains New Coke, Harley-Davidson perfume, and the Pontiac Aztec. (Damn, that whip was fugly.)

And unless launching the product or service will cause irreparable harm to your company or your career, you might as well take a shot. Who knows, maybe your pessimistic premonitions were exaggerated, or, at the very least, maybe you will be able to dig through the wreckage and find something salvageable for the future. Don't laugh. That's how Ultimate Texas Hold 'em came to be.

But hey, as foyer said of the penthouse, that's a whole other story altogether.

*Roger Snow is a senior vice president with Scientific Games. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Scientific Games Corporation or its affiliates.*