

# Football teaches lessons in negotiation



SCOTT DROBOS

This summer, like many of you, I watched with growing unease as the U.S. debt-ceiling crisis exposed a dangerous lack of negotiating acumen within Congress. With a sovereign debt default looming, members of Congress engaged in positional negotiations that had the feel of an ugly game of football — dominated by fumbles, false starts and personal fouls.

Football is, by design, a zero-sum game of us versus them and the debt negotiation was similarly portrayed as a win-lose contest. Such bargaining is inherently antagonistic, as each party strives to gain ground toward diametrically opposed goals. Negotiation should not be viewed this way — the goal is to reach mutual agreement, not to defeat an opponent. However, even the best intentioned collaborative discussions may devolve into competitive bargaining without a well-defined framework. The unstructured

nature of the debt negotiations led to repeated breakdowns in the talks, and in this regard Congress would have done well to model the context — if not the competitiveness — of a game of football:

**1.** Agree on the rule book. Parties should engage in meta-negotiations before bargaining, clearly outlining how negotiations will be conducted in terms of both the process and the procedures. By using meta-negotiation, the terms, methods, expectations and roles are agreed upon in advance. As in football, rules must be clearly defined, documented and enforced.

Had congressional leaders and the president conducted meta-negotiations, there would have been no question when, where and how the negotiations would occur — and which leaders would be ultimately responsible for a deal.

**2.** Pick a starting quarterback. Who has authority to negotiate and sign off on an agreement? Guidance comes from numerous sources, but there must be an individual or committee selected and empowered to get a deal done. Good faith negotiations are not possible without belief that an agreement will be honored. Throughout the debt crisis, no one was sure who had authority to negotiate. Obama and Boehner, Cantor and Biden, the “Gang of Six,” Ryan, McConnell, Reid — all engaged in negotiations for which none had full authority to commit to an outcome.

In the heat of a football game, the quarterback may elect to change a play called in from the sideline, based on what he sees on the field. Coaches put their faith in the quarterback to recognize when an audible is necessary and, once the ball is snapped, the offense is committed to the play. Plays might be reviewed to ensure the rules were followed, but there are no take-backs. Had Congress collectively selected and delegated representative authority, negotiations could have been conducted efficiently, focused on the overall goal.

**3.** Be aware of the clock. Most negotiations are time-based. As the debt clock ticked away, the full faith and credit of the United States was put in jeopardy. Good negotiations focus first on elements of a deal that both parties can more easily agree on. Starting with less contentious “common ground” ensures key components are not thrown together at the last minute, like a proverbial “Hail Mary” pass. Additionally, early successes create positive momentum and build trust between the parties, as they begin to see progress towards an agreement. In the end, Congress raised the debt ceiling without consensus on the details — punting the deficit negotiations to a committee which must recommend a proposal by Thanksgiving.

**4.** Practice good sportsmanship. Respect, honesty and a sense of fairness are critical elements in a collaborative and principled negotiation. Hardball

tactics such as threats or ultimatums only entrench positions and erode trust, particularly when played out on a public stage. Football referees ensure the rule book is followed, and players must abide by the rules of good sportsmanship. When negotiators “play dirty,” other participants must call them out on it and refer back to the framework agreed on during meta-negotiations.

Competing parties often assume they understand each other’s motivations and, as a result, they focus on holding their respective positions rather than trying to understand the interests of the other party. The better approach is for both parties to focus on the underlying needs of the other and then brainstorm for solutions to meet those needs. Success often involves compromise as bona fide win-win outcomes are not always possible, but creative brainstorming ensures the best alternatives for mutual benefit are explored and concessions are not arbitrary.

Ideological differences make any negotiation challenging, but those difficulties can be managed through a collaborative approach within a well-defined framework. If our elected officials can take a few pages from football’s playbook, they might even win some fans back in the upcoming election season.

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## Use staff to garner attention at a tradeshow

By Jane Schmitt  
SPECIAL TO ATLANTA BUSINESS CHRONICLE

The experts agree: Bigger isn’t always better when it comes to displays at tradeshow.

The ultimate goal is engaging potential customers, but a lavish booth isn’t necessarily the answer. What you really need is friendly, knowledgeable staff people who can initiate conversations that lead to future sales.



**Lacey**  
Exhibit Designers  
& Producers  
Association

“Bigger is not always better when you’re talking about tradeshow exhibits,” said Kelly Lacey of the **Exhibit Designers & Producers Association**, which has more than 400 corporate members in 18 countries. “In some cases, bigger is just

bigger, and there’s not a whole lot going on in that bigger environment.”

Here are some things to keep in mind for your next event:

**1.** The show floor is an exciting environment, but true success comes from effective planning of your space and good people representing your business.

“If you don’t have engaging people working your booth to bring visitors into that space — people who know what they’re talking about, who are welcoming — it won’t matter if you have a 2,000-square-foot booth or 200 square feet,” Lacey says.

Your people are your No. 1 resource. “I have clients who may take an 8-by-10 booth at a show but the people they bring in to work that booth are sales professionals with dynamic personalities,” she said. “They want to be there. They want to engage with a potential customer or prospect and educate them on who they are and what it is they can provide to help them with their business initiatives.”

**2.** Take advantage of technology to help you do more with less in these budget-conscious times.

“Technology now provides a myriad of tools to reach your prospects and



**Weisgal**  
Trade Show  
Exhibitors  
Association

customers,” said Margit Weisgal, president and CEO of the **Trade Show Exhibitors Association**. The group describes itself as “the voice of exhibitors around the globe.”

“As the target audience shifts from Gen X to Gen Y, using technology tools — social media, PDAs, even websites — effectively will become even more important. Dedicate a staff person to learn and understand the best practices of technology and to stay current with new developments.”

Lacey of EDPA suggests placing a banner ad on the event website. “And if you have a chance to do the pre-show e-mail blast, those usually cost around \$500 — not a lot of money. Do it,” she said.

**3.** Don’t underestimate branding. “You want to have engaging graphics,” Lacey said. “You need things that very clearly state your company name and identify what you do. How many times have you walked by a booth and seen a company name but you have absolutely no clue what they do.”

Install a flat-screen monitor with looping video to show what your business is all about.

“This can be very helpful,” she said. “It captures people’s attention as they’re walking down the aisle, especially if they’ve never heard of you before.”

Weisgal agrees. “The exhibit and the associated graphics can act as an additional staff

person, qualifying the audience by attracting prospects based on the message. Too often, exhibitors design their booths while standing inside,” she says. “Step into the aisle and view your booth from the visitors’ perspective. Does it speak to them?”

“At one show I attended, I saw graphics that went all the way to the floor,” she adds. “Anything below chest height will never be seen, and you only have four seconds to grab attention. Your message should give attendees a reason to enter your space and start a conversation.”

**4.** Tune in to your audience. “It is the job of the exhibitor to determine the size of its target audience from amongst the attendees,” Weisgal says. “Not everyone is a prospect; figure out who they are and how many of them will be at the event. This will drive the size of the exhibit.”

“It’s more important to give this niche group a good reason to visit with you. As a guide, multiply the number of staff people — per shift, if applicable — times the number of show hours times five. Then take that total (and) multiply by three for the number of visitors to target.”

**5.** Freebies aren’t the only way to attract visitors.

“Nothing works on every person all the time. Use a mix of tools to reach your audience. Freebies only attract scavengers. If you use a promotional product, learn how to use them correctly: as a reward for visiting with you and allowing themselves to be qualified,” Weisgal says.

**Schmitt** writes for Buffalo Business First, a sister publication to Atlanta Business Chronicle.

## HOW TO

### TRADESHOW

#### Top Tips

- Friendly, knowledgeable people out front often make a bigger splash than a lavish exhibit.
- Use technology to your advantage before, during and after the show.
- Lose the tchotchkes. Put some thought into promotional items that potential customers will want to keep instead of the usual trinkets that get discarded.

#### On the Web

- Exhibit Designers & Producers Association: [www.edpa.com](http://www.edpa.com)
- Trade Show Exhibitors Association: [www.tsea.org](http://www.tsea.org)