

A GUIDE TO MAKING AN EFFECTIVE SALES PITCH

MARK LANE SEEKS ADVICE ON SELLING YOUR GOODS AND SERVICES TO POTENTIAL CUSTOMERS WITH HELP FROM CHAMBER MEMBERS

AS A JUNIOR journalist working on a trade magazine more than a decade ago, I was once asked to accompany one of the advertising sales team – let's call him Jeremy – on a 'pitch' to a prospective client – who we shall call Mr X. This was, potentially, a major booking and it was hoped that my presence – a member of the editorial team – would show Mr X how serious we were about his business.

We arrived at Mr X's office and Jeremy began a long and rambling pitch as to why Mr X should book a series of adverts with the magazine. Ten minutes in, Mr X began to look bored. He tried to chip in with some questions but Jeremy evaded them. He clearly had his own agenda and wasn't going to budge from it. Sensing this, Mr X switched off completely. Then, after 15 minutes, he sat up, called an abrupt halt to the meeting, and asked us both to leave. Bizarrely, Jeremy continued with his presentation, seemingly oblivious to outside interference. Eventually, in what was one of the more surreal incidents of my publishing career, myself and Mr X had to usher Jeremy out the door, virtually man-handling him.

Now, I'm a writer by trade but even I know there are better ways of pitching to a client than this. In the pressure to earn his commission, Jeremy broke every rule in the book. But how could he have handled this situation differently? And more generally, what is the most effective way of making a lasting impression on a client or audience?

Heather Martin is a business development executive with Datek Solutions. They provide Synergy services in the UK. Like many companies, she uses Thames Valley Chamber events regularly as means of marketing her company. She says: "We use effective networking as part of our overall sales and marketing strategy.

"However, giving an effective and memorable pitch at any networking event takes planning and practice. The biggest temptation is to always try to say too much – ignoring the often unwritten rule of exceeding the time allowance. This is unfair on the other contributors who have complied with this request – but can also backfire since it looks unprofessional and the audience in my experience, just switches off."

Offering her own advice on making an

effective pitch, Heather says: "I try to make my pitch memorable and sometimes even entertaining. The use of a prop is good, and always a help. It could be an up to date and accurate statistic, or a newsworthy topic that can link to your business product/service. Wherever possible, and appropriate you should incorporate a call to action. Most of all, you have to be yourself and be comfortable in the style which comes most naturally to you."

To go back to our friend Jeremy for a moment, the biggest mistake he made for me was being completely oblivious to his client. Now he may well have taken this to extremes but this issue – the one of not really attempting to understand your audience – is a common mistake.

Ian Hewitt, a business development partner

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at Vantis, stresses the importance of researching your audience. "Know their likes and dislikes and tailor your presentation accordingly; for instance, not everyone loves PowerPoint," he says. "Be flexible and adapt to client/prospect feedback during the pitch."

Ian also suggests that AV presentations are kept short and relevant to the client/prospect. "Give examples your audience can relate to," he says.

Ian's suggestion on keeping things short and relevant is, in essence, textbook marketing. In an era when we all have so much information fighting for our attention, a long, rambling presentation will soon have an audience looking at their watch or taking a few sneaky glances at their Blackberries.

With this in mind Tim Holton, marketing manager with UniQ Systems, makes the case for the 'elevator pitch.' He says: "In

these times of potential information overload it is essential that sales messages are concise and resonant. The apocryphal tale of the shared elevator ride with the CEO presenting a chance for the enterprising person to present their credentials is now more relevant than ever.

"Indeed the 'elevator pitch' becomes increasingly important when it is used as the basis of understanding for the entire value proposition. Chunking messages into manageable amounts so that they remain pertinent and important to the audience is the pre-requisite whether that is through face to face contact, marketing collateral or the various forms of presentation media and social networking channels."

Okay, then. We've spoken of the need to understand your audience and to put over your message succinctly and in a palatable format. But how do you really engage with them – how do you grab their attention and keep it? How do you differentiate your business in a competitive field?

Performance coach Patrick Bird suggests engagement is key. Engagement, he argues, is as much about the delivery as the message itself. Let's turn this question around then. How can you tell if your audience is becoming disengaged? Patrick, a body language expert, says: "[a disengaged audience] will manifest itself in a number of ways; looking out of the window, checking their Blackberry, folded arms, crossed legs, hands moving to the face and head showing signs of frustration. Watch out for clusters of gestures that mean the audience are disengaged, folded arms may just mean they are cold!"

Finally, then, in terms of steps that can be taken to engage an audience, Patrick says: "Take a purposeful, upright and open stance; if you are going to use a gesture make it count, no loose hands or unnecessary movements that detract from your message.

"Speak from the heart and not from the slides. Remember not to turn your back on the audience. Breathing from the diaphragm will help support your voice and changes in tone.

"Be aware of signs that the audience are engaged through the questions they ask; the nodding of heads in agreement to points, relaxed open body language – and, of course, a smile." **BV**