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Pitching for new business is a make-or-break moment for many teams. You want to win the pitch, and so you develop a detailed slide deck, tout your credentials, capabilities and successes (case studies), and select your strongest presenter – possibly the leader of your team or company – to do all the talking. Right? Wrong.

A good pitch is a balancing act that can be adjusted to the currents in the room. A [recent survey](#) of HBR readers found — at least in this community — how important it is to understand not just what you are pitching, but who you are pitching to. This was relatively unsurprising until we dug into the reasons why: The more senior your audience, we learned, the less you should rely on your deck and the more you should expect your pitch to be a conversation, showing your team’s authentic passion for the challenge or problem and their resilience for solving it creatively, together.

Our Survey

In January of this year, we published an online survey seeking insights from managers who hear a lot of pitches. We asked them what they value most — and least — in a pitch. We also asked them to self-identify their gender as well as whether they are entry-level, mid-level or executive decision-makers. We received more than 1,800 responses. Of the respondents who provided their gender, 75 percent identified as male and 25 percent identified as female. Of the respondents who provided their seniority, 12 percent were entry-level, 37 percent were mid-level and 51 percent executives. In total over the last year, respondents have the cumulative experience of hearing up to 10,000 pitches.

Here's what they told us.

Lesson 1: Be a master of the facts, but know that for an executive audience, your relevant experience matters most.

The more senior the audience you are pitching to, the sooner you must register your relevant experience and how it solves their challenge in unscripted conversation. Listen well, and map your knowledge and experience to what you hear. But for less senior audiences, it's more important to show mastery of facts. Do your research and show it.

Lesson 2: Avoid pitches where only one person speaks.

Respondents of all levels told us that a pitch team with good chemistry together is much more trustworthy than one senior person who does all the talking. Reconsider the wisdom of bringing people to a pitch who say nothing or have no clear expertise. Use your team to amplify your expertise in a pitch, not dilute it. Of course, one senior person who is expert in all the relevant areas, listens well to the audience, and can build (or already has) their trust, will defeat a team that does not listen and is unable to apply their collective expertise to the contours of the audience's objective.

Lesson 3: Be passionate about the problem, not just your product.

Beyond experience and facts, passion for the pitch was a top trait that our respondents highlighted as important. "I want to feel their energy for the pitch. The other key aspect is their mastery of the detail. Is it really in their blood ... or just skin deep?" wrote one executive-level respondent.

But passion should go beyond your own product. Said another respondent, "I want to hear about me not about them." The lesson here is that if you're pitching, be passionate about who you are pitching too as much as you are about your own product.

Lesson 4: Listen closely and respond carefully.

Few decision-makers want to be "pitched." They want you to listen to them, ask questions, and understand their point of view on their problem before hearing your solution. And the more senior

the audience, the more they want to have a conversation, to be heard and to hear what you think of their challenge. “I wish they listened more and spoke less,” wrote one executive respondent. Shared another, “Listen and ask questions about my goals.”

Even for seasoned pitch teams, it can be difficult to be in a room with someone or a group who can decide the quality of your immediate future, and not advocate hard for it. It is only natural to want to lead, explain and prove why you should win. And because employers, investors, and innovators alike want the full story of their greatness to be understood by a decision-maker, it is anathema to stop speaking. But that is what your audience wants; not to learn more about you, but for you to hear (in the pitch) more about them and to make your greatness directly applicable and relevant to their goals, unscripted and live.

Winning the Pitch

In most significant competitive pitches, your experience and mastery of facts are certainly essential and must be demonstrated (quickly), because decision-makers of course want an expert to win the pitch. Yet, and I can say from personal experience, most everyone who pitches often has an example of a pitch they should have won, on paper, but did not. The reason is often that all those pitching have probably achieved the expertise and mastery of facts needed to solve the audience’s problems. That’s why they were invited to pitch in the first place; it is the price of entry, the low-hanging fruit, a common denominator. It’s paying attention to these other factors, then, that makes the difference.

The difference, then, between pitch winners and losers, is your chemistry — both as a team pitching and with your audience. It is your empathy for your audience, your passion for meeting a challenge together with them, your ability to listen, speak directly and apply your expertise, in the pitch. It is also the tone you can create in the room — presenting yourselves as a club your audience wants to join, knowing how to surprise, delight and engage your audience with your unique version of relevant expertise and problem-solving, live.

There are no absolute truths — pitching is not a science. But this survey backs up how important it is to learn to read the room when you first walk in. Is your audience, junior, mid-level or senior executive? What you see may suggest you adjust your pitch to what your audience wants and values.

Michael Quinn is the founder of Minor Nobles, the NYC-based consultancy offering workshops, webinars, rehearsals and 1:1 training to help teams and leaders update their behavior to win more pitches for new business and investment. He is also a faculty instructor for the Association of National Advertisers and host of the podcast, “Own The Room,” where top executives discuss their own experiences pitching and what they wish people would do more often, or avoid altogether, in pitches to them.
