



Presentation Skills

How to Pitch a Brilliant Idea

by Kimberly D. Elsbach

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Summary. Reprint: R0309J Coming up with creative ideas is easy; selling them to strangers is hard. Entrepreneurs, sales executives, and marketing managers often go to great lengths to demonstrate how their new concepts are practical and profitable—only to be rejected by... [more](#)



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Coming up with creative ideas is easy; selling them to strangers is hard. All too often, entrepreneurs, sales executives, and marketing managers go to great lengths to show how their new business plans or creative concepts are practical and high margin—only to be rejected by corporate decision makers who don't seem to understand the real value of the ideas. Why does this happen?

It turns out that the problem has as much to do with the seller's traits as with an idea's inherent quality. The person on the receiving end tends to

gauge the pitcher's creativity as well as the proposal itself. And judgments about the pitcher's ability to come up with workable ideas can quickly and permanently overshadow perceptions of the idea's worth. We all like to think that people judge us carefully and objectively on our merits. But the fact is, they rush to place us into neat little categories—they stereotype us. So the first thing to realize when you're preparing to make a pitch to strangers is that your audience is going to put you into a box. And they're going to do it really fast. Research suggests that humans can categorize others in less than 150 milliseconds. Within 30 minutes, they've made lasting judgments about your character.

These insights emerged from my lengthy study of the \$50 billion U.S. film and television industry. Specifically, I worked with 50 Hollywood

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executives involved in assessing pitches from screenwriters. Over the course of six years, I observed dozens of 30-minute pitches in which the screenwriters encountered the “catchers” for the first time. In interviewing and observing the pitchers and catchers, I was able to discern just how quickly assessments of creative potential are made in these high-stakes exchanges. (The deals that arise as a result of successful screenplay pitches are often multimillion-dollar projects, rivaling in scope the development of new car models by Detroit’s largest automakers and marketing campaigns by New York’s most successful advertising agencies.) To determine whether my observations applied to business settings beyond Hollywood, I attended a variety of product-design, marketing, and venture-capital pitch sessions and conducted interviews with executives responsible for judging creative, high-stakes ideas from pitchers previously unknown to them. In those environments, the results were remarkably similar to what I had seen in the movie business.

People on the receiving end of pitches have no formal, verifiable, or objective measures for assessing that elusive trait, creativity. Catchers—even the expert ones—therefore apply a set of subjective and often inaccurate criteria very early in the encounter, and from that point on, the tone is set. If a catcher detects subtle cues indicating that the pitcher isn’t creative, the proposal is toast. But that’s not the whole story. I’ve discovered that catchers tend to respond well if they are made to feel that they are participating in an idea’s development.

The pitchers who do this successfully are those who tend to be categorized by catchers into one of three prototypes. I call them the *showrunner*, the *artist*, and the *neophyte*. Showrunners come off as professionals who combine creative inspiration with production know-how. Artists appear to be quirky and unpolished and to prefer the world

of creative ideas to quotidian reality. Neophytes tend to be—or act as if they were—young, inexperienced, and naive. To involve the audience in the creative process, showrunners deliberately level the power differential between themselves and their catchers; artists invert the differential; and neophytes exploit it. If you're a pitcher, the bottom-line implication is this: By successfully projecting yourself as one of the three creative types and getting your catcher to view himself or herself as a creative collaborator, you can improve your chances of selling an idea.

My research also has implications for those who buy ideas: Catchers should beware of relying on stereotypes. It's all too easy to be dazzled by pitchers who ultimately can't get their projects off the ground, and it's just as easy to overlook the creative individuals who can make good on their ideas. That's why it's important for the catcher to test every pitcher, a matter we'll return to in the following pages.

The Sorting Hat

In the late 1970s, psychologists Nancy Cantor and Walter Mischel, then at Stanford University, demonstrated that we all use sets of stereotypes—what they called “person prototypes”—to categorize strangers in the first moments of interaction. Though such instant typecasting is arguably unfair, pattern matching is so firmly hardwired into human psychology that only conscious discipline can counteract it.

Yale University creativity researcher Robert Sternberg contends that the prototype matching we use to assess originality in others results from our implicit belief that creative people possess certain traits—unconventionality, for example, as well as intuitiveness, sensitivity, narcissism, passion, and perhaps youth. We develop these stereotypes through direct and indirect experiences with people known to be

creative, from personally interacting with the 15-year-old guitar player next door to hearing stories about Pablo Picasso.

When a person we don't know pitches an idea to us, we search for visual and verbal matches with those implicit models, remembering only the characteristics that identify the pitcher as one type or another. We subconsciously award points to people we can easily identify as having creative traits; we subtract points from those who are hard to assess or who fit negative stereotypes.

In hurried business situations in which executives must evaluate dozens of ideas in a week, or even a day, catchers are rarely willing to expend the effort necessary to judge an idea more objectively. Like Harry Potter's Sorting Hat, they classify pitchers in a matter of seconds. They use negative stereotyping to rapidly identify the no-go ideas. All you have to do is fall into one of four common negative stereotypes, and the pitch session will be over before it has begun. (For more on these stereotypes, see the sidebar "How to Kill Your Own Pitch.") In fact, many such sessions are strictly a process of elimination; in my experience, only 1% of ideas make it beyond the initial pitch.

How to Kill Your Own Pitch

Before you even get to the stage in the pitch where the catcher categorizes you as a particular creative type, you ...



Unfortunately for pitchers, type-based elimination is easy, because negative impressions tend to be more salient and memorable than positive ones. To avoid fast elimination, successful pitchers—only 25% of those I have observed—turn the tables on the catchers by enrolling them in the creative process. These pitchers exude passion for their ideas

and find ways to give catchers a chance to shine. By doing so, they induce the catchers to judge them as likable collaborators. Oscar-winning writer, director, and producer Oliver Stone told me that the invitation to collaborate on an idea is a “seduction.” His advice to screenwriters pitching an idea to a producer is to “pull back and project what he needs onto your idea in order to make the story whole for him.” The three types of successful pitchers have their own techniques for doing this, as we’ll see.

The Showrunner

In the corporate world, as in Hollywood, showrunners combine creative thinking and passion with what Sternberg and Todd Lubart, authors of *Defying the Crowd: Cultivating Creativity in a Culture of Conformity*, call “practical intelligence”—a feel for which ideas are likely to contribute to the business. Showrunners tend to display charisma and wit in pitching, say, new design concepts to marketing, but they also demonstrate enough technical know-how to convince catchers that the ideas can be developed according to industry-standard practices and within resource constraints. Though they may not have the most or the best ideas, showrunners are those rare people in organizations who see the majority of their concepts fully implemented.

An example of a showrunner is the legendary kitchen-gadget inventor and pitchman Ron Popeil. Perfectly coiffed and handsome, Popeil is a combination design master and ringmaster. In his *New Yorker* account of Popeil’s phenomenally successful Ronco Showtime Rotisserie & BBQ, Malcolm Gladwell described how Popeil fuses entertainment skills—he enthusiastically showcases the product as an innovation that will “change your life”—with business savvy. For his television spots, Popeil makes sure that the chickens are roasted to exactly the resplendent golden brown that looks best on camera. And he designed the rotisserie’s

glass front to reduce glare, so that to the home cook, the revolving, dripping chickens look just as they do on TV.

The first Hollywood pitcher I observed was a showrunner. The minute he walked into the room, he scored points with the studio executive as a creative type, in part because of his new, pressed jeans, his fashionable black turtleneck, and his nice sport coat. The clean hair draping his shoulders showed no hint of gray. He had come to pitch a weekly television series based on the legend of Robin Hood. His experience as a marketer was apparent; he opened by mentioning an earlier TV series of his that had been based on a comic book. The pitcher remarked that the series had enjoyed some success as a marketing franchise, spawning lunch boxes, bath toys, and action figures.

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Showrunners create a level playing field by engaging the catcher in a kind of knowledge duet. They typically begin by getting the catcher to respond to a memory or some other subject with which the showrunner is familiar. Consider this give-and-take:

Pitcher: Remember Errol Flynn's *Robin Hood*?

Catcher: Oh, yeah. One of my all-time favorites as a kid.

Pitcher: Yes, it was classic. Then, of course, came Costner's version.

Catcher: That was much darker. And it didn't evoke as much passion as the original.

Pitcher: But the special effects were great.

Catcher: Yes, they were.

Pitcher: That's the twist I want to include in this new series.

Catcher: Special effects?

Pitcher: We're talking a science fiction version of *Robin Hood*. Robin has a sorcerer in his band of merry men who can conjure up all kinds of scary and wonderful spells.

Catcher: I love it!

The pitcher sets up his opportunity by leading the catcher through a series of shared memories and viewpoints. Specifically, he engages the catcher by asking him to recall and comment on familiar movies. With each response, he senses and then builds on the catcher's knowledge and interest, eventually guiding the catcher to the core idea by using a word ("twist") that's common to the vocabularies of both producers and screenwriters.

Showrunners also display an ability to improvise, a quality that allows them to adapt if a pitch begins to go awry. Consider the dynamic between the creative director of an ad agency and a prospective client, a major television sports network. As Mallorre Dill reported in a 2001 *Adweek* article on award-winning advertising campaigns, the network's VP of marketing was seeking help with a new campaign for coverage of

the upcoming professional basketball season, and the ad agency was invited to make a pitch. Prior to the meeting, the network executive stressed to the agency that the campaign would have to appeal to local markets across the United States while achieving “street credibility” with avid fans.

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viewers would find it arrogant and aloof. So the agency duo ad-libbed a rap that one teen could recite after scoring on all-star Shaquille O’Neal: “I’m fresh like a can of picante. And I’m deeper than Dante in the circles of hell.” The catcher was taken aback at first; then he laughed. Invited to participate in the impromptu rap session, the catcher began inserting his own lines. When the fun was over, the presenters repitched their idea with a slight variation—inserting the teenagers into videos of home-team games for local markets—and the account was sold to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Real showrunners are rare—only 20% of the successful pitchers I observed would qualify. Consequently, they are in high demand, which is good news for pitchers who can demonstrate the right combination of talent and expertise.

The Artist

Artists, too, display single-minded passion and enthusiasm about their ideas, but they are less slick and conformist in their dress and mannerisms, and they tend to be shy or socially awkward. As one

The agency’s creative director and its art director pitched the idea of digitally inserting two average teenagers into video of an NBA game. Initially, the catcher frowned on the idea, wondering aloud if

Hollywood producer told me, “The more shy a writer seems, the better you think the writing is, because you assume they’re living in their internal world.” Unlike showrunners, artists appear to have little or no knowledge of, or even interest in, the details of implementation. Moreover, they invert the power differential by completely commanding the catcher’s imagination. Instead of engaging the catcher in a duet, they put the audience in thrall to the content. Artists are particularly adept at conducting what physicists call “thought experiments,” inviting the audience into imaginary worlds.

One young screenwriter I observed fit the artist type to perfection. He wore black leather pants and a torn T-shirt, several earrings in each ear, and a tattoo on his slender arm. His hair was rumpled, his expression was brooding: Van Gogh meets Tim Burton. He cared little about the production details for the dark, violent cartoon series he imagined; rather, he was utterly absorbed by the unfolding story. He opened his pitch like this: “Picture what happens when a bullet explodes inside someone’s brain. Imagine it in slow motion. There is the shattering blast, the tidal wave of red, the acrid smell of gunpowder. That’s the opening scene in this animated sci-fi flick.” He then proceeded to lead his catchers through an exciting, detailed narrative of his film, as a master storyteller would. At the end, the executives sat back, smiling, and told the writer they’d like to go ahead with his idea.

In the business world, artists are similarly nonconformist. Consider Alan, a product designer at a major packaged-foods manufacturer. I observed Alan in a meeting with business-development executives he’d never met. He had come to pitch an idea based on the premise that children like to play with their food. The proposal was for a cereal with pieces that interlocked in such a way that children could use them for building things, Legos style. With his pocket-protected laboratory coat

and horn-rimmed glasses, Alan looked very much the absent-minded professor. As he entered the conference room where the suited-and-tied executives at his company had assembled, he hung back, apparently uninterested in the PowerPoint slides or the marketing and revenue projections of the business-development experts. His appearance and reticence spoke volumes about him. His type was unmistakable.

When it was Alan's turn, he dumped four boxes of prototype cereal onto the mahogany conference table, to the stunned silence of the executives. Ignoring protocol, he began constructing an elaborate fort, all the while talking furiously about the qualities of the corn flour that kept the pieces and the structure together. Finally, he challenged the executives to see who could build the tallest tower. The executives so enjoyed the demonstration that they green-lighted Alan's project.

While artists—who constituted about 40% of the successful pitchers I observed—are not as polished as show-runners, they are the most creative of the three types. Unlike showrunners and neophytes, artists are fairly transparent. It's harder to fake the part. In other words, they don't play to type; they *are* the type. Indeed, it is very difficult for someone who is not an artist to pretend to be one, because genuineness is what makes the artist credible.

The Neophyte

Neophytes are the opposite of showrunners. Instead of displaying their expertise, they plead ignorance. Neophytes score points for daring to do the impossible, something catchers see as refreshing. Unencumbered by tradition or past successes, neophytes present themselves as eager learners. They consciously exploit the power differential between pitcher and catcher by asking directly and boldly for help—not in a

desperate way, but with the confidence of a brilliant favorite, a talented student seeking sage advice from a beloved mentor.

Consider the case of one neophyte pitcher I observed, a young, ebullient screenwriter who had just returned from his first trip to Japan. He wanted to develop a show about an American kid (like himself) who travels to Japan to learn to play *taiko* drums, and he brought his drums and sticks into the pitch session. The fellow looked as though he had walked off the set of *Doogie Howser, M.D.* With his infectious smile, he confided to his catchers that he was not going to pitch them a typical show, “mainly because I’ve never done one. But I think my inexperience here might be a blessing.”

He showed the catchers a variety of drumming moves, then asked one person in his audience to help him come up with potential camera angles—such as looking out from inside the drum or viewing it from overhead—inquiring how these might play on the screen. When the catcher got down on his hands and knees to show the neophyte a particularly “cool” camera angle, the pitch turned into a collaborative teaching session. Ignoring his lunch appointment, the catcher spent the next half hour offering suggestions for weaving the story of the young drummer into a series of taiko performances in which artistic camera angles and imaginative lighting and sound would be used to mirror the star’s emotions.

Many entrepreneurs are natural neophytes. Lou and Sophie McDermott, two sisters from Australia, started the Savage Sisters sportswear line in the late 1990s. Former gymnasts with petite builds and spunky personalities, they cartwheeled into the clothing business with no formal training in fashion or finance. Instead, they relied heavily on their enthusiasm and optimism and a keen curiosity about the fine

points of retailing to get a start in the highly competitive world of teen fashion. On their shopping outings at local stores, the McDermott sisters studied merchandising and product placement—all the while asking store owners how they got started, according to the short documentary film *Cutting Their Own Cloth*.

The McDermott sisters took advantage of their inexperience to learn all they could. They would ask a store owner to give them a tour of the store, and they would pose dozens of questions: “Why do you buy this line and not the other one? Why do you put this dress here and not there? What are your customers like? What do they ask for most?” Instead of being annoying, the McDermotts were charming, friendly, and fun, and the flattered retailers enjoyed being asked to share their knowledge. Once they had struck up a relationship with a retailer, the sisters would offer to bring in samples for the store to test. Eventually, the McDermotts parlayed what they had learned into enough knowledge to start their own retail line. By engaging the store owners as teachers, the McDermotts were able to build a network of expert mentors who wanted to see the neophytes win. Thus neophytes, who constitute about 40% of successful pitchers, achieve their gains largely by sheer force of personality.

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Which of the three types is most likely to succeed? Overwhelmingly, catchers look for showrunners, though artists and neophytes can win the day through enchantment and charm. From the catcher’s perspective,

however, showrunners can also be the most dangerous of all pitchers, because they are the most likely to blind through glitz.

Catchers Beware

When business executives ask me for my insights about creativity in Hollywood, one of the first questions they put to me is, “Why is there so much bad television?” After hearing the stories I’ve told here, they know the answer: Hollywood executives too often let themselves be wooed by positive stereotypes—particularly that of the showrunner—rather than by the quality of the ideas. Indeed, individuals who become adept at conveying impressions of creative potential, while lacking the real thing, may gain entry into organizations and reach prominence there based on their social influence and impression-management skills, to the catchers’ detriment.

Real creativity isn’t so easily classified. Researchers such as Sternberg and Lubart have found that people’s implicit theories regarding the attributes of creative individuals are off the mark. Furthermore, studies have identified numerous personal attributes that facilitate practical creative behavior. For example, cognitive flexibility, a penchant for diversity, and an orientation toward problem solving are signs of creativity; it simply isn’t true that creative types can’t be down-to-earth.

Those who buy ideas, then, need to be aware that relying too heavily on stereotypes can cause them to overlook creative individuals who can truly deliver the goods. In my interviews with studio executives and agents, I heard numerous tales of people who had developed reputations as great pitchers but who had trouble producing usable scripts. The same thing happens in business. One well-known example occurred in 1985, when Coca-Cola announced it was changing the Coke formula. Based on pitches from market researchers who had tested the sweeter, Pepsi-like

“new Coke” in numerous focus groups, the company’s top management decided that the new formula could effectively compete with Pepsi. The idea was a marketing disaster, of course. There was a huge backlash, and the company was forced to reintroduce the old Coke. In a later discussion of the case and the importance of relying on decision makers who are both good pitchers and industry experts, Roberto Goizueta, Coca-Cola’s CEO at the time, said to a group of MBAs, in effect, that there’s nothing so dangerous as a good pitcher with no real talent.

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If a catcher senses that he or she is being swept away by a positive stereotype match, it’s important to test the pitcher. Fortunately, assessing the various creative types is not difficult. In a meeting with a showrunner, for example, the catcher can test the pitcher’s expertise and probe into past experiences, just as a skilled job interviewer would, and ask how the pitcher would react to various

changes to his or her idea. As for artists and neophytes, the best way to judge their ability is to ask them to deliver a finished product. In Hollywood, smart catchers ask artists and neophytes for finished scripts before hiring them. These two types may be unable to deliver specifics about costs or implementation, but a prototype can allow the catcher to judge quality, and it can provide a concrete basis for further discussion. Finally, it’s important to enlist the help of other people in vetting pitchers. Another judge or two can help a catcher weigh the pitcher’s—and the idea’s—pros and cons and help safeguard against hasty judgments.

One CEO of a Northern California design firm looks beyond the obvious earmarks of a creative type when hiring a new designer. She does this by asking not only about successful projects but also about work that failed and what the designer learned from the failures. That way, she can find out whether the prospect is capable of absorbing lessons well and rolling with the punches of an unpredictable work environment. The CEO also asks job prospects what they collect and read, as well as what inspires them. These kinds of clues tell her about the applicant's creative bent and thinking style. If an interviewee passes these initial tests, the CEO has the prospect work with the rest of her staff on a mock design project. These diverse interview tools give her a good indication about the prospect's ability to combine creativity and organizational skills, and they help her understand how well the applicant will fit into the group. • • •

One question for pitchers, of course, might be, "How do I make a positive impression if I don't fit into one of the three creative stereotypes?" If you already have a reputation for delivering on creative promises, you probably don't need to disguise yourself as a showrunner, artist, or neophyte—a résumé full of successes is the best calling card of all. But if you can't rely on your reputation, you should at least make an attempt to match yourself to the type you feel most comfortable with, if only because it's necessary to get a foot in the catcher's door.

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Another question might be, "What if I don't *want* the catcher's input into the development of my idea?" This aspect of the pitch is so important that you should make it a priority: Find a part of your proposal that you are willing to

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yield on and invite the catcher to come up with suggestions. In fact, my observations suggest that you should engage the catcher as soon as possible in the development of the idea. Once the catcher feels like a creative collaborator, the odds of rejection diminish.

Ultimately, the pitch will always remain an imperfect process for communicating creative ideas. But by being aware of stereotyping processes and the value of collaboration, both pitchers and catchers can understand the difference between a pitch and a hit.

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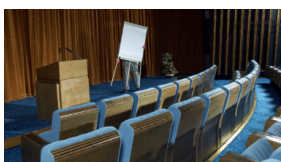
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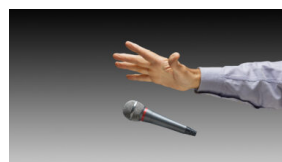
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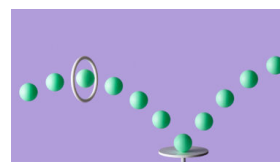
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