

An Innovative Method for
PRESENTING, PERSUADING,
AND WINNING THE DEAL

PITCH ANYTHING

OREN KLAFF

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**PRESENTING, PERSUADING,
AND WINNING THE DEAL**

OREN KLAFF



New York Chicago San Francisco Lisbon London
Madrid Mexico City Milan New Delhi San Juan
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For Dad, true north

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Chapter 1

The Method

Here's the “big idea” in 76 words: There is a fundamental disconnect between the way we pitch anything and the way it is received by our audience. As a result, at the crucial moment, when it is most important to be convincing, nine out of ten times we are not. Our most important messages have a surprisingly low chance of getting through.

You need to understand why this disconnect occurs in order to overcome it, succeed, and profit. This book tells you how.

I Am Not a Natural

I pitch deals for a living. My job is to raise capital for businesses looking to expand rapidly or go public. I am good at it. When companies need money, I get it for them. I have raised millions for deals involving Marriott, Hershey's, Citigroup, and many other

household names—and I continue to do so at a rate of about \$2 million per week. From the outside, the reasons for my success seem simple: I offer wealthy investors profitable deals that involve Wall Street banks. But others do that, too. Yet I raise a lot more money than they do. They compete in the same market. Do the same types of deals. Pitch the same kinds of facts and figures. But the numbers show I am consistently one of the best. The difference isn't luck. It is not a special gift. And I have no background in sales. What I do have is a good method.

As it turns out, pitching is one of those business skills that depends heavily on the method you use and not how hard you try. Better method, more money. Much better method, much more money. It's no different for you. The better you are at advocating your position, the more successful you will be. Maybe you want to sell an idea to investors, convince a client to choose you over the other guy, or even explain to your boss why you should be paid more. I can help you get better at it using the five methods in this book.

Pitching a Master of the Universe

Over the years, I've pitched to—and closed deals with—some of the iconic businesspeople of our time, including founding members of Yahoo!, Google, and Qualcomm. But the story of what I can offer you cannot really be told without my explaining the day I went to pitch one of the guys Tom Wolfe would describe as a “master of the universe.”

“Jonathan” (never Johnny or even John) is an investment banker who controls vast sums of capital. He gets between 600 and 800 pitches a year; that's three to four every business day. He often makes multimillion-dollar investment decisions based on no more information than a few e-mails on his BlackBerry.

As a dealmaker, this guy—and I have absolutely no intention of giving you his name; he sues everyone and anyone at a moment's notice—is the real deal.

There are three things you must know about Jonathan. First, he's a math phenom who can calculate yield curves in his head. He doesn't need spreadsheets. He can instantly analyze what you are pitching him. Second, he's seen more than 10,000 deals and can detect any kind of flaw or BS no matter how well hidden. Third, he's tough talking and, at the same time, witty and charismatic. The upshot: When he's pitching you, *his* chances are good. When you're pitching him, *yours* aren't. Yet, if you want to be taken seriously in venture capital, you need to have done a deal with this guy. And so, some years ago, when I was working to raise money for a software company, I arranged to pitch Jonathan and his investment team. Given their reputation, I knew if I got them on board, it would be a lot easier to raise money from other investors who were still undecided. They'd say, "Hey, if Jonathan signed off on this, then I'm in too." But Jonathan knew the power of his endorsement—and he wasn't going to give me an easy win.

As my pitch got underway, he made things difficult. Maybe it was for sport. Maybe he was having a bad day. But it was clear he wanted to take—and keep—control of the whole presentation. I didn't realize this at the start, however, so, I began, as I always do, by *framing* (frames create context and relevance; as we will see, the person who owns the frame owns the conversation). I explained exactly what I would—and would not—be talking about, and Jonathan immediately started giving me a type of resistance called *deframing*, which is exactly like it sounds.

For example, when I said, "We expect revenues to be \$10 million next year," he cut me off and changed the frame with, "Who cares about your made-up revenue projections. Tell me what your *expenses* are going to be."

A minute later, I was explaining, “Our secret sauce is such-and-such advanced technology.”

And he said, “No, that’s not a secret sauce. That’s just ketchup.”

I knew not to react to these comments. I pressed on.

“We have a Fortune 50 company as our largest customer.”

He interrupted with, “Look, I’m done here in nine minutes, so can you get to the point?”

He was really making it difficult. You can imagine how hard it was to use all the right techniques: *setting the frame*, *telling the story*, *revealing the intrigue*, *offering the prize*, *nailing the hookpoint*, and *getting the decision*.

Collectively, I call these the *STRONG method* (you will learn about these soon).

Some 12 minutes after I began, what I had hoped was going to be my best pitch ever instead showed all the signs of being my one of my worst.

Put yourself in my situation. After just 12 minutes of your presentation, you’ve been told that your secret sauce is ketchup. Told that your projections are made-up numbers. And that you have nine minutes left to actually make a point.

I was faced with the *presenter’s problem*: You can have incredible knowledge about your subject. You can make your most important points clearly, even with passion, and you can be very well organized. You can do all those things as well as they can be done—and still not be convincing. That’s because a great pitch is not about procedure. It’s about getting and keeping attention. And that means you have to own the room with *frame control*, drive emotions with *intrigue pings*, and get to a *hookpoint* fairly quickly. (Details on those last two in a second.)

I reminded myself of these steps in the face of Jonathan’s interruptions. Then I swallowed hard and hoped my nervousness

wasn't showing. I went back to my pitch, concentrating on my three objectives. I was determined. When he deframed, I reframed. When he looked disinterested, I delivered an *intrigue ping* (this is a short but provocative piece of information that arouses curiosity): "By the way, an NFL quarterback is also an investor." And finally, I got him to the *hookpoint*, the place in the presentation where your listeners become emotionally engaged. Instead of you giving them information, they are asking you for more on their own. At the hookpoint, they go beyond interested to being involved and then committed.

At the end of the 21 minutes, my pitch was complete. I knew Jonathan was *in*. He leaned forward and whispered, "Forget the deal for a moment. What in the hell was that? Nobody pitches like that but *me*."

I tried to show no emotion as I told him, "*That*, in general terms, is called *neurofinance*, an idea that combines neuroscience—how the brain works—with economics. I have taken it a step further and have broken it down into five parts" (the method we talked about above).

Now, even though Jonathan has MENSA-level intelligence, he doesn't have much interest in concepts like neuroscience. He—maybe like you—had always believed that the ability to pitch was a natural talent. But given what he had just seen me do in 21 minutes—it changed his mind. It was clear my pitching was a learned skill and not naked, natural talent like his.

"You can do that all the time?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "It's based on research about how the brain receives new ideas. And I'm raising a lot of money with it."

Jonathan hears a lot of big claims. When you listen to three or four pitches a day, your "BS detector" becomes finely tuned. So he asked, "How many hours do you have working on this neuro-whatever-it's-called?"

He was sure my answer was going to be 20 hours. Maybe 50. I shocked him when I said, “Over 10,000 hours.”

He looked at me with a wry half-smile. Giving up all pretense of being disinterested, he said, “I need you on my team. Come do this for my deals, and you’ll make a lot of money.”

I had never been more flattered. Not only had Jonathan, a guy who had been on magazine covers, offered me a partnership, he had given me an even higher compliment—validation that my method worked in high-stakes situations.

I turned him down. He had a reputation for being difficult to work for, and no amount of money is worth that. But his reaction persuaded me to try my approach as part of an investment company. I joined Geyser Holdings in Beverly Hills, the most profitable venture firm you have never heard of. Even as the economy cooled down (and then frosted over), I helped take Geyser from \$100 million to \$400 million in about four years. How I did that can serve as your blueprint for success. As you will see, it’s possible to use the PITCH method in any presentation where you need to be truly convincing. What worked for me will work for you—no matter what you do for a living.

The Need for a New Method

If ever there is a time to learn to pitch effectively, it is now. Funding is tight. Competition is more aggressive. On a good day, your customers are distracted by text messages, e-mails, and phone calls, and on a bad day, they are impossible to reach. If you’ve been in business for more than 10 minutes, you have figured this much out: The better you are at keeping someone’s attention, the more likely that person will be to go for your idea.

But what kind of advice is this really? Telling someone, “Keep the audience’s attention” is like telling someone learning to play tennis to “hit the ball with topspin when it comes.” *They know that!* What they don’t know is how to do it. But it’s worth figuring out. If you have to sell anything as part of your job—a product, a service, an idea, and we all do at some point—you know how the right pitch can make a project go forward and the wrong pitch can kill it. You also understand how difficult it can be to pitch to a skeptical audience that is paying attention to you one minute and distracted by a phone call the next. But we all have to go through this because we all have to pitch if we need something. And though most of us spend less than 1 percent of our time doing it, pitching may be the most important thing we do. When we have to raise money, or sell a complicated idea, or get a promotion, we have to do it. And yet we do it incredibly badly.

One reason is that we are our own worst coach. We know way too much about our own subject to be able to understand how another person will experience it in our pitch, so we tend to overwhelm that person. (We will deal with this in Chapter 4.) But the biggest reason we fail is not our fault. As you will see in the pages that follow, we don’t pitch well because there is an evolutionary flaw in our brain—a wiring kluge in our hardware—that we must understand and learn to deal with if we are ever going to pitch successfully.

Dealing with the Crocodile Brain

A brief history of how the brain developed will show

1. How the kluge got there.

2. Why pitching is so much more complicated than we first thought.
3. Why, as with any high-order skill, such as physics, mathematics, or medicine, pitching must be learned.

The three basic parts of the brain are shown in Figure 1.1.

First, the history. Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience show that our brain developed in three separate stages. First came the old brain, or “crocodile brain”—we’ll call it the “croc brain” for short. It’s responsible for the initial filtering of all incoming messages, it generates most survival fight-or-flight responses, and it produces strong, basic emotions, too. But when it comes to decision making, the croc brain’s reasoning power is . . . well, primitive. It simply doesn’t have a lot of capacity, and most of what it does have is devoted primarily to the things it takes to keep us alive. When I am referring to the croc brain, I am referring to this level.

The midbrain, which came next, determines the meaning of things and social situations. And finally, the neocortex evolved with a problem-solving ability and is able to think about complex issues and produce answers using reason.

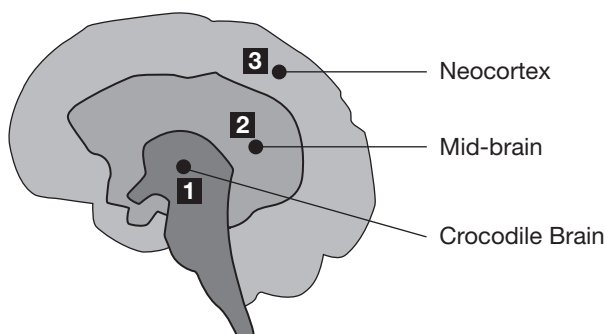


Figure 1.1 Three parts of the brain.

The Disconnect Between Message and Receiver

I learned from molecular biologist Craig Smucker that when we pitch something—an idea, product, deal, or whatever—the highest level of our brain, the neocortex, is doing the work. It's the neocortex that is forming ideas, putting them into language, and presenting them. This is fairly intuitive.

Three Brains Working Independently and Together

You can actually sense how the three parts of your brain work separately from each other.

When you are walking to your car and are surprised by someone shouting, you will first act reflexively with some fear. (This is the old crocodile/survival brain at work.)

Then, you will try to make meaning from the situation by identifying the person doing the yelling and placing him or her in a social context. This is your midbrain trying to determine if it is a friendly coworker, an angry parking attendant, or something worse.

Finally, you will process the situation in the neocortex, the problem-solving brain (which figures it out: "It's okay. It's just some guy yelling out to his buddy across the street.")

Our thought process exactly matches our evolution: First, survival. Then, social relationships. Finally, problem solving.

Pitching anything means explaining abstract concepts—so it didn't surprise me that ideas would be formed by the most modern, problem-solving part of the brain.

But this is exactly where my thinking—and probably yours—went off track. I assumed that if my idea-making abilities were

located in the neocortex (as they are), then that's where the people listening to my pitch were processing what I had to say.

It's not.

Messages that are composed and sent by your young neocortex are received and processed by the other person's old crocodile brain.

You may be where I was about 10 years ago. Back then, I subscribed to "the brain is like a computer" metaphor. With a computer, if I send you an Excel spreadsheet file, you open it and read it in Excel. This is how I thought the brain worked. If I created a message in *my* smart neocortex and "sent" it over to you (by telling you about it), I figured that you'd be opening that message in *your* neocortex.

But no pitch or message is going to get to the logic center of the other person's brain without passing through the survival filters of the crocodile brain system first. And because of the way we evolved, those filters make pitching anything extremely difficult.

So instead of communicating with people, my best ideas were bouncing off their croc brains and crashing back into my face in the form of objections, disruptive behaviors, and lack of interest.

Ultimately, if they are successful, your pitches *do* work their way up to their neocortex eventually. And certainly by the time the other person is ready to say "Yes, we have a deal," he is dealing with the information at the highest logic center of his brain. But that is not where the other person initially hears what you have to say.

Let me explain further. Because we are a soft, weak, slow species compared with just about everything else out there, we survived for millions of years by viewing everything in the universe as potentially dangerous. And because very few situations we faced back then were safe, we learned to err on the side of extreme caution. And that continues (unconsciously) to this day every time we encounter something new. It happens whenever we encounter a pitch from someone who wants us to do something.

We are hardwired to be bad at pitching. It is caused by the way our brains have evolved.

The fact that you are pitching your idea from the neocortex but it is being received by the other person's croc brain is a serious problem.

It's the kluge we talked about earlier. The gap between the lower and upper brain is not measured in the two inches that separate them physically. It must be measured in millions of years (the five million years or so that it took for the neocortex to evolve, to be more precise). Why? Because while you are talking about "profit potential," "project synergy," "return on investment," and "why we should move forward now"—concepts your upper brain is comfortable with—the brain of the person on the other side of the desk isn't reacting to any of those highly evolved, relatively complicated ideas. It is reacting exactly as it should. It is trying to determine whether the information coming in is a threat to the person's immediate survival and, if it isn't, whether it can be ignored without consequence.

The Croc Brain at Work

As you are pitching your idea, the croc brain of the person sitting across from you isn't "listening" and thinking, "Hmmm, is this a good deal or not?" Its reaction to your pitch basically goes like this: "Since this is not an emergency, how can I ignore this or spend the least amount of time possible on it?"

This filtering system of the crocodile brain has a very short-sighted view of the world. Anything that is not a crisis it tries to mark as "spam."

If you got a chance to look at the croc brain's filtering instructions, it would look something like this:

1. If it's not dangerous, ignore it.
2. If it's not new and exciting, ignore it.
3. If it is new, summarize it as quickly as possible—and forget about the details.

And finally there is this specific instruction:

4. *Do not* send anything up to the neocortex for problem solving unless you have a situation that is really unexpected and out of the ordinary.

These are the basic operating policies and procedures of our brains. No wonder pitching is so difficult.

Sure, after initial filtering, parts of your message move quickly through the midbrain and on to the neocortex—business meetings would be very odd otherwise—but the damage to your message and your pitch has already been done.

First, given the limited focus and capacity of the croc brain, up to 90 percent of your message is discarded before it's passed on up to the midbrain and then on to the neocortex. The crocodile brain just doesn't process details well, and it only passes along big, obvious chunks of concrete data.

Second, unless your message is presented in such a way that the crocodile brain views it to be new and exciting—it *is going to be ignored*.

Third, if your pitch is complicated—if it contains abstract language and lacks visual cues—then it is perceived as a threat. Not a threat in the sense that the person listening to your pitch fears he is going to be attacked, but a threat because without cues and context,

the croc brain concludes that your pitch has the potential to absorb massive amounts of brain power to comprehend. And that is a major threat because there just isn't enough brain power to handle survival needs, the problems of day-to-day life, and existing work problems plus whatever unclear thing you are asking it to do. Presented with this kind of situation, a circuit breaker in your brain is tripped. The result? A neurotoxin gets attached to the potentially threatening message (your pitch). This is like a FedEx tracking number, which, in turn, routes your message to the amygdala for processing—and destruction.

Now, if there is one place in the brain you do not want your pitch to end up, it is the amygdala. This is the fear circuitry of the brain. The amygdala turns messages into physical sensations like a faster heart rate, sweating, increased breathing, and increased anxiety. And it produces a feeling that makes the person want to escape from the presentation.

Pitches are sent from the modern—and smart—part of the brain: the neocortex. But they are received by a part of the brain that is 5 million years older (and not as bright.)

This is a serious problem if you are trying to pitch anything.

Again, this is part of the hardwiring that has allowed us to survive. A lion is chasing you, and without needing to kick it up to your highly evolved neocortex (which would spend a lot of time trying to solve the problem), the *danger* switch in the amygdala is flipped *on*, and it sends the alarm to the rest of the brain to start spitting out chemical and electrical messages that get you to *Run!* before you even have a chance to think. And while we don't live in the wild any longer, our brains are still wired to work this way.

Everything in the recent research points to the same conclusion: Nine out of 10 messages that enter the crocodile brain—and remember, every single pitch starts by going through the crocodile brain—end up being coded.

- Boring: Ignore it.
- Dangerous: Fight/run.
- Complicated: Radically summarize (invariably causing a lot to be lost in the process) and pass it in severely truncated form.

We've been thinking about this all wrong for years. Clearly, we need a new way of pitching.

Rules of Engagement

There are the two questions we always ask ourselves after we have made a presentation or pitch:

1. Did I get through?
2. Was my message well received?

We assume that our audience will do what we want them to do if our idea is good, if we didn't stumble through the pitch, and if we showed a winning personality. Turns out, it doesn't work that way. What is vitally important is making sure your message fulfills two objectives: First, you don't want your message to trigger fear alarms. And second, you want to make sure it gets recognized as something positive, unexpected, and out of the ordinary—a pleasant novelty.

Bypassing those fear alarm sensors can be extremely difficult. Creating novelty in the message can be tricky, too. But it is the

only way our pitch stands any chance whatsoever because the crocodile brain wants information a certain way—simple, clear, nonthreatening, and above all, intriguing and novel. You need to communicate in these ways, or you are never going to capture people's attention.

The croc brain is picky and a cognitive miser whose primary interest is survival. It doesn't like to do a lot of work and is high maintenance when it is forced to perform. It requires concrete evidence—presented simply in black and white—to make a decision. Minor points of differentiation don't interest it. And this is the brain to which you are pitching.

As the principal gateway to the mind, the croc brain doesn't have a lot of time to devote to new projects. It's overseeing a big, complex operation (taking care of survival) and can't get bogged down in nuance and details. It likes facts clearly explained. It wants to choose between just two clearly explained options. And it needs you to get to the point fast. It goes to sleep during PowerPoint presentations, and it needs strong summarizing points to keep its attention.

If it gets really excited about some new project you have presented, then it approves it. Otherwise, it gives up on it, doesn't give it another thought, and goes on to the next issue.

The harsh but true reality is that the croc brain—the source of your target's first reaction to your pitch—is

- Going to ignore you if possible.
- Only focused on the big picture (and needs high-contrast and well-differentiated options to choose between).

- Emotional, in the sense it will respond emotionally to what it sees and hears, but most of the time that emotional response is fear.
- Focused on the here and now with a short attention span that craves novelty.
- In need of concrete facts—it looks for verified evidence and doesn't like abstract concepts.

When I learned these rules of engagement for dealing with the crocodile brain, I had my big “Aha” moment. I understood two very important things: First, I finally *got* the fundamental problem you and I have when we pitch something: We have our highly evolved neocortex, which is full of details and abstract concepts, trying to persuade the crocodile brain, which is afraid of almost everything and needs very simple, clear, direct, and nonthreatening ideas to decide in our favor. Second, I realized that when my pitches had gone well, I had inadvertently adhered to the five rules of engagement contained in the bullet points above. I had made the crocodile brain feel safe; I was feeding it short vignettes of clear, visual, and novel information; and I wasn't making it do much work. (I also understood that when I didn't stick to those rules of engagement, I usually failed.)

Why do these rules of engagement matter for pitching? Sometimes they don't. If you're pitching the Google Android phone, 3D television, or a Ferrari coupe, the brain becomes so flooded with dopamine—a chemical in your brain that sends messages about pleasure and rewards—that any old pitch will work. But short of having a product that's so sexy it's irresistible—you have to observe the rules about how the brain works. How to do this makes up the heart of this book.

What Comes Next

What became clear to me after my big “Aha” moment was that I needed to bridge the gap between the way the neocortex and crocodile brain see the world. More specifically, if I wanted my pitch to get through, I needed to be able to translate all the complex ideas coming out of my neocortex and present them in a way that the crocodile brain of the person I was pitching could easily accept and pay attention to.

It took me countless efforts to come up with a formula that worked. Now you are going to learn that formula.

As you will see, it begins by *setting the frame* for your pitch, putting your big idea into an easily understood context. And then, once the frame is established, you must seize *high social status* so that you have a solid platform from which to pitch. Then you must create messages that are full of *intrigue* and *novelty*.

To make this process easier to remember, I use the acronym **STRONG**:

- Setting the frame
- Telling the story
- Revealing the intrigue
- Offering the prize
- Nailing the hookpoint
- Getting a decision

Over the years, I’ve used this formula—which we will be exploring in detail—in deal after deal with executives from Bear Stearns, Boeing, Disney, Honda, LinkedIn, Texas Instruments, and Yamaha. Each time I pitched, I learned more about the behaviors of the croc brain, and I eventually came to the understanding that

there are five separate places where you can stumble in a pitch. Each step in the process represents one of these points where missteps can be fatal. When the other person's croc brain becomes either bored, confused, or threatened, your pitch is in trouble.

In the pages ahead I will discuss how to avoid those problems and create the perfect pitch, one that gains the full endorsement of the croc brain and increases your chances of success dramatically.