

# Pitch perfect

Opinions over what makes a great pitch vary, but timing, engaging in conversation, research, rehearsing and letting your creativity shine will always be key. **Suzanne Hinchliffe** takes a look at what creates the perfect blend

**T**he dictionary definition for the verb to pitch is, 'to attempt to sell or win approval for one's ideas, often in a high-pressured manner'. (Dictionary.com)

Every day designers throw themselves into the lion's den with a bunch of hungry clients, keen to persuade them that they are the ones for the job.

So what truly is the best way to sell your ideas, be convincing and then close the deal? Is there a perfect technique or attitude? Here we offer some advice from those who have been there and won – giving an insight into how you can really make the client fall in love with you.

## Researching the pitch

It sounds obvious, but research into the client and their business is imperative. David Kimpton, founder of Kimpton Creative, emphasises the importance of a 'chemistry meeting' before the actual pitch.

'A chemistry meeting forces an opportunity to ask pertinent questions and build a rapport with the client,' he says. 'Winning a pitch is about having a relationship with a client, so it is important to know their names and what they do before the pitch.'

Seymour Powell carries out ethnographic research into its clients. 'It is important to understand their business and where they are going wrong. This way you can create a compelling story and show them how they can improve,' says Dick Powell, co-founder of Seymour Powell.

Researching a pitch includes defining how it can help your consultancy. James Bull, co-founder of Moving Brands, considers three questions when investigating the pitch, namely how it will help his consultancy's people, profit and promotion.

'Don't always think of a client in a short-term perspective, as being invited to a pitch is about building a relationship,' says Bull.

## Looking the part

You've done the preparation, but now it's the real deal. Do you dress up in all your finery or just be yourself? Dick Powell believes in the importance of impressing the client, but that does not mean you have to dress to impress. 'There's no point in being something you're not, as you have to have a working relationship with the client.'

Kimpton broadly agrees, but adds that you need to read the situation. 'I've been to a pitch for what I considered to be a 'grown up' company. The clients were in suits, so I wanted to dress the same. Once you have won the project you can dress how you want.'

## The big presentation

While some prefer a Power Point slide show to communicate a concept, for Moving Brands the goal is to destroy the formality of the pitch. 'We like to turn a pitch into a workshop, providing a big roll of paper and pens to get the client involved. It helps to mix up the seating plan, so they get to know you better,' explains James Bull.

The Partners managing partner Claire Robinson believes that simplicity is key. 'If you cannot articulate the core idea on one slide, you need to work harder until you can,' she says.

From a client's perspective, Tom Foulkes of Buro Happold has seen a few things go wrong because of technology. 'When I was at Land Securities there was one presentation where nothing went right for the consultancy as it was trying to convert its tried and tested credential presentation into a whizzy interactive thing. Suffice to say it had a complete technology failure and we spent much of the presentation in complete darkness. It still makes me shiver to this day,' he says.

## Showing creativity

Sometimes, a pitch is based on credentials, which can be tricky for start-ups. David Kimpton recalls a time at Hat-Trick Design (before going solo as Kimpton Creative) when being creative and hungry and to the point of desperation worked in the group's favour. 'The Salvation Army was moving into its international headquarters and the project was to provide the building's environmental graphics. We knew we were coming up against 'big boys' with Pentagram and we thought we had no chance,' says Kimpton. According to the Salvation Army, John McConnell (formerly Pentagram partner) plonked its portfolio on the client's table and said, 'You can trust us', which the client found arrogant. We gave a presentation showing our creativity and energy that didn't solve the problem, but gave them avenues to explore. They could see how we thought and liked our passion – and we won the pitch.'

## Listen to the client

According to Dick Powell, if the client seems bullish or authoritarian then you are not listening to what they are saying. 'While you think you're firing off brilliant ideas, the client may not like them. Listen to them, as you could end up digging yourself into a hole by running away with an idea,' he says.

'The pitch is not about your answers, but about asking intelligent questions to make the client believe in you,' says Caroline Hagan of Reach.

## Watch the clock

A golden rule is to not over-run, which means rehearsing the pitch is key. 'If you present for 30 minutes make sure you leave another 30 minutes for questions,' advises David Kimpton.

Claire Robinson thinks making time for debating is vital as it creates more opportunities to engage in discussion with the client, rather than just presenting at them. 'They are far more likely to remember you,' she says.

Tom Foulkes has also seen presentations destroyed through running over time. 'It shows little regard for the client and can undermine a great meeting in a matter of ten minutes,' he says.

## Going for gold

The Partners has a target to keep its win/loss ratio on or above 50 per cent. 'The target is as much about being really selective with the pitches we go for, as it is about how we present on the day. We only invest in opportunities that we have a good chance of winning, and once we decide to go for it, we invest 10 per cent of the value of the project in the pitch,' says Claire Robinson.

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Dick Powell, Seymour Powell

## Free-pitching

Free-pitching is something that fills many designers with anguish. Deborah Dawton of the Design Business Association is a big believer in remaining confident and in control. 'It is your choice to work for them,' she says.

DBA member Seymour Powell refuses to pitch for free, and many are against free-pitching, including Caroline Hagan, who calls it 'completely bonkers' and 'an utter lottery'. 'You would be better off gambling your money on the Stock Exchange,' she says.

But others disagree. James Bull, 'We wouldn't exist if we had never free-pitched. All groups are different and should not be standardised. Pitching is about showing off your creativity – and no one can tell you how to do that.'

The debate rages on. ■

## Top tips

How to clinch that job

### David Kimpton

Founder, Kimpton Creative



A pitch needs structure and clarity – the only way to make sure this happens is by rehearsing over and over again, so make sure you leave time for this. Give the client something compelling in the opening gambit – you can grab their attention by talking about something that resonates with them. Look at the people in the room and not at the screen – it builds chemistry and helps you engage in conversation.

### Claire Robinson

Client relationships partner, The Partners



Win the pitch, before the pitch. Why rely on two hours in the room on the day to win the client over, when you may have three or four weeks before the pitch to make them fall in love with you? Use the time cleverly to build the relationship and give them a flavour of what it would be like to work with you.

### Dick Powell

Founder, Seymour Powell



Don't try and be a business you're not; always be honest; be prepared; and be flexible in your responses to the client – listen more than talk.

### Caroline Hagan

Managing partner, Reach



Be unique and have a different offer and methodology to the other pitches. If you co-create the brief with the consumer, you have a better understanding of the market and can therefore be braver with your creativity.

### James Bull

Founder, Moving Brands



It is crucial to get the client involved in the pitch as it makes them think about things in a different way. Break down the barriers between client and consultancy and make it more of a workshop environment.

### Steve Price

Founder, Plan B Studio



Pitching is like a first date – they are checking out what you look like, what you sound like, what you say and how you say it. You need to be a storyteller with vision, passion, vigour and character – if you do this, at least the client will remember you for the right reasons.