Top 10 Pitching Tips

By David Greene

Whether you like it or not, as a creative person you will find yourself in the situation where you must "pitch" your ideas. This is neither good nor bad, it is simply a reality. At it's most basic level, "pitching" is merely the act of convincing others of the validity of your idea. As developers, you will pitch potential investors, publishing companies, production houses and even members of your own team, so you might as well get used to it.

It's funny––we go to school and learn all of the technical and theoretical concepts behind creating intellectual properties, but very few of us get any instruction on how to sell these wonderful ideas we dream up. A lot of it is common sense and may seem self evident. But often times, the simplest things are the most easily overlooked. The following is a simple checklist of activities that will help you to achieve a successful pitch. I wish you the best.

1 Clarify Objectives

Before entering any pitch meeting, it is essential that you understand your objective for the meeting. Of course, we all hope that as soon as we present our ideas, the person being pitched will have a moment of bright shining clarity, fall to their knees, thank god for your brilliance, and most importantly, open their check book. But this is reality. If you walk in the door with that objective in mind, you will most likely find yourself walking out that same door disappointed.

Often the objective for a meeting is simply to get another meeting. It is rare to land a gig after only one meeting. It is a cumulative process where one meeting leads to the next, then on to the next, and so on. So set your objectives realistically (ie. "From this meeting I want ...."). If you do this, you will save yourself a lot of disappointment and angst.

I've always found it to be a very comforting and focusing motivator to understand why I am in a room and what I hope to get out of it. If you know why you're there, you stand a much better chance of getting it.

*2**Understand Your Audience*

It is very important to understand the individuals you are going to meet with. Are they technical people who are more interested in the tech than the story, or are they marketing types who are more interested in the demographics than the specifics of the project? You will often find your-self modifying your pitch to meet your audience. Granted, this is a pain. But you need to target your pitch to your audience, otherwise you stand a good chance of loosing their interest rather quickly.

If possible try to do more in depth research on the individuals you will be meeting with. A lot of companies actually have bios of their primary officers listed on their website. Heck, it won't hurt to dig a little. You don't want to pitch your new concept "CyberChrist with an Attitude" to a company run by a Born Again Christian. A little research might save you time, effort and embarrassment.

3 Materials

Do yourself a favor. Invest the time and money necessary to create a professional appearance for any materials you plan to use during your pitch. This is a professional endeavor and drawings on cocktail napkins and documents which are written in crayon and grammatically incorrect do not bode well for your success.

Your materials do not simply help explain the concept you are trying pitch, they are an indication of your commitment to the project, a sign that the project is moving forward with or without them (and even more basically, it shows you are capable of producing an effective document).

The people you are meeting with are trusting you as a creative person to bring them something which will prove beneficial to both them and their customers. Do not disrespect them by showing up with a puppet show on popsicle sticks.

On the other hand, this does not mean that you have to spend exorbitant amounts of money. There are plenty of ways to add a professional sheen to your project without breaking the bank.

Repeat after me... Kinkos is your friend. Sure it sucks, especially when you're standing in line at 2:00 AM and have a pitch meeting at 9:00 AM the next morning. But the fact is, they really are open 24 hours a day/365 days a year. Utilizing a service such as Kinkos will allow you to go into the meeting with your materials looking exactly the way you want them to. I'm not usually one for endorsements, but these guys have saved my ass on more occasions than I care to remember.

To give you an example of the costs, I have never spent more than $12 to print and bind a proposal. Spend the twelve bucks because you never know who might be following your next pitch meeting. It might be me, and you can bet your ass that I'll have spent the twelve bucks. Which proposal do you think is going into the mulcher first? 'Nuff said?

4 Equipment

If you are presenting materials which need specialized equipment (ie: video or a computer), you may need to schedule specific conference rooms which contain the proper equipment (Web access, video monitor, etc.). Call ahead to find out if they have these items already available.

There is nothing worse than assuming they have a VCR and finding out that it is out for repairs. If you have gone through the effort to create a computer demo, try to use your own equipment for demo purposes. Yeah it's a hassle, but not as big a hassle as having to sort out technical problems on a system you're not familiar with. Nothing undermines a meeting more than tech problems in the middle of a pitch. Think about it. Most pitch meetings are scheduled for 15 to 30 minutes. Do you want to spend 12 minutes of your time re-booting the computer and eliminating system conflicts, or you do you want to get down to business?

For your own piece of mind, you can bring your own equipment to minimize the possibility of computer hassles. This doesn't mean showing up with a semi-trailer filled with a lighting rig and laser show. A Mac Powerbook will do quite nicely.

If possible, try to get into the room you are going to be presenting in before the people you are going to be meeting with. This is essential if you have any equipment to set up. Set up the room the way you need it to be. Own the room. Remember this is your "stage" for the next 30 minutes and you need to feel in control of your environment.

Always be nice to the secretaries and assistants because they are the ones who will be able to ensure that you get your equipment, conference room or whatever other items you may need. Treat them with respect for they are the gatekeepers of the domain you wish to enter.

5 <u>DRESS</u>

Don't over dress or under dress. In the best possible scenario, you want to dress like them. Whether we like it or not, people have a tendency to like people who look and act like themselves. Therefore it is best to try and understand the culture you are entering.

Some companies dress the "full nine yards" and without a suit and tie you will not be taken seriously. Other firms are more relaxed and showing up in your new Armani could alienate you from the barefoot exec you are the to meet with.

A little pre-research couldn't hurt. Whatever you finally do wear, make sure it is presentable. No stains, rips or other blemishes. Pretty basic stuff...but very important.
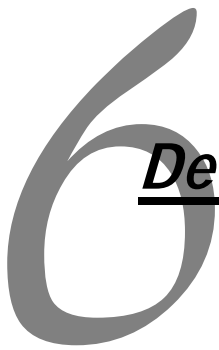
6 Determine Roles

Sometimes you may find yourself pitching with another person. This can be a benefit if you are organized and working together. It can also be a disaster if you are stepping on each other's words and fighting for the spotlight. Discuss who will be playing what role in advance of a meeting.

When I first began pitching, I was young, excitable, long-haired and a variety of other things which could send up warning signals to potential investors. Fortunately, the man I worked for was older and calmer than I was.

When we went into pitch meetings, I got to play the "excitable boy" the one who would do anything––bark like a dog, squirm like a bug, whatever it took to get the point across. My partner, on the other hand, played the role of the responsible businessman. The one who the money people could trust to keep everything in line.

Our pitch partnership worked well. If you are going to pitch with someone else, make sure you have your teamwork in order, otherwise you will undermine your effectiveness.

Nobody wants to work with a creative team who can't make it through a pitch meeting without arguing of over some obscure plot point.

7 *Rehearse*

Take the time to practice your pitch. If you are having trouble, try using the materials you have created as an outline to prompt you through your presentation. Try it out on friends, co-workers, your family, the cat, the mirror––whoever. And when you think you are done rehearsing...do it again.

You need to feel comfortable with the words that are going to be coming out of your mouth. Or do you want to spend half of the meeting looking for brilliant and explosive words to describe your project while the only sounds emanating from your mouth are errr, ummm, like, and, kinda, humm.

If you do not practice and know the material intimately, there is a good chance that the right words may not come to mind when they are needed. Repetition breeds confidence.

Practice the full pitch but also have a two sentence tagline ready. You never know who you will run into at a mixer or a convention. When they ask you what you are working on, you need to be able to quickly and concisely explain your project enough to entice them into wanting to hear more. This ain't the boy scouts but it does help to be prepared.

8 _Enjoy It_

Ok. You're in the room and you're on. This is your time to shine. You've been granted an audience with the king. By this point, you understand your personal objectives for the meeting. You have made sure that all the equipment is ready. Your materials look bitch'n––hell you look damn good and your partner is sharp and ready to go. You are well prepped and know the material so well you could recite your pitch in your sleep.

So go for it. Exactly how many times a year do you get to sit down with someone who could actually make your dream project come true? My bet is that it's not too many.

These are the precious moments. The ones that you're going to remember– the moments were you transcend the daily grind and try to turn your dreams into reality. So dig it for all it's worth. These moments don't come to often and it would be a shame to waste them sweating profusely because you were not prepared for the experience.

Bottom line, if you are prepared, you will have developed some degree of confidence in both yourself and in the pitch. Use that confidence as your foundation. Allow it to help free your fears and allow you to enjoy the experience. If you enjoy what you are saying, your audience will enjoy what they are hearing. Don't worry about success or failure. Simply do your best.

9 Be Prepared for Questions and Learn To Listen

Before the meeting, spend some time thinking of questions or potential objections that might be raised by the people you're meeting with. Try to have your responses ready. Do not view their questions or criticism as an attack on either yourself or your project. These people are simply trying to understand your vision and how it may fit in with their company's vision. So try not to get defensive. Be ready for anything.

Your primary objective in the pitch meeting may be to explain your concept to the other person. But in return, you are getting valuable information. Listen to all responses and comments. If you have been to three pitch meetings and every time there is an objection to one of your characters, perhaps this is an indication that you need to revise that character. Beyond the basic goal of selling your project, you are receiving valuable information about your project from industry professionals. Listen to what others have to say. Learn from them. Make changes when necessary.

10 _Follow Up_

Before leaving the meeting, mutually agree to a course of action. Should you follow up in a week? Do they need more information? Will they contact you? Do you need to do a revision and re-schedule a meeting? This ties back to where we started from back in "Clarify Your Objectives."

Now is the time to make your objectives a reality. Try to guide the conversation toward the result you want. If you are uncomfortable with asking for something directly, simply ask " What comes next?". Find out specifically what is the next stage in the process and what, if anything, you need to do. It does not matter what the course of action is, what matters is that both parties understand it and agree to it. Who should contact to who and why? Then do it.

Good luck.

*B*iography

Recently called a "Multi-Media Guru" by Entertainment Weekly, David Greene has been on the cutting edge of New Media for over five years.

He is currently President of Creative Spark, a San Francisco multimedia and Internet design firm. As a co-founder of *Robert DeNiro's Tribeca Interactive*, David served as project originator, original pitchman and lead game designer for the hallucinatory adventure game "9" which starred the vocal talents of *Steven Tyler* & *Joe Perry of Aerosmith*, *Cher*, *Jim Belushi* and *Christopher Reeves*.

More recently, David co-produced *Arista Recording Artists' Real McCoy's* latest enhanced CD with Minds Eye Media San Francisco. David wrote the featured case study in the upcoming Interactive Music Handbook to be released Spring 1997 by Alworth Press, and has produced numerous internet sites and promotions.

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