The Art of the Pitch

Get ready for the spotlight.

Coming up with good ideas is hard enough, but convincing others that they are good is a whole other ballgame. Part of the responsibility of being creative lead is that it is your job to present or “pitch” ideas to both internal team members and clients. I am not advocating that you learn how to sell ideas like one of those slick car wheeler-dealers, but you do need to thoroughly communicate the benefits of your creative solutions to teammates and the clients. You must develop the ability to be at ease when speaking to a group of people so that you can present your team’s ideas in a confident, knowledgeable manner. If you can’t, you risk having very good ideas end up in the recycle bin.

Ah, the pitch. We live and die by the pitch. If you are or want to be a creative lead and aren’t comfortable doing pitches, you will not go far. The most successful creative directors (CDs) pitch ideas often and they do it well. If you can’t sell your ideas or your vision, how will you ever advance? Sadly, many people’s vision or experience with pitching comes from watching episodes of AMC’s Mad Men. In between the womanizing, excessive drinking, smoking, and rampant sexuality depicted on the show, there are moments showing the creatives pitching ideas to clients and each other. We—executive CDs, CDs, associate CDs… or whatever title you hold—constantly sell our ideas.
Whether you like to do it or not, pitching is part of the gig, my friends. You know the work better than anyone else, and nobody is more invested in it than you. So you are the best person to pitch the ideas and convince others of its merits. Without the pitch to secure approvals, there is no work. No work means no money. No money means lots of Top Ramen and Kool-Aid for dinner.

Like all things in our journey to being the best creative lead you can be, there are good ways and bad ways to pitch. I will go over them here. Before beginning, I do want to stress that you don’t have to be an extrovert all the time to excel at pitching. You only have to be great when you’re pitching. If you recede into the background and shy away from opportunities to get up in front of a crowd to pitch ideas or give presentations you will soon find creatives who are willing to get up in front of people, surpassing you on your journey. If you’re shy, suck it up playa. Be shy when you’re alone. Creative leads are the biggest personalities in the room. They are willing to go out on a ledge and throw ideas out that other people might be afraid to share. They willingly get up and speak to groups. The good news is that this is something you can learn. The bad news is that the only way to get better at pitching is to pitch. You’ll have to overcome your fear, anxiety, or insecurities. Pitching is a skill just like any other. The more you do it, the better you’ll get at it.

Although fields or industries may differ (advertising, graphic design, media buying, web design, public relations, etc.), the basic ideas behind pitching are largely the same.

Think you can you do this? Is it something you want to do? Then read on. Let’s go.

Selling Creative Ideas

So what do you need to know before you pitch your idea? You need to understand who you’re pitching to. If you know who your audience is you can tailor your message and the way you present it so you have a much greater chance of success.

Let’s assume that you’ve brainstormed ideas, you’ve gone through rounds of revisions with your creative team, and now you’re ready to share them. The first group you’ll have to convince of your idea’s ability to address your client’s challenges is your Account Service team. They will judge your solutions against the creative brief that was provided when your team was assigned the job. Although this is an internal checkpoint and you don’t necessarily need completely fleshed-out creative work, it should at least be at a stage that your Account Service team can review and understand the solutions.

Why flesh out your ideas for the first checkpoint presentation? Because people can poke holes through an idea that is interesting but vague. Some people have a hard time visualizing ideas. If they have tangible creative concepts to review it’s much more difficult to dismiss.
Always remember, moving from an interesting but vague idea to specific and actionable is the difficult part of the creative process.

Most of the time it’s not worth pitching an idea until you’re able to answer some pragmatic questions about it: What problem does this solve? What evidence is there that the problem is real and important enough to solve—or in the corporate world, solve profitably? What are the toughest logistical challenges when executing the idea and how will (or would) you solve them? Do you have a prototype, sample, or demonstration of an implementation of the idea (a.k.a. proof of concept)? Why should this problem be solved now? Why should our organization be the one selected to solve this problem? These are the kinds of questions you are likely to be asked, and therefore, you’ll need to be prepared.

Prepping for the Pitch

Before going into the lion’s den, you want to know as much as you can about your client. You must have a solid understanding of who your client is as well as who their target market is. By doing so, you can almost predict what types of questions or concerns they will have with the creative work that you are about to present to them. By getting a firm understanding of who they are, where they’ve been, and what they’ve done in the past, you and your team can develop strategies demonstrating not only that you understand them, but that you and your team have come up with solutions that meet or exceed their needs.

Your clients are willing to spend money on your ideas, but they will only do so if they feel they can trust you. As the creative lead, you are going in with ideas that may be contrary to what they’ve done in the past. If you go in without any reference as to why you’re doing what you’re doing and putting it in terms they understand or are willing to accept, you may be in for a challenge.

I am not saying that by understanding their history and speaking their language your pitches will always be successful. What I am saying is you need to understand your client’s personality. How far will they let you take things? Do they enjoy humor? Are they really into technology? Do they like bright colors or do they like neutral color palettes? You’ve got to know these things to make your pitch much more likely to be a successful one.

Three Ways to Pitch Ideas

There are three approaches to pitching ideas: extemporaneous, keywords, and rehearsed. Each approach has its good and bad points. As you read through this you may find that one seems to be more appealing to you than the other two. What I recommend is you find the approach that best suits your style and go with it.
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Extemporaneous presentations

Believe it or not, in the past I rarely ever have really been one to rehearse for a presentation. Whether I was the creative lead at an agency or working on my own, when it was time to pitch ideas I typically studied the challenges faced by the client, reviewed what my solutions were, and then headed off to pitch my ideas. I was always able to hit the main points of the solution while addressing the client’s challenges. While that is not the best solution for presenting ideas, it worked for me at the time. You probably don’t want to try this approach if you have a tendency to forget information when you get nervous. We are all nervous when we present, so if this is a serious problem for you avoid extemporaneous presentations at all costs. In hindsight, I see how lucky I was to be able to pull off this way of presenting. I was at risk of not providing key insights that could make the difference between winning and not winning accounts.

Keyword presentations

If extemporaneous pitches aren’t your style, you can try using keywords. You don’t want to memorize a speech because reciting a speech from memory gives it a canned quality and distances a speaker from his or her listeners. There is also the risk of losing track of where you are in the speech if something distracts you while you speak. Writing down a list of keywords or phrases on an index card or piece of paper works well. While I really dislike having anything in my hands when I am presenting, a small document with keywords helps to remind me to talk about the most important aspects of items I am presenting. When you use keywords on an index card, you are less likely to forget something important.

Rehearsed presentations

Rehearsing for presentations is a very effective way to get ready for a pitch. When I worked at GDC Marketing + Ideation, I saw the benefit of rehearsing for pitches firsthand. The team—Frank Guerra, Beth Wammack, Carey Quackenbush, Victor Noriega, Lisa Gomez, and Marcie Casas—worked very hard at their presentation skills. Each member of the pitch team practiced their respective portions of the pitch (creative, media, public relations, etc.) and then they came together as a unit to rehearse multiple times before presenting ideas to current and potential clients. They did not try to memorize their presentations. They rehearsed multiple times so their presentations would appear effortless. It worked.

Following my time working with the GDC team, being able to watch their process firsthand, I am a firm proponent of every creative lead rehearsing their presentations before they sell ideas to clients. Rehearsing (not memorizing) will help you become more comfortable and confident with the delivery of your message once you are standing in front of your audience.

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Hello My Name Is…

Be sure to mingle before a large presentation so you have an opportunity to learn who is going to be listening to your pitch. Once you get their names, write them down and try to remember them so you can refer to audience members by name during the pitch or when it’s time for Q and A.

What’s even better? When people walk into the room where the pitch is going to happen, shake hands, introduce yourself, and then get their names so you can make a quick seating chart. You can use this seating chart to write down anything that you might want to reference during your presentation or after. Try to be sly about it. Don’t look at the seating chart you made and use a person’s name at the same time. Refer to your seating chart, speak for 5 to 10 seconds, and then refer to them by name.

By using their names, you are showing that you care enough to learn who they are. You are also building rapport and will grab their attention. In addition, doing this can help stop distracting conversations between audience members.

Engage the Audience

For those who have already had an opportunity to pitch ideas, have you ever pitched to a person or group of people who had no reaction or seemed bored? Pitching to a reactionless audience is somewhat painful. You will have a higher likelihood of either winning new business or getting a client to approve your campaign approach by engaging with them during your pitch. You need to get them to react. If you can break the ice and make a connection with them, they will feel comfortable enough to ask questions or make comments during your pitch. Once this happens, you have changed the dynamic of the pitch from a one-way presentation to a two-way discussion.

Some presenters get flustered by clients interrupting their pitches because they believe it messes up their flow. This is one of the main reasons that I now believe that prior preparation of the presentation is key. If you practice, you will be able to get back on track should you be interrupted in midthought.

Many presenters dislike interruptions because they don’t see it as a beneficial course of action. Interruptions aren’t always bad. If the interruption signals that the client is agreeing with your ideas or contributing to what you’re saying, then the interruption is a very good thing. When you are able to converse with clients during the pitch, when there is an open exchange of ideas and information, the atmosphere can change to something more informative and (hopefully) successful.

When the pitch is going well and turns into a conversation, the conversation can sometimes turn into a mini-workshop. What I mean by a mini-workshop is that the client or potential client is so engaged with your ideas that now
they have moved from merely being the recipient of the pitch to engaging with and helping to move the idea of your pitch forward. They will begin to see the ideas as actionable items that can be used to spread their message out to their target audience. Pitching to an engaged client is not just more enjoyable for you; the client will also feel as if they get more out of the meeting.

How do you engage with your audience? What has always worked for me is removing any physical barriers between me and them. If there is a lectern step out from behind it and move closer to your audience. Proximity helps to make a more personal connection with them. If you are in a large room with a long rectangular conference table, more often than not there are people at the table whose view is being blocked by someone else's big ol' cabeza. Give everyone the attention they deserve by moving around the room so they all feel equally engaged and equally important.

Pacing Your Presentation

I believe that everyone has their own presentation style. Believe it or not, I used to be a deacon at First Baptist Church in upstate New York. Yup, it's true. During my tenure there, I asked the pastor about presentation styles to try and understand how certain sermons seemed to get people excited. From church to church, I noticed that some congregations were super-engaged while others were more subdued. I asked if it was the content of the sermon or the way in which it was presented. The pastor informed me that the reaction from the congregation can be a direct correlation to the presentation style of the person giving the sermon.

That’s when I learned about the presentation technique church leaders are taught in seminary to get their congregations engaged and energized during their sermons. The method was broken down into four phases:

- Start low
- Go slow
- Raise higher
- Catch fire

Through the years, I have adapted that method to my presentation style. While I am not asking people to jump up and down shouting, “Yes Eli! I agree! That is the best idea I’ve ever heard! We should all buy two large pizzas with up to five toppings each for $20! You are as clever as you are artistically gifted! Amen! Amen! Amen!”

Okay, well that would be kinda funny. In reality, I provide initial information and build to my main points. I also adjust my pace and intensity according to what I’m presenting, or how important a certain aspect of the presentation is.
I also try to inject a bit of personality into my presentations. As a Puerto Rican, native New Yorker, I have a certain way of speaking. There is some Spanglish here and there, along with a bit of humor. Honestly I don’t plan for anything funny to be said, it just kind of hits me at the moment, and it seems to work for me.

Another thing I do is ensure that there is positive energy in the meeting. I am enthusiastic about the ideas I am pitching, but it is a measured enthusiasm. Overenthusiasm can make you come off as fake and insincere. You will find that measured, sincere enthusiasm in your pitches might make your clients keener to accept your concepts and design advice than a pitch that lacks enthusiasm or seems insincere.

Setting the Stage

Don’t jump right into the work without reminding your client why you’re pitching to them in the first place. Set up the situation or the marketing challenge that got you in front of them. Do it accurately and succinctly. You’ve got a very short amount of time at the beginning of the pitch to set up your ideas and get your client in the right mindset to receive your ideas. When you begin, they are already making decisions about you. Typically people make positive or negative judgments quickly and you’ll either be in for smooth sailing or a battle for survival.

Make sure that you make a good first impression. I am somewhat casual in the way I like to dress. I love to wear a great pair of jeans with some nice shoes, a sport coat, and a nicely colored shirt to presentations. I believe if you’re comfortable when you’re pitching ideas, your presentation will be great. However, if you are presenting to a very uptight dress code–oriented organization, you’ll want to dress in the manner in which they feel is appropriate.

Build Trust

You can build trust with your clients by giving them three things: honesty, ability, and concern.

- **Honesty**—Clients value people who tell them the truth. They want straight talk. Don’t beat around the bush.
- **Ability**—Clients want to know you can do your job. Don’t pitch an idea for something you have absolutely no idea how to turn into reality. Don’t promise things you can’t deliver.
- **Concern**—Clients need to know you’re on their side. Feeling that you are providing solutions that are in their best interest is probably the single largest concern that clients have with agencies. If they don’t trust you, your relationship will not last very long.
The Target Audience

Understanding your target audience is critical. If you don’t understand your target, how can you convince your account team that your creative solution is valid? If your concepts don’t resonate with the target, how will you get the client’s green light to produce the work? When you’re presenting your ideas, you will need to justify why your ideas will reach the target. Some of the questions you should be able to answer are as follows:

- What is the primary way in which the target receives information? Print? Web? Social Media? Word of mouth?
- How much time does the target spend on these mediums?
- How does your solution reach the target?
- Why does your solution specifically resonate with the target?
- Is your solution true to the brand?

Consider this: it is important to show the client how the target audience will view their marketing messages. If you are pitching an advertising campaign for your client, you should show your idea of the way the target audience will view the ad. If you have print collateral (brochures, postcards, flyers, etc.), the best way to show the elements is to print them full-size so the client can see the pieces and examine them the way the target audience will. Are you pitching a digital ad campaign? Don’t go in with only printed examples of your digital ads to get approval. Show them how your ads will look onscreen whether it’s on a laptop or iPad. Digital ads are much brighter onscreen than when they get printed out. Do you have an out-of-home campaign you’d like to pitch? Some media companies actually have mini billboard mock-ups you can use for your pitch.

What exactly am I trying to get at here? Pay attention to how you are planning to solve a client’s marketing challenge. Be sure that you utilize the best possible method to show your work so they understand how it will be received by the target audience. Take your target audience into account and understand the best way to reach them with your information. Millennial targets optimally receive information differently than Boomers, for instance.

¿Me entiendes?

While we typically deal with visual ways to pitch ideas to clients, people have different ways of processing information: visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. Without the benefit of knowing how the people on the client side will receive your work best, you will need to be prepared to address each modality. What are the best ways to cater to the different modalities?
Now that you’ve addressed the manners in which your clients will receive your pitch, you need to sell the work. What you want to do is paint a picture for your client and get them to buy in.

Now it’s Time for the Spotlight

This is where you can differentiate yourself from other creatives. Good creatives can create. Great creatives can not only create, but they can also sell. If you can stand in front of a client and present ideas that get them excited and ultimately encourage them to hire your team, then you’ll go far. Some of the ideas and techniques are the same whether you are pitching an integrated branding campaign for a multimillion dollar company or an identity campaign for a smaller company. Let’s look at some of the things you should be aware of.

Be happy. Smile. Make eye contact.

There is nothing more engaging than a person who is smiling while they speak to you. Now I’m not talking about a big, toothy shark grin, I am speaking about a genuine “I’m happy to be here presenting the ideas to you” smile. You should be pleased and honored to have these people give you their time. Show it with an engaging smile. The smile you display will also help them understand that you are not only happy about presenting work, but at least you are also confident that you are providing them with the best solutions possible.

When you smile, it will help to decrease your own tension and creates a warm environment. A smile tells people, “I am prepared for this and I will make this an interesting and informative presentation for you.” If you appear relaxed, your audience will also relax.

Eye contact is also important. Look at the people you are speaking to. Engage with them visually, but don’t stare at them… that’s just creepy. Glance around the room. Look at your team for their agreement and support. Look at your clients, each one of them. Don’t look at the same people in the same pattern repeatedly. That’ll just make you look like a water sprinkler. Visually jump from person to person in random patterns. Break down the room from groups to individuals. Each person you’re speaking to should feel as if they are the only person in the room. Make a connection with the people you are presenting to. Change the dynamic from a presentation to a chat between friends.
A typical mistake made in pitches is for the presenter to look exclusively at the person they believe is the decision-maker. Bad move playa. If you do this, you will alienate the other people in the room. You are pretty much telling everyone besides the decision-maker, “You’re not important.” If you alienate people on the receiving end of your presentation, they won’t have positive things to say about you and they may decide they don’t like what you were presenting to them. Their opinions will likely have an impact on the final decision. You want everyone in the room to advocate on your behalf.

Body posture

Talking through your ideas is only one part of the equation. You have to be very cognizant of your body posture as well. The way you stand, the way you move, the way you emphasize key points: all of these send messages. Your audience can read you as uptight or nonchalant, timid or challenging, sheepish or restrained. Avoid distracting movements or lack of movements, and for goodness sake don’t ever have a clickable pen or a snap-top marker in your hand: you’ll click your audience to death!

You will find that there are typically three types of presentation setups that you’ll be faced with: seated, standing, and lectern. Here are some tips for all three methods of presenting.

Seated presentation

Although they are not ideal for presentations, seated presentations work best for small meetings or in small rooms. It’s a little disconcerting to stand over your client in a very small room to present your work to them. While I would rather be in a large room to present, smaller rooms can make an event feel a little more intimate. In these scenarios, remember:

- Be comfortable, but don’t be lazy. Don’t slouch into your chair.
- Leaning slightly forward toward the person you’re speaking to will add energy to your delivery. You will be perceived as having enthusiasm for what you’re presenting.
- Square your shoulders to the person with whom you are conversing during the presentation. Don’t merely move your head from side to side. Squaring up your shoulders to everyone you speak to invites them into the presentation.
• When squaring up your shoulders to different people at the table, don’t swivel your chair from side to side. Randomly square up to different people and establish eye contact.

• When presenting to a crowd, square your shoulders up to different parts of the room.

**Standing presentation**

When you're presenting in large conference rooms or theaters, standing is the way to go. There is something about standing up in front of a group that immediately gets your audience's attention and helps you get your message across. To help things go your way while standing, try these tips:

• Do not pace from side to side in a repetitive pattern. It's very distracting and makes you appear anxious.

• Do not shift your weight from one foot to another. It makes you seem extremely unconfident.

• Keep your hands moving naturally as you speak. Use them to gesture and emphasize your points. Try not to clasp your hands together or lock your fingers.

• Try to avoid fidgety hands. Fidgety hands make you appear nervous or uncomfortable with the topic.

• Do not lock your elbows to your sides. Relax; let your arms move freely.

• Make eye contact with all parts of the room. Don’t just focus on one or two people.

• Stand tall.

**Presenting from a lectern**

Lecterns are common in classrooms, as well as some conference rooms and large venues like theaters. All tips from standing presentations apply here, and in addition:

• Do not lean in or touch your stomach to the lectern. If you do, you risk knocking your notes down or shifting your view down to the lectern thus not looking at your audience.

• Stand tall to ensure that you don’t get lost behind the lectern.
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- Resist the urge to place your hands on the lectern. If you must, rest them on the lectern, but do not have a death grip on the edges.
- Don’t lean over the lectern or rest any part of your body on the lectern, it’ll make you appear lazy or nonchalant.

Don’t Turn Your Back to Your Audience!

This tip is so important that it should be highlighted. In my opinion, turning your back to your audience to read your slide is horribly disrespectful to your audience. Not only do you begin to speak to the slide, it also implies that you don’t know what you’re presenting because you have to look at your slides for information. As creative lead, you should know everything about the slides that are being projected. If anything, you should be able to quickly glance at the visual and then explain it in its entirety to the audience. When you turn your back to your audience, you lose credibility very quickly.

Work the Room

As any good performer will tell you, you need to work the room to ensure that you connect with the audience and they respond favorably to you. How do you do this when you’re presenting? You must be able to adjust your pacing to keep the audience engaged throughout your pitch. In some cases you can even adjust some of the details of your pitch based on the verbal and non-verbal cues that your client is sending your way. This is critical to the success of your pitches. Your goal is not only to show the ideas you have developed, but to explain how they will benefit your client. Three quick tips to help you work the room:

- Don’t beat around the bush.
- Speak clearly.
- Give them the information and pause for a minute to let them absorb it.

Don’t be a Cocky Jerk

Whatever you do, don’t jump into a pitch and act like a slick car salesperson. Additionally, don’t go into a pitch as the chuckling, sycophantic, promise-the-world schmuck. You’ll lose a client’s trust and confidence immediately. Be honest. Be engaging. Your audience is smart. They will see through any insincere behavior.
Take Small Bites, Giuseppe!

Have you ever tried to shove an entire foot-long sandwich into your mouth all at once? No? If you were to try, do you think you could ingest it in one gulp? Think of your campaign presentation as a foot-long sandwich. Don’t try to shove an entire campaign down your client’s gullet. Break your concept into pieces. Gradually present the pieces and let them build to make the whole. It’ll be a lot easier for them to swallow.

For example, say you and your team are tasked with providing a new branding campaign for a local credit union. This assignment asks you to consider a complete shift in the way the brand is displayed to the public because the client has done some advertising that really hasn’t helped them stand out in a crowded marketplace. You and your team work up a new brand voice that includes headlines and impactful, informative copy. You’ve worked on defining new visual vocabulary with unique imagery, you’ve selected secondary colors to support the brand color palette, and you’ve generated ideas for the creation of print and digital ads, collateral materials, and internal publications. What you’re about to pitch is a solution that moves the client’s messaging away from anything else in the marketplace. Because the solution is such a broad shift, when it’s time to pitch the ideas to the client it would be best to unveil a little at a time. Give them a roadmap to follow that leads them through the details and ends up with the final, cohesive solution.

So let’s put this situation in terms of starting low, going slow, raising higher, catching fire:

- **Starting low**—Give an introduction that explains why you are there, what you believe your assignment required, and how you plan to progress through the pitch.

- **Going slow**—Begin to unveil the different elements. Start with the new visuals to show how you will evolve the photo treatments and subjects of their communications. Next, go over the headlines to show how the words will get people’s attention while supporting and being supported by the imagery. Next, explain the personality that will be exuded in the body copy. Finally, show how the secondary color palette supports the primary brand colors and explain how they should elicit certain responses.

- **Raising higher**—Show how the elements work together. How will horizontal and vertical print advertisements look? Give them an idea how digital advertisements will get attention on web pages. Showcase how out-of-home messaging could be succinct yet informative.
• **Catching fire**—Now’s your chance to get them really excited by showing them how the elements come together for the public. Create mock-ups of the different communications solutions in context. Show a print ad in a newspaper or magazine being read by someone. Place a digital ad on a web page that shows how it looks in context. Show how the billboards would look when viewed by a person driving by in a vehicle. How will their new elements appear on an iPhone?

So a Designer and a Copywriter Walk into a Bar…

Utilizing humor in your pitches is one way to break down barriers and make a connection with the people to whom you are pitching because it’s difficult to disagree with someone you’re laughing with. Humor can be used to your advantage; however, be very careful. Not everyone has the ability to pull off a joke during a presentation. If you can’t joke successfully, don’t try to use humor during your pitches. It could make things really uncomfortable when it flops. Believe me, when a joke flops it’s difficult to get back on track.

If you want to play it safe, try using a relevant funny story or analogy in your presentation. It’s easier to tell a story than to tell a joke. If they don’t laugh at your story, at least you’ve delivered your message.

Keep your eyes open to the world around you. There’s humor everywhere from books to magazines, TV to the web. Find things that are humorous and see how to incorporate them, but always be aware who is in your audience. Not everyone will find some things humorous.

**Defend Your Work**

Part of the job of a CD is not only to show the work, but to defend it from people who may not agree with it. You need to be confident in your position that your work is not only strategic but addresses the client’s marketing challenge and speaks to the target demographic. You will sometimes be faced by coworkers as well as clients who will give the “I don’t like it” response even though they are not in the target demographic. It’s only natural for people to view things in their own terms and based on their own experiences. To combat this, you **must** make sure that you have research about the target demographic so you can defend your work in terms of data and information rather than anyone’s (including your own) personal likes or dislikes.
It’s frustrating to create a campaign targeted to a Millennial-aged audience and hear a Baby Boomer client say they don’t “like” it because they don’t understand it. If you have research to back up why your team’s work is solid, then you will have a stronger position to defend. You will have numbers, case studies, testimonials, and articles to support your work. Maybe you’ll win the battle. Maybe you won’t, but at least you’ll know you had the support of research to back up your creative decisions and you did your best to provide enough information to support your team’s creative solution.

Caveat: Don’t Ever Show Crap Work

Whatever you do, if you don’t like the work, don’t show it. I have been hurt by this idea more than once. I was asked to show something I was not 100% convinced was the best solution, but unfortunately that’s what the client chose. It sucks to show work that you don’t believe in, have it approved by the client, and then have to execute it knowing that another idea could have been more successful. To avoid this, only show work you are convinced is the best solution and that you and your team will be happy and proud to produce.

Life and Death by the Deck

As a creative, I have to say I absolutely hate horrible-looking presentations. Presentations full of lame clip art, drop shadows, flashing words, flipping photos… ugh! Pretty much all the cutesy stuff that can be done with PowerPoint or Keynote, I really dislike. If I attend a presentation and the presenter has a horribly designed slide presentation, I’ll have a difficult time paying attention to what they are saying. I am not able to get past their distracting slides. Slides deserve quite a bit of attention because they will be onscreen while you are speaking. You must take the necessary time to create good ones or you risk losing a good percentage of your audience before you get to the main point of your pitch. Visuals can add to what you’re saying just as quickly as they can detract from it. So what’s the point here? I recommend a KISS strategy (Keep It Simple Shiboink). Let me give you quick tips for improving presentations.

We Are Visual Creatures

It’s imperative that you think about how imagery can enhance your message. Don’t rely on PowerPoint or Keynote transitions or visual treatments to enhance your message. You want your audience to have an emotional response to your visuals. Here are some quick tips:
• Don’t place everything in the center of the slide. Try using the rule of thirds. Imagine your screen is divided vertically and horizontally into thirds. Place the focal point of your image where the horizontal and vertical lines would intersect.

• Blur out distracting elements (busy background patterns, unnecessary people, random objects, etc.) from any photography.

• Check stock photo sites for visuals, but be very selective about what you use. Stock photos can help, or they can just be lame. How many times do we have to see business people with their arms crossed looking at the camera with an intense, but determined gaze? Oh barf! Don’t just grab the first image you see. Use some imagination. Never use images with logo watermarks on them.

• Use colors to elicit certain responses. (blue=calm, red=passion, yellow=sun, orange=energy, etc.)

• Use dark text on a light background because it’s easier to read, but avoid stark white backgrounds because in a dark room a stark white background is somewhat blinding.

• Don’t use custom or kitschy fonts they are distracting and sometimes difficult to read

• Keep text large and use minimal bullets per slide because people will naturally try to read what you place on a slide. If there are too many bullets with lots of copy, your audience will stop listening to you and begin to read your bullets.

• Avoid long sentences because you and your audience will read them. Presenters who read their slides lose credibility quickly. If you have too much text on your slides, you may be tempted to read them verbatim. Opt instead for keywords because keywords are easier to remember.

• Keep your focus to only two to five points per slide max. This helps keep you from lingering on a slide too long.

• As you create your slides, constantly organize them and refine your flow (Slide Sorter view in PowerPoint or Light Table view in Keynote). Remember start low, go slow, raise higher, and catch fire.

• If a slide doesn’t work, get rid of it.
Write for Brevity

Imagine you’re writing for Twitter. Try to keep your phrases to a minimal number of words. Strive for words that are conversational yet impactful. However, don’t pare down important words. Don’t sacrifice clarity for brevity.

Consider two versions of a slide bullet:

Too Wordy:

- It is believed that the fall of the Roman Empire affected coin-operated lint-picking machines by positively increasing their use among Roman citizens by 25 percent.

Better:

- After the fall of the Roman Empire, coin-operated lint-picking machines usage increased 25 percent.

Always Keep Your Audience Guessing

Follow up keyword-heavy slides with slides containing a single, large image or large field of color with minimal copy. This will keep your audience from getting bored with your layout. Adding variety will also help keep them engaged. Throw in a joke or maybe a photo of your favorite pet to see if they are paying attention. You can also consider adding variety to the slides by introducing charts, images, illustrations, quotes, and so on.

To Comp or Not to Comp? That is the Question

There are some situations where you pitch to those few gifted clients who have the eye; the people that can see and understand what you’re pitching by merely looking at a sketch. Then there are others who are very literal. They need to see everything in detail. Or maybe it’s not them; maybe you’re presenting an idea that can really only be appreciated when the client can see how it will look when it’s executed. You will have to understand in what form your ideas must be presented when it’s time to pitch them to your client.

I’m not saying that you have to spend $500 on a photo in an effort to secure approval from your client. You can have your team do all kinds of things. If you have an ad idea that requires a certain arrangement of people, you’ve got an agency full of models to choose from. Select people from your creative team, your media, account service, and public relations team and stage the photo you need. You don’t have a camera? Sure you do. You’ve got an iPhone or other smart phone that can take photos. Want to show them how the work will look on a billboard, a bus, or stenciled on the sidewalk? You’ve got a creative
team who can take the photos you need and mock it up in Photoshop or you can utilize any free mock-up site online to get images you can use in your pitch. The only limit you have is your own imagination.

You are selling ideas. To sell them you need to make sure the person who is buying them can imagine what you’re seeing. You can display the power of your ideas with mock-ups that show how they will actually look to the public in context.

**Handouts Before the Pitch? Just Say “No!”**

Whatever you do, don’t hand out material before you pitch your ideas. As soon as you give a client something to look at, you are competing with your own material for their attention. They will flip through it and inevitably steal your thunder by trying to get to the meat of your presentation.

If you want to provide the clients with handouts, let them know you will do so after your presentation. That way they have something to refer to or even jot notes on once you are finished.

**A Roadmap for You to Follow**

Pitching creative work is best done in a systematic way. If you are able to present to clients in a way that makes it easy for them to imagine the work and digest the different elements, you will hook them and be that much closer to an approval. You shouldn’t make a presentation confusing for a client and expect a positive outcome. If they get confused they will most likely not approve anything.

For example, the way in which storyboards are presented to clients can cause quite a bit of confusion. Because storyboards are typically designed with the visual description on the left side of the page, the visuals in the center, and the audio or dialogue on the right side of the page, some creative leaders present the boards in a left-to-right, top-to-bottom manner (Figure 8-1).
In other words, the creative reads the description of slide 1, shows the visual, then reads the dialogue or voice-over for slide 1. Then on to presenting slide 2 in the same manner and so on, and so on. In my opinion, that is one of the worst ways to present a TV concept to a client. This manner of presenting a storyboard doesn’t allow for the client to imagine the visuals of the spot before they are trying to absorb the audio. It breaks up the flow of the dialogue because the presenter is always describing the scene while the client is still digesting the narrative.

I believe there is a much better way to present: a presentation road map. Not only is the following road map a good way to present TV ideas, it can be used for most other creative presentations. There are two aspects to the presentation road map: the presentation of the storyboard and the presentation of the ideas. If you follow this roadmap to pitch your ideas, you will find that your clients are able to engage with and absorb the information being presented to them much quicker.

Figure 8-1. An example of bad narrative flow in a storyboard presentation
First, try organizing your ideas like this:

1. **Objective**—what are you trying to accomplish?
2. **Target**
   1. **Demographic**—the structure of populations.
   2. **Psychographic**—the study and classification of people according to their attitudes, aspirations, and other psychological criteria, especially in market research.
   3. **Brand, product, or service benefit**—why does the audience care?
3. **Challenge**—what is the opportunity available to educate the public? What is the obstacle that must be overcome?
4. **Concept**—present the idea in a way that excites the client.
5. **Wrap-up**—a single sentence set up to provide context for what you’re about to show.
6. **Execution**—show work.

Second, when you present the storyboard, rather than describing the visuals then reading the audio portion and jumping back to the visuals for the next frame and its associated audio, and so on and so on, try something different. Provide the client with the visuals. Describe each frame and set up the tone of the spot (Figure 8-2). As you progress through your PowerPoint (or Keynote) presentation you can give the client the details of the scene. You can sing or hum the song that will be playing in the background. You can even mimic some of the movements of the actors in the spot.
Once you finish with the visuals, the presentation will go back to the first frame and you can read through the audio portion of the spot. Whether it's the talent speaking or a voice-over, you can walk the client through the spot one more time. Now that the client has seen the visuals and been provided with your description, the audio portion will make more of a connection.

Note When you’re pitching TV storyboard ideas, try to avoid using technical camera jargon. Keep your verbiage simple and concise so it’s easy to understand. You are presenting the overall idea; you don’t need to go into the minutia such as camera movements, coloring, or effects… yet.

Now, let’s take a look at how all this can work.
Case Study

Let’s take an imaginary journey into a creative pitch for a TV spot. The client is a latex condom company. Their goal is to get people to always use condoms so they can avoid any diseases or unwanted pregnancies. I will provide the pitch dialogue after which in parenthesis I explain what portion of the roadmap I have just provided.

CD: Good morning everyone. Our team is here to present a concept for a TV spot that will run during the Super Bowl. As we all know, TV spots during the Super Bowl are a great way to showcase your product in a way that will not only engage and entertain, but will reach millions of people. With this in mind, we understand that our main objective is to sell more condoms. (Objective—First, you set up the presentation by giving information about the purpose of the meeting then tell them what you understand is their marketing challenge.)

CD: We know that we are reaching a vast audience during the Super Bowl, but our main target are those very eager young men 18 to 24 years old who may not be thinking clearly enough to consider buying a condom before engaging in sexual relations. We are trying to get them to take control of their lives before their lives take control of them. In addition, we are reminding our target that they are not only being responsible for themselves, they are also behaving responsibly for their partner. (Target—The client is being told who the target audience is, what the target audience has in mind, and why the target should care.)

CD: Our goal with this spot is to show not only that your product is the best in terms of sensitivity, but that it is THE safest condom on the market because it is very strong. (Challenge—Outline what the challenge is and what you expect the target will get from your creative idea.)

CD: How strong are your condoms? You condoms are SO STRONG they can stop almost anything. (Concept—Give the client a description of the spot that hints to the type of solution you will be presenting. In this case it’s an exaggeration.)

CD: Because sperm, like petulant children, need to be controlled. (Wrap-Up—Sum up the spot with a simple statement.)

CD: Before I begin, allow me to play a small snippet of music that will help set the mood: the song “Feelings” by Morris Albert. (Play the song and begin to describe the images of the spot.) We see a young man walking down a typical street. He is obviously dressed to go out on a date. Behind him we see thousands of men dressed in round, white costumes with pointy white hats. The oddly dressed men—who look surprisingly similar to a certain male reproductive cell—mimic every move the young man makes. When the young man walks faster, they walk faster. When the young man stops to look at his watch, they stop to look at their watches. When the young man stops to look at himself in the window of a sexy lingerie store, they stop, look at themselves
and get very excited. Finally the young man has reached his destination. He stops and waves to someone in the distance. We see his girlfriend. She waves back at him from across the street.

CD (suddenly stop the music that has been playing): The young man begins to fix his collar and prepares to step off the curb toward his girlfriend. Without warning, he is run over by the thousands of chubby white sperm men! They charge toward the girlfriend. Thousands of sperm men are running toward her. As these men charge, the girlfriend’s expression changes from happy to concerned. Suddenly, the men run into an invisible barrier just before they reach her.

CD: The young man walks up to his girlfriend and takes her by the arm, and they walk off into the night together. As they walk away, they pass the world’s largest condom filled with the thousands of sperm men who were following the young man all night. We conclude by watching the sperm men struggling in vain to get past the barrier.

CD: As we see the sperm men struggling, your logo appears with a simple line that reads: For a hundred million reasons. (Execution—First, provide a visual description of the spot only showing images from the frames of your storyboard. In this case there is not any voice-over or dialogue, but if there were, you could go through the storyboard images once more, and read the dialogue the second time. Doing it this way allows your client to first see the images and enjoy them before listening to what the audio portion will be.)

In a Nutshell

There you have it. Easy. Right? Of course not. If it were really easy then everyone could do it.

Pitching is a skill that must be learned and practiced. It is a way to present the benefits of a communications strategy that you and your team have developed. Pitching is something that CDs must continually do and do well. They pitch to their account team to get approvals to move forward with ideas; they pitch to clients to get their approvals to execute their ideas; and they pitch to potential clients to get their business and sign them on as clients.

When you’re pitching ideas you must take everything into consideration from researching your client to understanding how they will most likely react to your presentation to the ideas you present and the way you present them. If you’re currently on your way up the career ladder working toward a CD position and you have an opportunity to present ideas to the account team, to a client, to your creative team, to anyone, do it. The only way to get better pitching ideas is to do it and do it frequently.

Remember, for a CD: Life’s a pitch.