

How to Create an Effective Sales Presentation

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Making a sales presentation can be nerve-racking. Throw in a recession and increased pressure to close the sale, and the scenario gets even more stressful. Generic speeches and snazzy PowerPoint slides just don't cut it anymore — especially with corporate customers who have reduced spending to boost their bottom lines. That's why firms like IBM have retooled their sales pitches to better address the needs of their customers. Before setting up your next meeting with a potential client, try these techniques to create a more effective sales presentation that can produce real results.

Things you will need:

- Allow hours or days for customer research.
- **Good research:** To understand what potential customers need, you have to understand the details of their business.
- **Storytelling:** Narrative is more compelling than a data-driven slide show.
- **Attitude:** Be confident and persuasive. Don't shy away from who you are: a salesperson. Own it.

A yellow sticky note with the text 'step 1' written in a handwritten style.

Know Their Pain

Goal: Target your sales pitch to address the problems customers need to solve.

There are no one-size-fits-all solutions when it comes to framing a sales pitch. Even within the same industry, each potential customer will have a unique set of problems that he is eager to address. Your job is to understand those needs and position your pitch to speak directly to the client's core concerns.

To do this effectively, good research is essential. The customer's Web site is a good place to begin, but keep digging deeper. "Prospective clients expect that you understand their business, because Web sites, social networking, and other forms of technology are accessible to everyone," says Kyla O'Connell, a sales consultant and director of business development for advertising agency Punch. "It's not wise to walk in and ask, 'What is the company's vision?' They expect you to know that already." Research the company and its competitors online, but don't stop there.

The Internet is useful, but nothing beats the insight you'll get by talking to a human. That's why it's invaluable to find a contact inside the target company who can advise you. Leverage your social networks or professional organizations to find an "inside coach" who can provide details

about what happens behind closed doors — especially whatever “pain” or existential concerns the firm is confronting.

Lastly, try to learn as much as possible about the **person who will make the purchasing decision**. The buyer may be under intense pressure to solve a problem, or face losing her job. Once you have a handle on what that problem is, your presentation should position your product or service as a solution. Potential customers are always more receptive when it’s clear that the sales pitch is relevant to their circumstances.

Big Idea

Study the Industry as Much as the Players

Getting to know the inner workings of a company — and its decision makers — is a crucial part of any effective sales pitch. But don’t miss the bigger picture: what’s happening in the industry. Keep up with trade magazines, seminars, newsletters, conventions, or online groups that provide insight into an industry.

In 2001, IBM executives asked customers what IBM sales reps lacked. The answer, according to an interview in *Sales and Marketing Management* magazine, was that IBM’s sales force did not have sufficient depth of knowledge about customers’ industries. To address this, IBM retrained its sales force to make each sales rep an industry expert. Reps were also reorganized into teams based on a customer’s size, industry, and location. The shift meant that all of IBM’s sales reps could respond quickly to customer needs — without having to defer to a superior or another employee with specialized industry knowledge.

step 2

Design a Presentation That Sings — Not Snoozes

Goal: Create an engaging pitch targeted to your potential customer.

Resist the urge to cobble together a bunch of pre-existing PowerPoint slides, and instead try to create a presentation that tells a clear story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Dean Brenner of the Latimer Group, a communications consulting firm, urges salespeople to sit down and outline the story they want to tell before writing the final draft. Begin by setting a goal, he says. Consider these two questions: What do I want to accomplish? What do I want my customer to think when I finish the presentation? If a competitor sells a cheaper product, then “your goal is to get them to see value beyond the price,” Brenner says. “All communication needs to be constructed with a very clear picture of where you’re trying to go.”

Clarify your message before pulling in props such as PowerPoint slides, brochures, or decks. “Those things are merely the final illustration of the story you’re trying to tell,” Brenner says. Showing a picture, video, or graphic to illustrate a point is fine, but avoid showing a series of slides that contain nothing but text. “Too many salespeople use PowerPoint slides as a

crutch and just simply read the slides to the audience,” O’Connell adds. Most important, avoid what O’Connell calls the “shameful rookie mistake” of turning a sales presentation into a dog-and-pony show that describes how great your company is — but doesn’t address your potential customers’ problems.

Checklist

Developing a Presentation

Before you head into the meeting, make sure you have all your ducks in a row. Here are a few things you won’t want to forget:

- Determine the points you want to make, tailored to the specific customer.
- Write out your goals for the meeting.
- Take your insights into your customers’ needs and turn them into a story with a solid beginning, middle, and end.
- Create the visual aids that best illustrate the story.
- Eliminate jargon and confusing slides from the presentation.
- Practice, practice, practice.
- Get feedback from at least one other source, like your sales coach or a trusted colleague, before the presentation.

step 3

Speak Like a Pro

Goal: Deliver an authentic, persuasive, and creative presentation.

Terri Sjodin, founder of Sjodin Communications and author of *New Sales Speak: The 9 Biggest Sales Presentation Mistakes and How to Avoid Them*, says there are three essential elements to crafting a punchy presentation.

1. Have a rock-solid, persuasive case.

When people are uncomfortable making a forceful argument, they often compensate by providing lots of disjointed data. That’s a mistake. Data should be used to support a compelling story, but without the story the data can be overwhelming. “We give biased information. So let’s just own who we are,” Sjodin says. “We don’t have to shrink from being persuasive, especially when you believe in your product, your service, and yourself.” She encourages salespeople to think like lawyers: Craft an argument that’s so chock-full of evidence that it would persuade even the toughest judge.

2. Be compelling and creative.

“You may have a great case, but the way you present it has to be clever,” Sjodin says. That means steering clear of generic scripts or boring visual aids. Try using a testimonial from another customer or telling a story to illustrate a point. “Use your analytical skills as a sales professional, and ask yourself, Am I really looking at this material and defining what makes us different?” Sjodin says.

3. Speak in an authentic voice.

No one likes a poseur. “You don’t want to hear Eddie Murphy performing Robin Williams material,” Sjodin says. “They’re both great comedians, but each has their own voice.” Sales professionals are no different. Don’t pretend to know things you don’t or use too much industry jargon. Be yourself, be accessible, and remember that potential clients will see through someone who is putting on an act.

What Not to Do

Avoid Information Overload

Don’t fall into the trap of giving clients information that they already know, Sjodin says. Too many facts will bog down a presentation and prevent it from moving forward. “Often you get this huge information dump, but you neglect to pull out the ‘So what?’ argument from the presentation,” she says. That approach forces the listeners to sort through the information on their own to find out what’s important, Sjodin says, rather than laying out arguments to build a case. There are lots of risks of dumping too much information in a presentation. The clients may get bored or feel like they are being lectured. Worst of all, they may take in all the information and data — and then use it to negotiate a deal with someone else.

(Additional reporting by Noah Buhayar)