Plan Your Sales Pitch Down to the Word; Here's Why

You've probably heard hundreds of sales pitches in your life. Some immediately captured your interest, while others were tuned out almost as soon as they began.

What made the difference? The most effective sales pitches were those that were well prepared and delivered with confidence. And even if you weren't interested in that product or service at the time, you remembered the pitches that made a positive impression when conditions changed or somebody asked for a recommendation.

Now that you're an entrepreneur, you want the sales pitch for your small business to have that kind of positive impact on your prospective customers. Don't worry that you're not a "born salesperson;" in truth, few people are. All it takes is research and planning—the same steps needed for every other business decision you make as an entrepreneur.

Prepare Several Pitches for Different Situations

Because you'll find yourself in many types of selling situations—both expected and impromptu—it's best to prepare several pitches, each with the same basic facts tailored to the setting and audience. Here are three that you will likely need:

The in-person pitch—a formal presentation about your business given to one or more people.

The phone pitch—a variation of the formal presentation designed for cold calling or following up on inquiries. (An email version of your phone pitch may be good if you expect to market online. Just remember that the content written text varies in format and style from the spoken word.)

The elevator speech—a concise description of your business for informal situations, such as social gatherings and plane trips. Imagine yourself on an elevator with only a few "floors" of time to explain to someone what you do.

Putting It Together

Of course, the content and delivery of these and other sales pitches will vary depending on the setting, who initiates the conversation, the product or service you're describing, whether you're providing general information or pursuing a specific assignment, etc. The fundamental ingredients are a full understanding of your business, and as much knowledge as possible about the interests of your listeners. Yes, your pitch is about you, but it's also about them—what they do, what they need, and whether there's a way you can help.

Here are some other guidelines for making any kind of sales pitch successful:

Know what to say, even if you don't say it. Structure your pitch like the trunk of a tree that leads to multiple branches of increasingly specific information. You may not need all of them over the course of a conversation, but you'll be prepared to field any question that arises.

Organize around your key selling points. The first 30 seconds usually determines whether you capture your listener's attention. You have far less time for phone calls and conversations. You want your pitch to have a logical order, with a defined beginning and conclusion.

Be flexible. If your pitch it too tightly scripted, an unexpected question or distraction may throw you off track. Being aware of your listeners and surroundings will make it easier to answer or defer questions, or take up a new conversation thread of more interest to your listener.

Be honest. Avoid the temptation to tell prospective customers everything they want to hear, as you may not be capable of following through.

Practice Makes Perfect

As you develop your sales pitch, practice with people who can provide honest and fair feedback, and who understand your customers' perspective. Encourage them to pose questions to practice your ability to respond, improvise and keep your pitch on track.

And always be alert to for ways to keep your sales pitch fresh timely, whether it's a different setting, trends in your prospective customers' businesses, or changes in your product or service. While it is particularly important for formal pitches, your elevator speech may require periodic tweaking as well.

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