

Better sales pitches



Would you like to close more sales opportunities? Improving your sales pitch is the way to do it; whether it is the initial story you tell about yourself, your brand image, your proposals or face-to-face presentations.

Pitch

Sales begin with a pitch. What are you going to do for the customer? The better you understand their needs and their problems, the better your pitch will be. Car manufacturers understand this very well. They tap into their customers' need for status, self-actualisation and comfort. Otherwise, we'd all be driving the cheapest car on the market. Similarly, Microsoft doesn't sell software; it sells solutions to business problems that make people more productive and businesses more competitive.

Your pitch requires careful thinking about what you do and how you help your customers, and it needs to be expressed in their terms.

Try expressing your story as a 30-second elevator pitch, as a tagline for your logo, as an opening sentence in a letter or as the answer to a question from a journalist. You can use it as part of a short get-the-meeting email. Beermat Entrepreneurs, Mike Southon and Chris West recommend a short, personal email to a prospect. Show some interest in their company – perhaps congratulate them on recent success – and ask for a quick ten-minute meeting to introduce yourself. It

TOP TIP: delay emails in Outlook

Did you ever press send and then wish you hadn't? Use the [Rules Wizard](#) in Outlook to delay outgoing messages for five minutes. Then if you need to change something or want to recall a sent message, you'll have a chance to do it.

gives you a chance to make your pitch, ask them about their business issues. It might lead to an opportunity and a proposal.

Polishing

Polish your proposals. They should show your company and your products at their very best. If your proposals are poorly designed, poorly written and full of mistakes, your customers will (rightly) assume you're not up to much and buy elsewhere.

"It's all too common to see poorly presented and inconsistent documents," says Adrian Barkey from Microsoft Partner EJC IT. "And yet people waste valuable time struggling to make them – time that could be better used elsewhere." The answer is templates. They save time and ensure consistent, good-looking collateral, proposals and presentations. Using Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, you can set up a template document with design, styles, your company logo and everything you need to create a great-looking proposal or presentation. Once they're ready, you can share them with everyone in the office on the server or via a [Business Productivity Online Suite](#) SharePoint site, ensuring consistency.

Finding a good template is easy. There are hundreds on the [Microsoft Office website](#). You can use them as a starting point or hire a designer to create new ones for you using your company branding. A sharp logo can help too. The Design Council has a great [online guide](#) to choosing and using a designer. You can also work remotely with firms online, such as HP's [Logoworks](#), who will design a logo (and other business documents) for a fixed, upfront fee.

Proposal

A good proposal should leave your customers ready to buy. According to Barbara Minto, author of the Pyramid Principle, the best place to start is with a clear statement of the problem you are trying to solve. This approach helps you to see the world from your customer's perspective and to explain how your product or service helps them. Although your customer may quibble about price and may need persuading that you have the best solution, if you can summarise their needs clearly, you will start on common ground. "By summarising what the reader already knows, the introduction establishes the relevance of the question to which your document will give him the answer," says Minto.

You can use boilerplate copy or even a mail merge document in Word to prepare common elements. For example, you can write short descriptions of each of your products or summaries of common customer requirements. Doing this in advance will help you produce proposals faster when you actually need them. It will also ensure consistency between proposals. Similarly, you can use Excel to do the financial part of the proposal and then embed the spreadsheet into your proposal document so that all the sums add up. There's nothing more embarrassing than realising you made a mistake in a quotation. Too low and you have to ask for more or lose money. Too high and you risk inadvertently putting your prospect off. Keep the proposal short and to the point. A couple of pages may be all that you need, although you can use extra pages for specifications, product descriptions and legal terms and conditions if necessary. Keeping things short means that your potential customer is more likely to read the whole thing. Close with a clear statement of what happens next. For example, include an order form for the customer to sign or propose a meeting to go through any questions.

Presentation

PowerPoint presentations can enhance a face-to-face sales pitch but it's easy to get them wrong. "It's all about engaging with the audience," says Aileen Gonsalves, artistic director at [C Company](#), a London-based theatre company. She regularly trains business

Ten tips for better business writing

We asked Matthew Stibbe, author of the free eBook [30 Days to Better Business Writing](#), for ways to make your prose as sharp as the rest of your proposal.

1. **Make time for writing.** It's important.
2. **Write like a human being, not a corporate cliché machine.**
3. **Use the active voice** ("The cat sat on the mat" not "The mat was sat on by the cat").
4. **Use fewer words.** Get to the point quicker.
5. **Use shorter words.** As Churchill said, "Broadly speaking, the short words are the best, and the old words best of all."
6. **Use Word's grammar checker** to spot silly mistakes and passive sentences.
7. **Use a readability tool** to get objective feedback.
8. **Get someone else to check your work**, ideally a professional proofreader.
9. **Write for the reader, not yourself.** Answer their questions first.
10. **Avoid hype.** If something is the latest and greatest, explain why. Don't just say it is.

people in how to make better presentations. "Common problems include reading from the screen, not paying attention to the people in the room and nerves." Her advice:

- **Fewer words.** Use PowerPoint to illustrate your presentation; get images from stock libraries such as [iStockPhoto](#) and the [Office clip art library](#) to make it look professional, but cut down on the number of words on screen.
- **Preparation prevents poor performance.** Prepare in advance so that you know your talking points. Not only will this make you less nervous, but it will help you keep your attention on the people you are talking to. However, it isn't a script so you don't need to learn it by heart. Be a little bit spontaneous so you don't turn into a presentation robot.
- **Keep it short.** A shorter presentation is easier to learn, has more impact and is less likely to bore the audience.

- **Relax.** Simple breathing exercises can help you relax before a presentation, but the best thing is to remember that you know your stuff and to treat it as an enhanced conversation, not as a formal lecture. Just pretend you were having the meeting in the pub with your mates. But without the beer.

PowerPoint 2010's Presenter Mode can help. While your presentation appears full screen on a projector or external monitor, it shows the current slide, your speaker notes, a stopwatch and the next couple of slides on your laptop screen. This makes it much easier to stay in control of the presentation, keep track of your notes and focus on your audience.

Persistence

Once you've made your pitch, don't sit on your hands. Customer relationship management software, such as Microsoft Outlook 2010 with Business Contact Manager¹, can keep track of proposals and contacts with all your potential clients. When you send your proposal, make a diary note to follow up. A well-timed, well-crafted follow-up can close the deal.

TOP TIP: using presenter mode in PowerPoint 2010

When you're ready to give your presentation, if you have two monitors (e.g. a laptop with its own screen and an external display) you can use one screen for the presentation and the other as a presentation control panel. To do this, just select 'Use Presenter View' on the Slide Show tab.



For more information

- [12 tips for creating better presentations](#)
- [6 ways to ensure your email gets read](#)
- [Try Office 2010 with a 60 day free trial](#)
- [More on how technology can help your business](#)

¹ Business Contact Manager is available with Microsoft Office Standard 2010 and Professional Plus 2010.