10 Tips for Successfully Selling Your Idea

Former Chrysler chairman Lee Iacocca once stated “You can have brilliant ideas; but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere.” Here are ten tips from various business and community leaders on how to successfully communicate and gain support for your idea.

1. **Do your homework and go in with a game plan**
   
   Before you meet with a potential supporter, do some background research on them and their organization. What is the mission of this individual or their company, and how does your project specifically align with this mission? What kinds of projects has he or she supported in the past, and how is yours similar to those? These are just some of the questions that you should try to answer before your meeting. After determining why exactly the client will see value in your idea, develop a plan for the meeting. Wharton legal studies and business ethics professor G. Richard Shell says “A lot of people just wing it, thinking they can count on their own experience and instinctive powers of persuasion to carry the day, but in fact, you do need a strategy.”

2. **Gain support from the ground up**
   
   It is unlikely that you will give your first pitch to the final decision-maker. Rather, you’ll probably give your pitch to someone in lower management, who will then recommend you to higher decision makers if you were persuasive. Charles Lindbergh, first man to fly nonstop across the Atlantic, used this strategy to gain funding for his endeavor. He first approached local airport contacts for support, and then leveraged their recommendations to eventually get a meeting with the most successful businessman in St. Louis, who funded his project.

3. **Sell yourself as well as your idea**
   
   Your audience is judging your creativity, intelligence, and professionalism as much as they are judging the merits of your project. Furthermore, they are doing this extraordinarily quickly. Research suggests that humans can categorize others in less than 150 milliseconds. So it is essential to establish quickly that not only is your idea inventive, practical, and smart, but that you are too.

4. **Start small and scale up**
   
   You will not be able to save a city in a year, but you can complete a smaller project that contributes to a larger vision in that time, and that is more than enough. Furthermore, you can always expand your project incrementally so that eventually your endeavor makes a huge community impact. The danger of taking on more than you can handle is that you will not accomplish what you said you would, and thus lose credibility with potential supporters. So commit to completing a smaller project first, that you can then scale up after you hone your skills and gain more resources. And keep in mind that Google’s success is largely based on just one service.

5. **Tailor your message to your audience**
   
   Your idea might appeal to different stakeholders for widely different reasons, and that’s okay. Based on your background research, identify what motivates your audience and adjust your presentation accordingly. Bono of the rock band U2 is known for successfully appealing to the personal values of legislative members to gain support for his campaign against AIDS.
6. Treat the pitch like a conversation
Potential supporters are more receptive to ideas that they feel they helped create. Wendy Weiss, widely acknowledged as the "Queen of Cold Calling", says that presenters should only talk 20% of the time and listen the other 80%. Weiss says "A good pitch is one where you ask questions, listen to the prospect, and offer them a solution to a problem." While you should already have an idea of the client’s needs through your background research, you can always learn more by asking questions. After the potential supporter describes the problem, state how your project can solve this problem in their own language. Clients will be hard-pressed to turn down a solution that will satisfy the needs they just described to you.

7. Keep it short and interesting
Carmine Gallo, contributing writer to Forbes, recently wrote “If you can’t tell me what you do in 15 seconds, I’m not buying, I’m not investing, and I’m not interested.” So get to the point quickly. It is also important to make your pitch unique. Author Joseph Heller once told his college writing students that everything has already been written about, and that the only way to grab people’s attention is to say what has already been said in a fresh way. Ditch clichés and pre-made PowerPoint templates, and make your appeal stand out.

8. If you don’t know, find people who do.
It’s okay if you’re not an expert in all areas of your project. Know what you know, know what you don’t know, and then find people who do know. The most successful leaders, including billionaire investor Warren Buffett, are not shy about seeking advice from the smartest experts. Funders are supporting a team as much as they are a great idea.

9. Follow up
Continue to build the relationship even after the pitch. “One of the most common mistakes people make in selling ideas,” says Shell, “is to think that their job is finished once they succeed in getting someone to say ‘yes’ to their proposal. That’s only the beginning. Research shows that in most organizations, a minimum of eight people will need to sign off on even simple ideas. The number goes up from there. So after you move the individual, you also have to move the organization.”

10. Educate yourself
The above tips are just some of the recommendations we found through our research. They are largely taken from the below articles. Each resource has additional advice to offer though, so perfect your persuasion skills by checking them out:

- How to pitch anything in 15 seconds: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phyU2BThK4Q
- How To Craft An Effective Sales Pitch: http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2012/01/05/how-to-craft-an-effective-sales-pitch/
- 6 Steps to the Perfect Pitch: http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/201826