

# Making The Pitch

## How to prepare for A Beauty Contest

Pulling your best suit out of the closet doesn't constitute preparing for a business pitch. A prospective client expects more. Most will assume you have done your research, understand their needs and are prepared to discuss how your firm can address their specific issues. If you want to win their business you had better be prepared. Start with basic information gathering. Does anyone in your firm know someone at the potential client's business? If so, find out about the client. Are there existing contacts already established between your organizations. You risk looking foolish if you don't at least cover this base.

Contact the prospective client and be frank. Tell them you want to put your best foot forward and you want to address areas of most interest to them. Ask simple questions: How many people will be attending? What are their various roles within the company? Should you expect a board room with a big table, an informal discussion in someone's office, or a meeting outside the client's offices, perhaps over a meal? Will they expect a formal presentation with powerpoint slides, or do they have something more casual in mind?

And don't forget the basics. Will they supply equipment or electrical outlets for projection? Will the business provide a phone connections for Internet access (so you can show off your firm's Web site)? How much time will you have? Who will make the final selection and what criteria will they use? Who are your competitors? What time in the day will you present?

Since we all have our own presentation style, do what works best for you. If someone is most comfortable using visuals, assign him or her that job. Let the person who likes dialogue moderate the question and answer sessions. Choose a dynamic speaker for the opening and closing sections of the presentation.

Prepare an outline and try to structure your presentation in the same order as the request for proposal, or verbal request. You will show the client you are paying attention to the requirements. Distribute the outline at the beginning.

Each presenter should have a clear role. If three people attend, then all three people should speak. Bringing along a "big-name" partner who sits mutely until trotted out to lend credibility is pointless. Select the presentation team carefully as it also should be the team who takes care of this client.

Tell your audience what you plan to cover and how long your presentation will last. Advise the audience whether you will answer questions at the end or they should break in as questions come up.

The timing of your presentation can be critical, so be flexible. After sitting through three other presentations, the client may opt for a more informal question and answer session or may be anxious to end the long day.

Look for eyes glazing over, nervous fidgeting and doodling – all signs you are losing your audience. Energize a tired audience by posing questions, moving around the room, making eye contact and passing around exhibits – anything to break the lulling sound of your voice.

Tough times to make presentations are right after lunch and at the end of the day. One group that drew the post-lunch time slot brought a small, tasteful selection of desserts. While it was obvious bribery (and they joked about being so blatant), the motive was even more devious: the sugar revived the snoozy, lunch-stuffed attendees.

Conversely, if you know you will be on at the end of the day, plan as much of your presentation as possible without using a projector. When you do use the projector, don't dim the lights too low, lest you put the attendees to sleep.

Plan a strong close, as that is what people will remember. Research shows that people miss 85 percent of everything they hear, so reiterate the important points in the closing. Leave behind supplementary materials.

Don't hesitate to ask for the business and to ask what else you can do to make their decision easier. Too often lawyers end the presentation without letting the client know that they truly want to handle the client's legal affairs.

Make sure you rehearse, more than once if possible. Focus on your introduction, the key points, transitions between key points and your summary.

Finally, try to relax and enjoy. Show enthusiasm, and don't be afraid to put some passion into your presentation. People want to know that you are excited to get their business and that you will treat them like your No. 1 client.