

‘Almost every great business is the product of two great ideas. A great idea, and another great idea about how to sell the first idea. It pains me to think how many wonderful innovations and great businesses we may have lost because they never cleared the second hurdle. If only they had read this wonderful book’ **Rory Sutherland**, author of *Alchemy*

‘When I finished *Pitch*, my first thought was: how much would it cost to hire him? This is the go-to compendium of pitching – as an ex-sales trainer, I found things I’d never considered. It’s light-hearted and packed with incredible stories and tools. Seriously impressive’ **Thomas Erikson**, author of *Surrounded by Idiots*

‘From the opening story of the legendary ABM pitch for British Rail through step-by-step instructions on how to organise, craft and deliver an effective pitch, Danny has created an indispensable guide for any individual or organisation that needs to up its pitch game. Highly recommended’ **Peter Coughter**, author of *The Art of the Pitch*

‘You can’t convince anyone of anything without a good story. Danny has masterfully captured that connection in this concise and practical book. Pick this book up and land your next pitch like a pro’ **Jeff Gothelf**, co-author of *Lean UX*

‘In a world of digital tricks and games, Danny’s book brings a refreshing focus on the fundamentals of how to win. His principles and stories are timeless. Read it. Live it. Enjoy the Reward’ **Doug Hall**, author of *Jump Start Your Business Brain* and founder of Eureka! Ranch

‘If you want to beat the competition then this is the most thorough and engaging pitch book that I’ve had the pleasure to read. It covers everything from A to Z – and beyond – and will become an indispensable guide on not just pitching but how to prepare for and present yourself in any situation when your persuasive power is paramount’ **Graham Thomas**, former CEO and president of Saatchi & Saatchi

‘Danny is the modern authority on the art of the pitch’ **Adam W. Morgan**, author of *Sorry Spock, Emotions Drive Business* and former Adobe Executive Creative Director

‘In a world saturated with uninspired pitches and tedious presentations, *Pitch* emerges as a beacon of hope for anyone yearning to transform their communication into a powerful, emotional experience. Fontaine artfully weaves together the science of psychology, the magic of storytelling and practical strategies that can elevate any speaker’s game ... This book is not just a guide; it’s a revolution in the art of pitching’ **Robin Dreeke**, author of *It’s Not All About ‘Me’*

‘Time to give away any other books you have on pitching – and on presenting, storytelling and creativity while you’re at it. *Pitch* has it all – case studies, research and brilliant advice that anyone can follow. Danny’s wide experience and personal insights prove that it’s possible to find power beyond PowerPoint’ **Neil Mullarkey**, author of *In the Moment*

‘Fontaine distils the art of persuasion into a practical, battle-tested framework that anyone can apply – whether you’re leading a team, selling an idea, or standing in front of a boardroom full of skeptics. A must-read for leaders, entrepreneurs, and anyone serious about influence – literally everybody needs to read this book’ **Ben Williams**, author of *Commando Mindset* and founder of Loopin

‘This book has become my pitching bible and is seriously in a league of its own. It doesn’t just help in winning business, it helps you win people over in every aspect of life. Whether you’re closing deals, or making your ideas heard at work, if you want to be more persuasive, make your words more impactful, and ultimately be more successful in any area of your life, please read this book. Then read it again’ **Carl Hewitt**, co-founder and CEO of Hewitt Matthews

‘As a fellow storyteller, I love a book that doesn’t just hand you a framework but gets to the heart of why storytelling matters. Danny’s ability to tap into what truly makes us human – and yes, that includes engineers – offers a fresh, powerful approach to pitching that can transform not just how we do business, but how we connect and inspire action in every aspect of life’ **Hilary Salzman**, author of *The Roar of Her Story*

‘If pitching is a game, this book is the cheat code’ **Tommy Schaff**, Cialdini Method Certified Trainer

PITCH

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HOW TO CAPTIVATE AND CONVINCE
ANY AUDIENCE ON THE PLANET

DANNY FONTAINE



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For Sareta, Dylan, Zach and Ziggy

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Introduction: The Joy of Pitching

The year is 1979, and a fledgling British advertising agency has just received an opportunity that could change the fortunes of their business. One of the founders is Peter Marsh, a maverick who transitioned from the amateur dramatics circuit to the world of advertising, where he is known for his flair for theatrics. Marsh knows that his agency, ABM, has the creative chops for the work on offer, but he also knows that they have only been invited to the pitch to make up the numbers.

The client is British Rail, the state-owned company that in the 1970s still operates nearly all overground rail transport in Great Britain. They are facing a whole host of challenges, not least the ever-increasing number of complaints from the public about delays, poor treatment from staff, and the dilapidated state of their trains and stations. They need a brand overhaul; a PR campaign to end all PR campaigns, with the somewhat optimistic hope that this will win back

the hearts and minds of the entire British public. Just a small task, then.

At the same time, Saatchi & Saatchi rule the advertising world. They are the biggest, most well-known, and most profitable agency in Britain. If you hire Saatchi & Saatchi, you're essentially buying guaranteed success, even if it is at a premium price. Saatchi & Saatchi are a Goliath in the industry, and ABM are well aware that they are David. To stand a chance of winning this work, Peter Marsh will have to do something utterly disruptive. He needs a pitch that is so captivating and convincing that British Rail will forget that Saatchi & Saatchi ever existed ...

We have all, at some point, felt like the David in a situation. This could be when you enter a boardroom, trembling with fear and wanting to puke at the prospect of getting your idea across to a real-life Logan Roy; but we deal with 'pitch scenarios' in many areas of our lives beyond sales. I reckon that it's safe to say that all of us will have encountered at least one of these scenarios:

- Going for a job interview
- Presenting your idea or way of doing something at work
- Giving a speech at a wedding, birthday, funeral or event
- Giving a presentation at school
- Getting support for your charity or political cause
- Motivating a team to perform better
- Trying to persuade a friend, lover or family member

to watch a particular movie or order a specific takeaway

It doesn't matter if you're an architect or a plumber, a small-business owner or the CEO of Apple. If you interact with another human, and have some small desire to persuade, impress or entertain, you are pitching.

In any one of these scenarios, we can feel fear and trepidation, overwhelmed by the sense of urgency, the pressure to perform, the uncertainty of the results, and the feeling that, somehow, we are simply inferior to our audience. And that is not fun.

This book aims to change that, partly because we all want to enjoy what we do, but also because joy is contagious. If we want our audience to enjoy themselves, then we must enjoy ourselves – genuinely. It's a double joy whammy and today is the day that you stop pitching in the same way that everyone else does and push yourself to find unique, creative and unexpected ways to convey that joy.

OK, back to Peter Marsh.

It's the day of the big pitch, and British Rail chairman Peter Parker (no relation to Spider-Man) and his senior team arrive punctually at the ABM offices in London. They ring the buzzer, and wait a full three minutes before they are let in. Undeterred, they approach the receptionist's desk to announce their arrival, but then have to wait again while she finishes a personal phone call. Eventually she hangs up, somewhat displeased at being disturbed. 'Yes?'

'We're here to see Peter Marsh; we're from British Rail,'

says Parker, visibly annoyed by the lack of pomp and circumstance around his arrival.

The receptionist studies her notes, then nonchalantly waves her arm towards a small, seated area before picking up her phone again.

Parker and his men (and yes, unsurprisingly, they are all men) take a seat and survey their surroundings. The chairs are filthy. Old magazines are strewn around. Dirty coffee cups are stacked at random. The ashtrays on the table are brimming over with stale cigarette ends that leave a foul stench in the air.

At that moment, a man in a suit carrying an umbrella walks into the building and, after a brief conversation with the receptionist, takes one of the seats nearby. As he glances around at the grubby seating area, his eyes meet Parker's and they exchange disapproving looks.

The clock ticks, and the men continue to wait. Five minutes after the meeting should have started, Parker gets up and approaches the receptionist again. 'Could you please let me know when Mr Marsh will see us?' He doesn't attempt to mask the frustration in his voice. The receptionist is still on the phone, now with the receiver tucked under her chin so that she can focus on painting her nails. She looks up for a second to give Parker an icy glare, and then returns to her call.

Parker sits down again, but nearby the gentleman in the suit has had enough. He stands up promptly and leaves the office. A minute later, Parker snaps. He signals to his colleagues that it's time to go, and, without saying another word to the lacklustre receptionist, marches towards the front door, determined to leave this regrettable hellhole once and for all.

At that precise moment, Peter Marsh flings open the set of double doors by the reception desk and launches himself into the room. ‘Gentlemen,’ he says, ‘you have just experienced what your customers face on a daily basis. Now let’s see what we can do to put it right.’

The penny drops for Parker, and a smile slowly forms across his face. Instead of continuing towards the door, he shakes Marsh by the hand and follows him to the boardroom to listen to the full content of his pitch.

ABM won the job – the biggest in UK history – which catapulted them to become the nation’s leading advertising agency. The creative designs and ideas they showed in the boardroom were a huge part of this, but it was that key moment in the offices that hooked them: Marsh had made his audience *feel* something. He had transported them from their executive ivory tower into the mindset of the customers who used their services, and it impacted them on a deep, emotional level. Marsh knew that when we are affected in this way, our instincts compel us to listen, respect and trust the person who evoked it.

This is what anybody working on a pitch should be aiming to achieve: whether we are presenting to a group of stony-faced investors, or trying to convince our partner to stretch to the Airbnb with a hot tub, we must make our audience *feel* something; this is how we create a paradigm shift, a penny-drop moment. There are many ways that we can do this, and a background in amateur dramatics is not a prerequisite. The first step is to stop thinking about a pitch as a set of PowerPoint slides and open your mind to the concept that a pitch can take any form that you dream up. This is also how a pitch can

change from being an event that you dread to an experience that you cannot wait to be a part of.

The *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* definition of the word pitch is, 'to try to persuade somebody to buy something, to give you something or to make a business deal with you.'

That's it. There's absolutely no mention of PowerPoint, or of a one-hour time slot with introductions, technical deep dives and a Q&A. There's also no mention of standing behind a podium or sitting in a boardroom. Pitching is all about persuasion, through any means, between one human and another.

Our natural inclination when we pitch is to do the same as everyone else has done since slide projectors were invented. We think that if we put in enough hours, create enough content and get lucky on the day, then we've done all we can to convince an audience. The reality is that with a different mindset we can have a far greater impact, with a lot less time spent on developing mountains of content.

For me, pitching is the most exciting part of any business; it's a Pandora's box of creativity, experimentation and adventure. It's our chance to create emotional connections and build relationships with fellow humans. It's a place to tell stories, to entertain and to delight. We can use technology, theatre, props and storytelling. We can indulge our imaginations and play as if we were children.

At this point, I may have aroused a serious dose of scepticism in you. After all, can this all really be true across every single industry and scenario? The answer is yes. I've been coaching teams and pitching multimillion-dollar deals for years, and I've successfully used these methods to consistently

beat competitors in front of some of the most serious audiences in the world: financial institutions, government departments, law firms and many other highly regulated and stereotypically ‘serious’ industries. Likewise, I’ve also used these techniques in all of the situations that I mentioned above; I’ve successfully gained new positions and been promoted at work, I’ve managed to get big names on my podcast like Simon Sinek, Nancy Duarte and Rory Sutherland, I’ve done speeches and toasts, and I’ve led highly motivated, high-performing teams.

People sometimes ask if this is manipulative behaviour, and so let’s be really clear – no, it isn’t. Manipulation is harmful or controlling behaviour to gain something for oneself to the detriment of someone else. This book is quite the opposite and sets out ways to persuade others by providing them with an exciting, enjoyable and emotional experience; one that they are glad that they have had and one that we have thoroughly enjoyed giving them.

It works because we are all human. A company is only a group of individuals, no matter how big it is, and all of those individuals have feelings and emotions. And, as a general rule, people much prefer being entertained and moved by an experience to sitting for hours being talked through words on a screen. Yes, pitching is more than simply entertainment, but when we consciously use entertainment as a mechanism of persuasion it becomes a deeply influential and meaningful activity. I’m not saying that we don’t need to include the less sexy detailed information about our ideas and propositions in a pitch, but there are certain ways of doing this that keep an audience engaged and listening, far more so than a simple transaction of information.

To succeed we need to be bold, we need to be brave, and we even need to be vulnerable. Doing things in a totally new way can be somewhat nerve-wracking but, if you are willing to try, then you will start to see the results of winning more pitches, persuading more people and massively increasing your enjoyment doing it. And you don't just need to take my word for it. This book contains lots of pitching stories – some are to show you the power and success of pitching in this way, and others are to illustrate what not to do in a pitch environment. There is certainly no shortage of examples that prove the validity of this approach.

This book covers everything that you need to know to become a master of pitching, and I've tried to be as logical as possible in laying the chapters out, so that we can go on a journey through the entire pitch lifecycle. Like any great story, this book has three acts. We'll start with Formulate, which will get us totally prepared for creating a world-class pitch. Act II is Refine, where we'll take our ideas and turn them into a living, breathing pitch. The third act is Finalise, which takes us all the way to the pitch itself as well as the days that follow.

You can, of course, use this book however you like, but my advice is to read it all in order first, as many of the topics logically lead from one to another. Then, when you're working on your pitch, refer to the relevant chapters when you need them. The main thing is that you try things out for yourself and see what works for you. The only way to reach a definitive conclusion is to run the experiments.

Many of the anecdotes in this book come from the business world, but I will also highlight how they can be used in non-business scenarios. With that in mind, in most cases I

have used the word ‘audience’ instead of ‘clients’ or ‘buyers’ because whatever the context, the person on the receiving end of your pitch, presentation, speech, lesson or job interview is your audience.

As well as anecdotes from pitching legends, I’ve also included examples from my own pitching experience. Due to the confidential nature of these deals, I have had to change some details, but the lessons from them remain the same.

My big hope is that this book will go beyond teaching you how to pitch; I want you to find more enjoyment in your life, to have the confidence to be you, and to have the means to reduce the stress and anxiety of important situations. So let go of your preconceptions and inhibitions and open your mind to the *joy* of pitching.

Oh, and one more thing. Remember the guy in the suit with the umbrella from the ABM pitch? Well, he worked for Peter Marsh. His job was to sit next to the British Rail crew, and then stand up and leave just before he thought that they had reached the end of their rope. This way Marsh knew exactly when to fling open those doors. See how much fun pitching can be?! OK, let’s get started.

ACT I

FORMULATE

1

Pitching Principles

Simon Sinek is a world-renowned inspirational speaker, best-selling author and titan of the business world. But before he became any of these things he was, in his own words, ‘just a guy with an idea’. He’d cut his teeth in ad agencies and trained in ethnography and, by his mid-thirties, he wanted to write a book. ‘I hadn’t built a big business,’ he told me. ‘I hadn’t written anything. I hadn’t given a TED talk.’ He had none of the accolades that you may know him for now, but he believed passionately in his idea – that to succeed, we must first start with the underlying reasons *why* we do what we do – and he knew that he could change the world if only he could convince a publisher. Through an acquaintance, he managed to secure a meeting with ‘the god of business publishing’, a man both famous for the success of the books he published and notorious for his difficult personality. This was Sinek’s chance.

He arrived at the office prepared, on time and with

his sixty-minute pitch well rehearsed and memorised. Immediately, things went off track. As soon as he walked into the room, the publisher barked, 'So, what is it? I only have half an hour, so this better be good.' Sinek was nervous but pressed on. 'OK,' he said, doing some quick mental reshuffling. 'Well, then let's jump right in.'

Throwing his original plan out of the window, Sinek focused on the man in front of him. He forgot that he was a god who held the power to make or crush his dreams. They were just two people in a room, and Sinek wanted to share something genuinely exciting with him. 'I gave it to him as if he was somebody in an audience,' he told me. 'I gave it to him as if he was a friend.' Instead of focusing on what he could say to convince and impress the publisher and secure a book deal, he focused on what he had to give to the world: the material he knew so well, the idea he'd been fostering for years.

After twenty or so minutes, the publisher began to fidget. Sinek paused to ask if everything was OK, and the publisher informed him that he had to leave to pick up his son. Remember, Sinek had already cut his pitch down by half; now he was being cut off even earlier. A lesser person might have felt put out, insisted on sticking to the promised amount of time and finished his pitch. Instead, Sinek remained calm and friendly. 'Your priority is in the right place,' he said. 'Don't worry about it, go pick up your kid.' The publisher thanked him and left.

Three days later Sinek was offered the book deal for *Start With Why* that sky-rocketed his career.

Despite the many years of his long and successful career since that moment, when I asked Simon Sinek about the best pitch he'd ever done he chose this encounter with the

curmudgeonly editor. A moment where he'd let go of his pre-conceived plan and spoken from his heart.

What Sinek demonstrated in that moment was that pitching is not about the flawless execution of a prepackaged presentation; it is simply about creating a moment in time. There is no repeatable, infallible formula to create a 'perfect pitch' – one that can win over any audience at any time in any situation. This is because we are not dealing with absolutes; we are dealing with the complex and ever-changing world of people and their individual thoughts, emotions and behaviours. Two people can receive the same pitch in two completely different ways, just as one person might love the movie *Titanic* while another might hate it. There is nothing that you could change about the movie to turn all haters into lovers. This doesn't mean that there aren't identifiable and repeatable techniques that Hollywood writers employ to win over their audiences, but even then you'll get predicted blockbusters that flop, and small gems that unexpectedly become huge hits.

Creating a pitch is the same. The advantage we have over people making a movie, though, is that instead of the general public we have a small audience to whom we can tailor our pitch. Also, as in Hollywood, we have a whole toolbox of methods and frameworks that we can use to construct engaging content. We'll be diving deep into those in the upcoming chapters. You won't need every tool in this book for every pitch, but you can use the ones you need in endless ways to create something that's suited for *your* audience.

Before we get into the toolbox, there is a set of pitching principles that come first. In fact, the whole point of these principles is to show you that our approach to pitching – our

mindset – is more important than striving for perfection in the details. Think of these as a pitching manifesto: eleven rules that should be applied and referred to before and during any pitch venture. They'll keep you focused on the big picture, which is especially helpful if you ever feel like you're getting tangled up in the details of your content.

Methods, frameworks and tools can (and should!) evolve, adapt and change, but these principles are as close as it gets to timeless.

1. *A PowerPoint deck is not a pitch*

The definition of the word 'pitch' does not contain the words 'PowerPoint', 'Keynote', 'slides' or 'deck'. Remember that a pitch is persuading someone to do or buy something, by ANY means. Singing about milk, doing parkour in the boardroom or recounting a scene from *Conan the Barbarian* (we'll come back to all of those later)* are all perfectly valid forms of pitching, as is simply reading words from a piece of paper. I'm not saying that pitches can't or shouldn't involve a slide deck of some description; what I'm saying is that they *can* involve just about anything, and you shouldn't only associate a pitch with a piece of software. The tools you use are a way to execute your ideas; they're not the solution in themselves. In chapter 9 we'll be talking about how your pitch has got to work, even if the technology fails.

* Apart from singing about milk – that was another Peter Marsh special that landed ABM yet another huge historical account in British advertising. They were pitching to the Milk Board and came up with the jingle 'Milk's gotta lotta bottle', which they performed multiple times during the pitch while dressed as milkmen.

2. *The only limits to a pitch are your ideas*

Great, so now we're thinking beyond PowerPoint, but what does that mean? What *are* the parameters of a pitch? Changing your mindset from creating 'a slideshow' to creating 'anything in the world' is quite a leap. We'll be looking at lots of ways to come up with big, powerful and relevant ideas, and the point is that there really *is* no limit to the size that they can be. Pitching is an opportunity to try new ways of doing things that are not a part of the normal processes of your organisation. I think of pitching as *the laboratory that bureaucracy forgot*. Let me explain.

If you are part of a business providing services or selling products, there are rules. Brand guidelines, compliance, regulations, signoffs, quality control, governance ... in short, you are usually constrained by multiple layers of bureaucracy. This keeps everything consistent and in order, but it's a killer for wild and exciting ideas. Whether you are a solo entrepreneur, going for a job interview or preparing a speech, we all have an ingrained concept of societal norms based on what everyone else usually does in a situation.

Instead, see pitching as an off-the-grid science laboratory that runs experiments in human psychology. It's a free space to be bold, different and immersive. We're creating a moment in time designed to resonate with an audience, and what we do in that room for an hour or so will probably never see the light of day again – although the memory of it can last a lifetime.

We'll hit logistical problems like budget, skills and materials at some point, but, with a growth mindset and some lateral thinking, even those things are usually surmountable. Don't be defeatist. Don't be constrained. Experiment. Play. And think as big as you can.

3. *Think before doing*

I see it all the time. Teams receive a brief, and they immediately splinter off and begin working. Often, they're not even sure *what* they're working on, but they're convinced that if enough work is done, then maybe they have a chance of winning. But, of course, quantity isn't the answer.

When you receive a brief for a pitch, read it, take it in, and then do something else entirely. Find an unrelated and mentally non-demanding task, like going for a walk or doing a jigsaw puzzle, and let the brief stew in your subconscious for a while. It's not only a welcome respite for most people before they embark on an intense period of work, but the evidence also shows that it is a powerful catalyst for creative ideas. In a 2012 study titled 'Inspired by Distraction', Jonathan Baird identified the delightfully named concept of 'mind-wandering', and demonstrated how important this activity is to creative work. Participants were given a creative task, and then divided into four groups: one took a break and did a demanding task, another took a break and did an undemanding task, one took a break and just rested, and the last had no break at all. After the break, the group that performed the undemanding task, which allowed for mind-wandering, showed the most significant improvement in creativity – more than those who rested and did nothing. The study concluded that mind-wandering during simple tasks facilitates 'incubation', where the subconscious continues to work on a problem, leading to more creative solutions. Pitching is a highly creative activity, so try some mind-wandering before you dive in. The results can be really quite magical.

4. *Create anomalies*

While our subconscious minds can help us become more creative, ironically they can also be a total blocker to receiving ideas as an audience member. We go through our daily lives with very little thought as to what we're actually doing – and, in both the biological and evolutionary sense, this is intentional. Our subconscious is our autopilot that drives the things that we've done before, like putting on socks, picking up a coffee cup or walking without falling over. Research tells us that 95 per cent of the decisions that we make are made subconsciously. This gives our conscious brains the capacity to focus on important or new things. But in a pitch, it presents a very real challenge.

People tend to have pretty accurate expectations of how most events will pan out, based on their experience of doing them in the past. Our audiences may have sat through hundreds of presentations, pitch decks or post-dinner speeches in the past. Most of them will have been so similar that their brains aren't even bothering to tune in to the material any more; they all merge into one long, grey nothingness. I mean, you can't blame them. Especially in a business presentation, the audience's main prerogative is to get out of the room and go back to a nice cup of tea and bit of scrolling on social media.

To create truly awesome pitches, we've got to disrupt. We must pierce through the mundane and done-before and produce genuinely unexpected moments that grab our audience's conscious focus and create new memories. We don't want our presentation to be the trigger for someone else's mind-wandering. We *must* create anomalies – something irregular, unexpected and memorable, to snap our audience's brain into paying attention.

5. *Start every new pitch as a new pitch*

A common mistake I see is to start a pitch by reaching for a previous pitch deck, presentation, proposal, speech, whatever, clicking on 'save as', and then starting on a rewrite of old material. This might seem like a fast-track approach, but:

- It's not. It'll probably take you longer to read through and change an old pitch than to just start a new one.
- It kills creativity – you're automatically going with what went before, often even if it wasn't successful the last time! You're losing an entire part of the process that encourages new and wild ideas.
- It won't be personalised for *this* audience, for *this* environment or for *this* time.

In addition to being personalised, every pitch should feel new to the audience, and they will always be able to tell if the material is stale. In business, even if the product or service remains the same, if you have a different audience then all of your focus and effort must be for this audience, for this opportunity, for this moment. The same goes for teaching a lesson to two different groups of students, or applying for two different jobs; create new material, or evolve and personalise it, for every single pitch you do.

6. *Always be the underdog*

When I started out pitching, I was working for small and relatively unknown digital agencies. To even be considered as part of the competitive process was a huge achievement; to win the pitch took a Herculean effort: huge disruption, killer storytelling, immersive experiences and massive emotional plays. Being the underdog is HARD.

Then I moved to larger consultancies with thousands of employees and logos that most people would recognise from a mile off. But when your reputation precedes you, complacency can sometimes set in. When you get asked to pitch for everything, and end up winning just a few of them, then you become accustomed to these statistics and it just becomes a numbers game. Meanwhile, someone else is winning the lion's share of those deals with huge disruption, killer storytelling, immersive experiences and massive emotional plays. All the tools of the underdog.

In this book we'll learn how we can apply these things to our pitches, but beyond that you need to treat EVERY pitch as if you were the underdog. I've helped companies to become more successful by treating every pitch as I used to for smaller agencies. Pitching isn't a numbers game, it's a winning game. Pitch less and win more; that's the golden ratio. If you want to win, then you have to *want* to win. Pitching is all or nothing. Even if you are the frontrunner and have a great reputation; even if all signs point to you winning, then make sure it happens by acting and thinking like an underdog would.

7. Find your true differentiation

Every successful company, person, idea, product and service has something that's unique about it – or it's the cheapest. Occasionally you get both, but you can't have long-term success without being different or the cheapest. These two things are binary. If you're not different and you're not the cheapest, then why would anyone choose you?

But finding differentiation is hard. Sometimes we think we're different and unique because we make statements such as:

‘We’re the safest pair of hands.’

‘We have the best team in the industry.’

‘We have exceptional customer service.’

‘We’re passionate/experienced/dedicated/innovative ...’ the list goes on.

These things are fluffy and subjective, and anyone can and will say them. Having a high opinion of yourself is not a differentiator. If you really *are* the ‘safest’, then you better have the hard evidence to back that up. If you really do have ‘the best team’, then you better make sure that, when the audience meets you in the pitch, they have no doubt in their minds.

A good exercise is to write down all the things that make you or your proposition unique. Then write the name of your closest competitor at the top. Could they also say these things to an audience?

Differentiation doesn’t have to be huge. In a competitive market, it can be the tiny differences that win a pitch. If everyone is claiming to be the safest, best, most passionate company, then what about the fact that you also let your employees bring their dogs to work once a month? The small things count; you just need to challenge yourself to find them.

Look deep inside yourself. What is *genuinely* different about you, your product, your service or your idea?

8. *Be emotional*

Pitching is an emotional business, and you mustn’t be afraid to embrace that. People often think that business and emotions are two things that should never be mentioned in the same breath, but they’re also the people who don’t win pitches. We’ll come on to the power of emotions and mirror neurons in chapter 5, but, as an overarching principle, remember this:

- Emotions change minds.
- Emotions create memories.
- Emotions are contagious.

If you are feeling joyful, excited or passionate, then so will your audience. If you are feeling uncomfortable, nervous or bored, then so will your audience. There are ways to deal with the negative aspects of pitching, like your nerves, and we'll discuss that in chapter 14, but as well as dispelling the negative you must also proactively and consciously bring forth the positive.

9. *Be authentic*

We'll be looking into the psychology of persuasion, but this isn't the same as manipulation. Sure, you can trick someone into buying your product, but you'll only achieve a one-time sale, a sour relationship and a disappointed, angry customer. Unless you're a travelling charlatan from the early 1900s, this just isn't a good gig. To state the obvious, we want happy customers who genuinely love us and our ideas and who want to keep coming back. Most of us also want genuine, positive relationships with the people we do business with. We achieve this through authenticity. Admit what you're *not* good at. Be vulnerable. Be honest. Do everything that you can to help your customer with their business as if it was your own.

Simon Sinek used to tell his audience about the areas of marketing that they *shouldn't* hire him for. Ironically, this only made them want to hire him more in the areas he *was* good at, because of the trust that this honesty created. And, as we've already seen, when he let go of his inhibitions and spoke to the big scary publisher as if he were his friend, his authenticity

and passion sealed the deal. Don't attempt to mimic the perception you have of a great presenter; be *you*.

10. Embrace failure

If we try something new, then, by definition, we can never guarantee its success. If we don't try anything new, then we can never progress and never change the way that things are. This has been proved many times over. Remember Blockbuster? Kodak? BlackBerry? Just three companies from a long list who refused to embrace change and suffered the existential consequences. New can be scary, but opening our minds to the concept of doing previously successful things in a new way is the only way we can progress. Don't be scared of failure; embrace it. To fail is to learn, and the more we fail the more ways we will discover how to succeed.

Don't just listen to me on this one: here are some of my favourite bits of wisdom from some of the most successful people who have ever lived.

'If you want to increase your success rate, double your failure rate.' – IBM founder Thomas J. Watson

'I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.' – Thomas Edison

'Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.'
– Robert F. Kennedy

Got it? Accept failure. Embrace failure. Seek out failure. Encourage trying and failing in your team. Build a culture where it's safe to fail, where it's GREAT to fail – because only then will you discover new and great things that you never knew were possible.

11. Mental health is more important than winning

I like lists with ten things in them, but number eleven is a principle that I simply can't leave off. There's a fine line between throwing yourself into a pitch and burning out. I can tell you this with confidence because I've walked that line myself way more times than I care to mention. Pitches can be stressful: they generally require long periods of concerted effort, self-doubt, anxiousness and nerves. But no matter how big the prize, it's not worth sacrificing your mental health or your relationships with your family and friends. We'll look at ways to deal with the stress that comes with pitching, but for now take my advice:

Know your limits. Take breaks when you need them. Remember to sleep and eat and drink. Cultivate a positive culture. Look out for each other. Don't be a hero. Keep a check on yourself and your team.

If you combine these mindset principles with the methodology and frameworks from the following chapters, then you'll be creating some of the most powerful pitches in the history of the planet, and you'll have a truckload of fun along the way. Just remember, at the heart of every successful pitch, beyond the data and the performance, lies the power of human connection and the genuine desire to contribute something meaningful to the world.

The next question is, should we even be pitching at all?

2

To Pitch or Not to Pitch

Jeb Blount is a legend in the sales world. He's written fifteen books on sales and owns Sales Gravy, a sales and consulting firm. When companies are struggling in the sales department, he's the guy they call.

La Petite is one of the largest educational daycare companies in the USA. Their business revolves around selling on-site childcare facilities into corporations to make it easier for employees with kids. It's an incredible idea for lots of reasons, but they had a big problem. Blount was hired as vice-president of corporate services and when he joined he discovered that they hadn't sold a new facility in twelve years – and it wasn't for lack of opportunities.

As one of the few companies in the country that offer this service, they were responding to up to five RFPs (Request For Proposals) every single month but always coming second. These RFPs were big as well, requiring huge numbers of

words to be written by a full team of people working around the clock.

Blount started digging to find the problem, but the proposals seemed top-notch, compelling and competitive. He couldn't find a clear reason why the odds were so highly stacked against them.

One day a new RFP arrived, and the La Petite team had already jumped straight to work when Blount asked them a question:

'What do we know about this deal besides what's in the RFP?'

Nobody, it turned out, knew anything. When he pressed them, they replied that it was impossible to know anything because there were strict instructions from procurement in the document: you can't call us, you can't meet us, you can't ask questions. The team had no relationships with anyone, and the only information available to them was written in the RFP. On the other hand, the competitor had a long and close relationship and had signed multiple deals with the client in the past.

Blount instructed the team to hold off on the response and instead send a message that said they wouldn't be responding to any more RFPs unless they could get a meeting with the CEO. They looked at him like he'd lost his mind. Even though they had been losing every single deal, this still sounded like a crazy suggestion.

They made the call, and the buyer refused. But La Petite stood firm. The buyer *needed* them in the process. Eventually they begrudgingly agreed, and the La Petite team flew to Connecticut, sat down with the CEO and had a wonderful