TAG-TEAM PITCHES

Group presentations are a different ball game. Here’s how to play

Making a presentation is usually difficult enough when you’re on your own, but when you’re part of a group making a team pitch, the stakes go skyward. Group presentations require all the skills of solo flight, plus the ability to handle the tricky dynamics of public teamwork. What’s more, any missteps have an expanded audience (and angry teammates). How can you avoid group presentation blunders? Some experts and veterans of team pitches offer these tips:

1. PREPARE AS A GROUP

It might sound simple enough, but trying to get three or more salespeople together for even just one dress rehearsal is never easy. Therefore, it’s all too common for groups to gather at McDonald’s to piece together a game plan a few hours before show time.

This last-minute tactic over fries is what most often makes a group presentation come off more like a grade-school play, says Steve Waterhouse, president of sales consulting firm The Waterhouse Group, based in Scarborough, Maine. For a team to convey its message professionally and efficiently, the groundwork must be laid in advance and everybody in the group needs time to become comfortable with the material. “Like any team, members of a group presentation need practice to perform well,” he says.

Preparation time is what can make the difference when you’re trying to close a multimillion-dollar deal. Holly Van Hart, a director in the software systems group of Sun Microsystems, recalls a pitch a year ago in which her team of 10 made a presentation to a group of senior executives of a potential client.

In the weeks leading up to the meeting, Van Hart’s group gathered frequently any way they could—via e-mail, conference calls, and face-to-face meetings. Team members also reached out to insiders at the client’s company to gather tips and insights that gave them an advantage over the competition. The result was a multimillion-dollar contract. “It was a huge time commitment,” Van Hart admits. “But it paid off.”

2. DECIDE WHO’S DRIVING

Veterans of group presentations believe every team needs a leader to navigate the group, and Waterhouse agrees. Picking a point person and making that designation obvious to the client helps everybody involved stay focused.

This strategy will also help the pitch run smoothly, while putting the customer at ease, Waterhouse says, adding that often he sees members of a group interrupt—or worse, correct—one another during a meeting. “It can be a small thing. The person speaking says the company has four thousand employees and another member of the group jumps in and says, ‘No, we’re up to forty-two hundred now,’” Waterhouse says. “Don’t fight your teammates for the floor.”

3. BEWARE OF BODY LANGUAGE AND MOOD SWINGS

Just as the body language of a single presenter is crucial, the movements and positions of the group can influence a presentation. Keep your eyes and your attention on your teammate who is speaking, even if you’ve heard his part of the pitch 1,000 times.

“You raise the level of importance of your teammate’s words by your body language,” Waterhouse says. Resist the temptation to spend all your time eyeing the client for reactions, he says. “That just encourages the client to take his eyes off the speaker and look at you.”

At the same time be aware, as the presentation moves along, of the general mood in the room and be quick to compensate for mistakes of others. Michael Shedrow, director of sales for Radisson Inn Northpoint, in Alpharetta, Georgia, says the key to a strong group presentation is knowing when a fellow team member may have dropped the ball.

Shedrow remembers a presentation in which the first person ran too long and began to lose the attention of the audience. That was Shedrow’s cue to make a quick change in his portion of the pitch. “That’s when you start off with something different, a joke or a funny story, to bring them back in with you,” he says. “You have to know when your teammate may have gotten off track or lost the attention.”

—Ellen Neuborne