

We're off to the pitches, Hollywood style

 By [Sid Peimer](#)

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It's like the Gods must be crazy except the Coke bottle is an actress...

When writers pitch their screenplay they need to position the movie relative to something the studio executive knows. For example, *Argo* would be "The Great Escape meets the Ayatollah". What really goes on in Hollywood pitches was somewhat of an enigma until Kimberly Elsbach of UCLA and Roderick Kramer of Stanford spent five years totally immersed in the process. [1]

Their much-lauded study appeared in the *Academy of Management Journal* where their central finding was that the success of the pitch depended as much on the catcher (the studio exec) as on the pitcher (the writer). [2]

An elaborate ritual, but just two processes

Beneath this elaborate ritual, two processes were at play. Firstly the catcher used certain cues to judge the pitcher's creativity; attributes such as passion, wit, and even quirkiness. Slickness, trying too hard and lots of different ideas were seen as negative cues. If the catcher was more influenced by the negative cues, the meeting could essentially be over in the first few minutes.

However, there was a second process occurring at the same time: In most successful pitches, the pitcher didn't push the idea onto the catcher until a 'yes' was extracted. Instead, the catcher was invited in as a collaborator. The more they were allowed to collaborate, the greater the chance of the idea being greenlighted. The purpose of the pitch should therefore not be to move others to immediately adopt your idea, but to offer something so compelling that it begins a conversation, allowing both parties to play the ideal role: to be participants. Try that next time you make a marketing or advertising pitch

It's the same in the simulator

In simulated pitches on my courses (I've done about 100), the same issues come up time and again. Although delegates often label this as 'just an exercise' (they only have 20 minutes to prepare and 5 minutes to present), having sat on the client side of numerous pitches, I firmly believe that the same issues would have arisen had the pitch process been "for real". As Parkinson's Law states: A task will be accomplished in the time allocated to it. [3]. It has also been said that very little work would come out of an agency if it wasn't for the last minute. [4] I trust you get my point.

Below is a table that separates the winners from the losers in the simulated pitch environment.

WINNERS	LOSERS
Stuck to the 55/5 rule*	Went straight for objectives
Defined the problem - sometimes breaking it down to its components.	Regurgitated the brief
Accepted the situation	Saw the timeframe as unrealistic, and that this 'is just an exercise' - it would be different in real life. It isn't.
Played down the puffery	Included irrelevant 'puffiness'. Took wooing to a level of discomfort.
Brought it back to one thing	No cohesive concept
What they didn't know, they explained how they would find out, and why they needed to	Showed how much they knew
Had very logical structure	Just information - no story
Were sensitive to the existing business	Proposed dramatic change
Body language supported what they were saying	Mouth said one thing, their manner said another
Whetted my appetite - gave me a few tactics (just to give me an indication of the application of strategy - not to show how marvellously creative they were)	Either focused on tactics at the expense of strategy, or left out tactics altogether

* The 55/5 rule is Einstein's maxim: "If I had an hour to solve a problem I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions."

An MP3 audio "Pitching and Dating" which focuses on relationships in pitching can be downloaded from the Stratplanning homepage here www.stratplanning.com.

References

1. Daniel H. Pink. *To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others* Riverhead, 2012.
2. K D Elsbach, R M Kramer. Assessing creativity in Hollywood pitch meetings: Evidence for a dual-process model of creativity judgements. *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol 46, No. 3 (June 2003), pp 283-301.
3. There are a number of variations on Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parkinson's_law
4. Not sure if I read this somewhere or made it up.

ABOUT SID PEIMER

A seasoned and insightful executive with multisector experience in roles as diverse as senior management, strategic planning and copywriting. I am a qualified pharmacist with an MBA from UCT. I am also an accomplished keynote speaker and presenter.
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