

Switching on the Green Light

If you're wondering about your next sponsorship deal in this economy, a little perspective can carry you a long way toward succeeding in your next pitch. The first thing you need to understand is that sponsorship is a team sport. That means a group of decision makers will sit in on your pitch.

It's natural to feel panicky about what you imagine a steady flow of sponsorship seekers parading before hard-boiled decisions makers who are calling the shots. And yes, if you let them, they will be. But while they need to learn about what you have to offer, you need to learn about them. You need to figure out their Switch. I'm talking about that universal must-have that flips on the green light. The trouble is, each person at the table sees it and expresses it differently. But it's not as tough as you think to discover it. You just have to get them talking.

Here are three tips that will greatly improve the meeting you are about to have:

1. **Know what you are walking into.** Gather some data about how the meeting will be handled. Will it be structured or unstructured? Ask the person who invited you into the pitch to "coach" you a bit on who will be at the table and what purpose each person play. In a structured pitch process, every person sitting in on your presentation has a pre-determined role they play. They've made an effort to direct the meeting to get their questions answered and avoid stepping on each other's toes. In an unstructured meeting, the participants may approach the process more creatively. They value ideas. It will feel like a free-for-all. They may not have read any of the materials you've sent. It's personality driven. Will complement their culture they may be wondering?
2. **Understand that strategy follows structure.** In a structured pitch, assume they've read your stuff. Be succinct. They've taken the trouble to orchestrate a process to avoid wasting time—follow suit.

In the unstructured interview, there will be a longer ice-breaker. People will chat with each other and you. No one has been given guidance about what to ask. They're winging it. So for the structured pitch, the strategy is to be friendly, frank and focused. They will introduce themselves and explain what they do at the company. Then you jump in: "Thanks for inviting me in. I know your time is precious, so I'll get right to it." Using Power Point? Do it in three slides.

In the unstructured pitch, ask permission to take control of the meeting. First ask, "It would help me enormously to hear a few comments from each of you about what you do and what you need to get out of this meeting." Listen. Take notes. Give meaningful eye contact. Next, ask permission to pitch: "Would it make sense if I shared a bit about myself

and our organization?” And prepare them to listen. “This will take 10 minutes.” This is the prelude to the pitch, and it let’s people take you in.

3. **Share their goals.** I mean, the goal of the meeting is see if you have a fit. You’ll discover that by getting people to talk. That’s true whether it’s a structured process or unstructured. It might strike you as a bad idea. If they’re doing most of the talking, they aren’t learning about you has to offer. But unless you vet the various people at the table, and gauge their interests and personalities, you will fail to find the Switch. Each one of them will express it differently, filtered through their various personalities. Without this insight you cannot find how each decision maker interprets the Switch. No insight, no sense of fit, no deal.

Next week, I’ll list some common creatures of the pitch process and offer tips on the types of questions that will help you discover their particular view of the Switch.