

The 5 Parts of the Perfect Pitch

By Andy Goodman

It's a moment that nonprofit board and staff dream about yet also secretly dread. Whether by luck or design, you find yourself face to face with a VIP – a Very Important Prospect - someone who can help your organization in a big way. This VIP (a) is only vaguely familiar with your work, and (b) has only a few minutes to spare.

"So, what do you do?" the VIP asks, not-so-surreptitiously glancing at her watch. You've got a handful of minutes to pitch your nonprofit. What do you say?

For the last five years, Los Angeles social Venture Partners (LASVP) has been preparing nonprofit leaders for this moment through a unique program called The Social Innovation Fast Pitch Competition (<http://socialinnovationpitch.org/pp/>). Participants are trained in the art of telling their organizations' stories in precisely three minutes. I've had the privilege of coaching participants and witnessing dozens of pitches. Here's a firsthand look at what works (and doesn't work) in this high-pressure scenario.

The best pitches answer these five questions.

1. Who are you?

This is always the first question in your audience's mind, and an answer such as, "I'm the executive director of People for Good Things" may be sufficient. In some cases, though, your personal history may directly relate to your organization's mission and is worth including.

John Sullivan, a finalist in LASVP's 2010 competition, represented a nonprofit advertising agency housed within a drug treatment center. His pitch began with this stunning answer to question #1: "My name is

John Sullivan. I'm an Eagle Scout, an ex-convict, a recovering heroin addict, and the founder and creative director of BTS Communications."

2. What problem does your organization solve?

Note that this question does *not* ask, "What do you do?" Too often, nonprofit board and staff will gladly describe their programs and services – often diving deep into the weeds - but what remains unclear is exactly how (or even if) these efforts solve the problem.

Rick Nahmias, founder of Food Forward, used the opening of his pitch to answer this question: "In January 2009, while walking my dog Scout around the neighborhood, I'd see pound after pound of citrus fruit rotting in driveways or carried off by squirrels. I saw yards of fruit unpicked. My neighbor's tangerine tree was full, food pantries were empty, I got an idea. Three months later, Food Forward was born."

3. What is distinctive about your solution?

To say "we help more students graduate" or "we break the cycle of homelessness" or "we protect valuable habitats" is a start, but it's not enough. If other nonprofits work on the same issue - and it's rare that you'll have an entire field to yourself - you have to make it clear what makes your approach different and even preferable.

Imagine LA is one of several organizations addressing the problem of homelessness in Los Angeles. President and CEO Jill Bauman opened her pitch by addressing that question head on: "Did you know that in Los Angeles there are 8,000 homeless families? Remarkably, also in Los Angeles, there are

8,000 faith communities: churches, synagogues and mosques. Imagine LA's vision is to match each family with one faith community in such a way that the family permanently exits homelessness and the children thrive. Eight thousand plus eight thousand equals zero, a simple yet powerful equation."

4. What evidence can you offer of impact and sustainability?

Once your audience has a clear understanding of your organization's unique approach to a particular problem, they'll want evidence that your work is making a difference. Be careful, however, that you demonstrate clear progress (i.e., outcomes) and not just measures of your effort (i.e., outputs).

Girls & Gangs serves girls in the juvenile justice system. In 2009, executive director Dawn Brown her pitch included this information: "Last year we served 340 girls ages 12-18 with only 3 staff members. We do this at an average yearly cost of \$1,000 per child. It costs the county \$45,000 to incarcerate that same child." The numbers are impressive, but do not add up to evidence of impact.

Fortunately, Brown added this to the same pitch: "The experts say if you can keep one-third of the girls [from returning to jail], you're doing well. Last year, we kept two-thirds out." Now *that's* evidence of impact.

5. What do you need now and how will it help?

Whether you're asking for advice, time, money, or all of the above, both parts of the question are critical. VIPs, like everyone else, are overwhelmed with requests for help. It's not enough to be clear about what you need. You must also clarify how their help will make a critical difference.

Caroline Kunitz of LA Diaper Drive, which supplies disposable diapers to families that can't afford them, was a double award winner at LASVP's 2011 competition. Her

pitch ended by answering this fifth question: "We're requesting \$200,000 for the next two years. This will allow us to hire staff, raise funds, get a permanent warehouse, and buy more diapers at our incredible discount of 65% off the store price. LA Diaper Drive already has a broad audience. Imagine what we could do with funding." And then she added the clincher: "I guarantee: families and tushies across Los Angeles will thank you."

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-Andy Goodman

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