A Guide to Creating an Effective Pitch

Thank you for participating in the 2nd Fraser Health - Simon Fraser University Research Pitching Day on May 1, 2014 and for agreeing to “pitch” your research idea to potential partners and/or collaborators in the audience. To make the most of the limited time available to you, and to maximize the impact of your presentation, this guide provides you with some tips on making an effective research pitch.

What is a Pitch?

In many fields the task of bringing an idea to someone with the power to do something with it is called a “pitch”. Most often you only have a brief time to get your message across and it is important to carefully plan and deliver your message so that your idea is “sold” to the listeners. You are also typically one of many pitches competing for attention and you want to make sure yours stands out from the crowd. How do you achieve this?

Elements of an effective pitch

As you will have 5 minutes (strictly enforced) to make your pitch, you should think of your presentation as a classic “elevator pitch”. This is the scenario where you find yourself sharing an elevator with people you want to impress and have only a brief time to communicate your idea to this captive audience.

1. **Concise.** We are giving you 5 minutes. This is actually considerably longer than the typical elevator pitch so make the most of your time. Do not spend 3 minutes on background and then end with your idea. Jump right in.
2. **Clear.** Use language that everyone understands. Avoid jargon, unknown acronyms or technical terms.
3. **Visual.** Use words that create a visual image in your listeners mind. This will make your message memorable.
4. **Tell a Story.** A short story, that is. A good story is essentially this: someone with a problem either finds a solution or faces tragedy. Either type of story can be used to illuminate what you do.
5. **Targeted.** A great pitch is aimed for a specific audience. So think of who you want as an FH or SFU collaborator/partner and state this clearly.
6. **Goal Oriented.** A pitch is designed with a specific outcome in mind. What is your desired outcome? State what your goal is clearly.
7. **Has a Hook.** This is the element that literally snags your listener’s interest and makes them want to know more. This is the phrase or words that strike a chord in your listener.
How to Craft Your Pitch

1. Explain the core idea or concept

First and foremost, you need to make sure that you can wrap up the premise of your idea in a nice, clear and concise “speech” to your clients. Your pitch should include how your idea can help resolve health problems or how it can help meet health goals. Make sure to validate your claims by using concrete evidence and by specifically pointing out how the elements of your idea will help achieve these goals. To explain your concept, you may even want to address how you came up with the idea in the first place as an introduction. This will make it more personable and help your audience relate to you and your idea better. Just make sure to not drag the story out. Get to the point quickly.

2. Address weaknesses and answer “why” questions

It’s your job to identify weaknesses in your idea beforehand and find a way to convince your audience that your weaknesses aren’t truly weaknesses at all. That’s not to say you should spin everything. You need to maintain some level of honesty regarding your idea. But pre-formulating answers to questions your clients might ask will make it seem as though you’ve got all of the groundwork covered and you are confident in your idea.

You also need to be prepared to answer really tough “why” questions. For example, you may be asked “why did you use that methodology” or “why did you chose that case study?” Be prepared to give a justifiable answer to all of the choices you make. In addition to convincing your audience that you know what you are talking about and can be trusted, this type of answer may also educate your audience about a health issue and the role of research in addressing it.

3. Know your competition

There is an unlimited universe of health research that could be undertaken and your goal is to convince your audience that your idea is the one that should be given support. Funders have many more applications than available financial resources to allocate. Practitioners and policy makers have multiple demands on their time and must give their attention selectively to perceived priorities. Academics have similar demands to juggle and are often required to choose among many potential collaborators.
While you may think your idea is completely original, it may very well not be. And that’s ok. But don’t let your audience blindside you during your pitch if/when they call you out on the similarities your idea has with another. Instead use the similarities of a competitor to your advantage. Know your competition and openly acknowledge how successful the other idea, for example, already is. Emphasize how yours may be complementary or seeks to build on what knowledge already exists. By doing so, this will convince your clients that you’ve done your homework and will give you a sense of credibility.

4. Rehearse Your Pitch

Whatever you do, you never want to “wing” your pitch. Your presentation should be highly polished in its content and delivery. Write down everything that you want on a piece of paper or some note cards, and then rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. While talking to yourself in the bathroom mirror will suffice, it’s usually best to practice in front of a live audience. See if you can get a friend or family member who is willing to hear your pitch. He/she should be able to give you an honest opinion about how you sound and whether you make a strong case or not. Avoid using a script, however, when making your pitch. The secret is to appear natural and relaxed in your delivery which is achieved with lot of practice.

5. Learn from others

Pitching is most common in business situations although, in the health field, there are an increasing range of situations where a pitch-like presentation is called for. Giving a job interview, presenting your findings at a conference, reporting back at an internal meeting, writing a research proposal or addressing the community, for example, can all be seen as opportunities to “sell” the value of your work to an important audience. This FH-SFU event should thus be seen as an opportunity for you to watch and learn from others how to pitch effectively. Many will be pitching for the first time while others will be old hands. Good luck!