

**Q:** I've pitched many great ideas for change to my organization, but management never takes action on any of them. Even when my organization specifically requests ideas for new products or processes, it's always a colleague's idea that gets chosen over mine. Negotiators are good at persuasion. Do you have any tips to increase my odds of success?

**A:** To get better results, it, indeed, would be wise to view the pitch as a negotiation. To succeed in negotiation, you gather information on your target, practice empathy to understand her needs, and calibrate your communications to show how your desired outcome creates value for you both. The same is true for pitching any idea. So, after doing your homework on "catchers" (those reviewing ideas), follow these tips for a better pitch.

**1. Craft your persona.** When the goal is persuasion, both the message *and* messenger matter. University of California at Davis professor Kimberly D. Elsbach finds that catchers use stereotypes to decide which pitchers to work with and are more likely to work with pitchers whom they perceive as "creative types." My own and others' research suggests that catchers tend to favor pitchers who are similar to themselves, legitimate authorities on the idea, or unlikely promoters of the idea (for example, an environmentalist supporting a logging firm). The lesson: Make stereotypes work *for* you. Give the catcher verbal and visual hints about who you are through your style of dress, formality of language, and, if possible, the location of the pitch.

An activist who successfully pitched the idea of jewelry certification to a major fair-trade organization, for example, crafted his persona strategically. He knew his catcher closed deals over meals, so he begged the hosts of a dinner she'd be attending to invite him. Because the other guests were established activists, his presence gave him an air of legitimacy.

He dressed with flair to signal his creative persona and made sure to talk with people whom he knew his catcher respected. When his persona was secure, he pitched and succeeded.

**2. Doctor your discourse.** In crafting your message, consider the following. First, people make better choices when presented with two options at once rather than each option separately, Harvard's Iris Bohnet, Alexandra van Geen, and Max H. Bazerman have found. If your idea is truly the best, compare it to a competing idea during your pitch to clarify its merits.

Second, spend significant time explaining the benefits that will flow from your idea's implementation. Focus on benefits that match the vested interests of your catcher—her values, goals, and capacities. This strategy lets you speak in win-win terms that make your proposals seem doable.

Knowing that the fair-trade organization was motivated to help children, for example, the jewelry activist framed his pitch for certification as a solution to the industry's child-labor problem rather than focusing on jewelry's destructive environmental impact.

Third, be sure to balance the technical content of your pitch with appeals to emotion. You might try to give your pitch a narrative arc, complete with heroes, villains, and moral appeals. The jewelry pitcher, for instance, tried to persuade the fair-trade organization that it had a "moral imperative" to certify gold because it was the only organization with enough label recognition to bring this new product to market successfully.

**3. Offer resources.** Brainstorm ways to make it easier for your organization to adopt your idea. Can you lower the cost of entry by offering expertise that would otherwise need to be bought? Can you provide a prototype, or proof of concept, to increase your catcher's confidence in your idea's practicality? Or perhaps you have social capital to offer. Do you know people who could help get your proposal off the ground?

In his final move, the jewelry pitcher brought to his meeting a piece of gold produced according to ethical standards he had written and offered to serve as an expert in this industry. With the costs of entry so low, all the catcher had to do was say yes.

Above all, make your pitch a negotiation. Identify aspects of your proposal that you're willing to yield on and engage your catcher as a partner in the idea's development as early as possible. Persuasion is both a skill and an art. Practice these tips on every pitch, and watch your success rates soar!



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