

Philanthropy & Funding

# The Pitch Is Dead. Long Live the Conversation.

If you treat funders like prey, they'll probably run.

By [Kevin Starr](#) | Jun. 20, 2016

Some months ago, I was at a conference about social innovation or something, and a young woman came up and asked if we could talk. I said “Of course!” and with that, she launched into a staccato pitch about some really useful thing she was doing in some place that really needed it. My nametag said “foundation,” and so of course she was doing what she is supposed to do, but I have the attention span of a four year old, and the one-way flow of information sent my thoughts skittering into the weeds. They went something like this:

1. I admire your courage, your willingness to just rock up and do this.
2. I love what you're trying to do in the world.
3. You're a better person than I am.
4. This isn't working.
5. Please stop talking.
6. I wonder if they have any of those little crab cakes left?

I know, I know—it's awful. But the thing is that I really am in her corner; I am rooting for her and all those brave people like her. As a funder, I have it easy, and I know that without her my job is meaningless. I love talking with people like her, and I get really annoyed when conference organizers do stuff like declaring their event a “no-pitch zone.” So why do I feel like a trapped animal, ready to gnaw off my own foot to get away?

It's because a pitch is a really weird way to communicate. Its basic premise is that time is scarce and power is unequal. Even if concise and well-organized, the information comes in a one-way rush that forces the listener into an uncomfortable, passive role. The listener starts to fidget and look around, and the talker slides into the role of the supplicant who knows her time is slipping away. Anxiety and/or annoyance ensue, and it takes great social skills on the part of somebody for it to end well.

That little episode at the conference made me curious, and so I asked a number of funders whom I respect whether they'd ever funded someone who'd initially accosted them in that fashion. These are people who actively show respect to doers in word and action. After some head-scratching, the answer was, across the board, "I don't think so."

Anxiety-provoking *and* ineffective. Awesome.

These days, when I work with social entrepreneurs, I suggest that they dump the whole "elevator pitch" thing in favor of a "hallway conversation" approach that more closely approximates how human beings communicate. I'm not saying you should wing it: You can and should prepare. There are some common patterns in funder-doer interactions that, if anticipated, will lead to productive, comfortable, and authentic conversations.

First, there are three common questions you need to be ready to hit out of the park:

1. "So what do you do?"

Answer this like you would answer your mom. Start with the specific ("We help the poorest women in rural Uganda start profitable small businesses"), not the abstract and grandiose ("We are ending extreme poverty in Africa") Get that first sentence clean and clear, then add a couple more that provide context and intrigue the listener. Then pause. Give the listener a chance to respond like a normal human being. Get those three or four sentences down, and practice until you can deliver them calmly and conversationally. Rehearse with honest friends who will tell you if you sound weird or inauthentic, and rehearse enough so that you can comfortably tweak them depending on the setting and the kind of person you're talking to.

2. "How does that work?"

If you've intrigued them, they're curious. Be graphic—nobody understands anything until they can picture it in their head. Present your thing as a logical series of activities and get all the way to impact. Again, keep your mom in mind, keep it short, and rehearse with the right people. And pause. Always pause.

3) "But doesn't that ...?"

If you think about it, there are one or more common objections that people have voiced to you, ranging from the informed ("Hasn't research shown that microcredit doesn't work?") to the ideological ("Working with

government is a waste of time”). Be ready, but don’t ever, ever rebut. Instead, validate and respond. Calmly. Something like this:

- “Yeah, those studies on microcredit were really disappointing.” (Validating.)
- “We sifted through them, and it seemed like if we used microcredit to finance a money-making asset, we might get a different result.” (Repositioning.)
- “We were surprised how well it worked.” (“We were surprised” validates again and puts you in common cause; “how well it worked” makes it a logical choice to go down the road with you.)

Never do a frontal assault on the gates of resistance; always do an end run that treats the other person like someone intelligent with reasonable concerns.

If you have dialed in smart answers that respond to the other in a comfortable, authentic way, you’re probably going to have a mutually productive conversation. Here are a few more things to stack the deck in your favor:

Listen.

Everybody says this; few do it. If you’ve said more than five crisp sentences without pausing, you’re over the limit. If the other person looks puzzled, don’t start piling on more stuff—stop and let them ask. Remember that you can always say more; you can never say less. Oh, and really listen—don’t just pause so you can think of the next thing to say.

Nail your metaphor.

When someone hears about something new, some part of their brain desperately tries to match it with something they already know about. In your case, they’ll usually get it wrong—you need to get there first. Get your metaphor/analogy/graphic image ready, and get it in there early. Base it on something they’re sure to be familiar with: “We’re the Avon ladies of village care,” or “We’re like a credit rating agency for the very poor,” or “We’ve got a business-in-a-box for would-be beekeepers.” Make it vivid, make it accurate, make sure it’s something that particular listener is likely to know about.

Have a few key facts that will stick.

“Two-thirds of those in extreme poverty are farmers” surprises no one anymore. “The economy of Guinea is such a mess that 95 percent of people must work completely outside the formal sector” surprised me just the

other day. “We can provide a weather forecast that is 85 percent accurate within a 3 kilometer radius,” or “Teaching families about home care before discharge lowered complication rates by 70 percent”—there are facts about your context or your work that are surprising and/or sticky. Select them, tune them, and have them on deck. And, uh, make sure they’re true.

Be an equal.

Believe me, what you have to say is more interesting than anything funders have to say to each other. You’re doing interesting stuff in interesting settings to solve big problems—don’t let it go to your head, but the conversation is more of a favor to them than to you. Internalize that. Let it help you relax.

Be patient.

You’re an expert; the other person is probably not. If one line of reasoning doesn’t seem to be working, switch gears. Most funders mean well, so cut them some slack. The smartest assumption is that if they don’t get it, it’s your problem to fix. If someone really is being a jerk, ask—sincerely—if you said something wrong. That will throw them off-balance and might make them think. If that doesn’t change their behavior, excuse yourself and walk away. You deserve better.

Here’s the thing: If you want funders to go down the road with you, you need to make them feel: 1) smart, and 2) comfortable. Make that your mantra. Make it easy for them to grasp what you’re up to, and master your own anxiety so you don’t trigger it in them. We are talking about an encounter between good people who want the same things. A pitch turns it into an ordeal; a conversation makes it real. Choose the conversation.

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