

WALKING THE LINE

Without blowing smoke up your caboose, I think I've heard thousands of pitches.

Across my eight tenures developing and creating unscripted content at diverse brands, I've become both a fan and a connoisseur of artful sales techniques. After moving officially to the maker side, I wondered if there was a secret formula that guaranteed a faster, smarter green light – and if so, how could I cleverly adopt it? While there's no easy shortcut, I do think there are simple things that help both buyers and sellers build their businesses. After all, one hit show transforms everything, for everyone.

As a coach from my school years that I didn't particularly like once told me: keep it simple, stupid. While it enraged me as a teenager, I endorse the "KISS" principle as an adult. In this case, it means "know your brand." When I was working for a network at any level – from writer/producer to EVP – my job was to understand and respect the audience I served. The best people I ever worked for taught that and held teams to it. I viewed the audience as a series of concentric circles – not a bullseye, because hurling sharp objects at humanoid targets sounds violent. But the more you knew about them, the higher your odds were of super-serving the meat and potatoes they craved, and of launching a delicious delight that could push the boundaries of their palate. It was always that new, impossible, or even "too bizarre" idea, as I was sometimes told, that smashed the edges of the brand and reinvented it.

By Gena McCarthy

The same rules apply when you're selling. The more you know about the brand you're pitching, the stronger your pitch will be. As a new production label entering the market, we've spent a lot of time setting general meetings with people who graciously, patiently spend time walking us through their content performance and needs. We're using their wisdom to frame fresh development. So far, so good. If you're always shooting in the dark, sometimes you hit, but the greenlights for us have come faster when we know and respect the target.

I think most people know this, but selling takes guts. It ain't easy sticking your neck on the block waiting for the chop, given most pitches wind up as passes, for very practical reasons. We love working with people who deliver good and bad news directly, because we bake that feedback into our next pitch. We constantly recalibrate ideas to make them better for buyers, in the same way a failed series launch during my network career would inform my next greenlight decision.

Theories abound regarding the best pitching techniques. As someone who enjoys observing people, I can tell you the range of successful styles is impressive. Some people are horse whisperers



who quietly and efficiently persuade others. Some are master performers who dazzle with their wit and charisma. Some are palpably nervous and awkward but absolutely wonderful, with the best ideas. And I swear that I once saw two producers launch a military pincer movement on my boss, approaching from each flank and charming her into a greenlight.

As someone who leans toward the shyer side of the spectrum – shout out to all the successful introverts in extroverted careers – my advice is to be true to who you are. If I entered a room with a top hat and cane, thumping my chest and twirling my mustache, I'd terrify everyone, including myself. Be authentic, knowledgeable

and passionate in whatever style suits you best. Buyers are tolerant, and if they like your idea, they don't care how you deliver it. At the end of the day, it's all about the content.

Which brings me to the question of who to pitch. Some people preach going straight to the top; others recommend going to the lean and hungry ones on the team. I say, go to the people you genuinely like and trust, no matter their level. We're a democracy after all, not an aristocracy, so spend time building long-term partnerships.

When success arrives, and it will, you'll have friends for life.

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