

# Improvise Your Way to Success

Steve Yastrow

Consider the last time a hard sell worked on you—or when you were last “convinced” to do something. Having a hard time coming up with an instance?

While a common sales practice, an overt sales pitch is more likely to cause a customer to run rather than to buy.

## Five Reasons Sales Pitches Don't Work

- 1 | Pitches are selfish:** Your pitch is about you and the product you're trying to sell. Your customer doesn't care about your story or what you're trying to sell—except to the extent that it impacts him or her.
- 2 | Pitches are boring:** If you're pitching, your customer will stop listening. No one wants to hear a grocery list of reasons your product is superior. They also don't want to suffer through your rehearsed spiel. Instead of listening, your customer's mind will wander to things that are actually relevant to his day.

**3 | Pitches are one-way:** a pitch is a monologue focused inwardly. Your customer wants to be heard, and will be much more interested in a dialogue where he can express himself.

**4 | Pitches are inflexible:** the chance that your pre-scripted pitch addresses the unique needs of your customer is one-in-a-million. If you are married to using your pitch (and uncomfortable straying from it), you will be unable to speak specifically to the unique challenges your customer is facing.

**5 | Pitches are lazy:** a pre-scripted pitch does not offer a specific solution to a specific problem for a specific customer. Rather, it makes your customer do the work of connecting your offering with her needs.

The bottom line is that no one wants to be assaulted by one-way communication (a sales pitch). Rather, customers need to be invited into two-way conversations where we can be heard and understood. Whether you're selling a product, your services, or yourself—you must learn to persuade differently in order to close more deals. You must learn to *ditch the pitch*.

Ditching the pitch means improvising a fresh, spontaneous, made-in-the moment conversation with your customer. It replaces sales pitches with *persuasive conversations* that your customers will care about. The first step in this transition is to stop thinking about what you want to say, and start thinking about the *conversation* you want to have.

Genuine conversations are enriching; they make us feel good, and give us energy (the exact opposite of a sales pitch!). Authentic conversations are created in real-time, meaning they must be improvised.

While the idea of improvisation can be intimidating to some, the truth is that you were born to improvise. It's in our human DNA. In your lifetime, have you ever had two days that were the same? What about two hours? Of course not. We evolved to live in and navigate an ever-changing, unpredictable world. Improvisation is one of the most natural things we do.

In the same way that we each improvise in conversations with our friends, successful sales people bring their natural improvisation talents into their customer conversations through the help of six habits.

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# The Ditch the Pitch Habits

A successful sales improviser isn't winging it. Rather, he is using the tools of improvisation to navigate an unexpected, developing-in-the-moment conversation.

The six Ditch the Pitch Habits provide us with a framework for understanding the novel customer situations we encounter. They also help us craft spontaneous responses to those situations.

They are:

## Habit 1: Think Input Before Output

The best improvisers are the best listeners and the best observers. The key is to focus on input before output, noticing the information available to you before you determine your response. In customer conversations, let everything you say or do be informed by what you hear and observe.

In order to learn to Think Input Before Output, try these practices:

**Be alert:** During a customer conversation, be alert and fully present so that you can notice every cue your customer gives you. Resist distracting thoughts and the temptation to multi-task, which might cause you to miss important information about what your customer cares about, wants or needs.

**Say less to notice more:** Whenever you're talking, you can't be listening to your customer. Experiment with talking less, giving your customer more room to express herself. As you do this, be aware of the extra things you notice while you're not talking.

**Turn down your analytic brain:** Practice the art of non-judgment. Don't rate or judge either yourself or your customer during the conversation, and don't overanalyze or obsess about your chances of making the sale. If you do these things you risk being so caught up in your own thoughts that you could miss important information coming from your customer.

**Tip:** Each Ditch the Pitch Habit has three practices. Use these practices in your customer conversations and you will see yourself developing the habits required to create fresh, spontaneous persuasive conversations.

## Habit 2: Size Up The Scene

As you gather input in a customer conversation, interpret that information to understand what is going on. The cues you collect about who you're with and what's going on will inform your approach to the conversation.

As you listen and observe, take stock of your customer's character and situation to understand what this particular customer's reasons for saying "yes" might be. Pay attention to the tone and manner of conversation that your customer seems most comfortable with.

In order to learn to Size Up The Scene, try these practices:

**Know who you are with:** Focus on "who before what," noticing how your customer's personality and character suggest the best way to conduct this conversation. Two customers may look the same on paper, but their personal characteristics could suggest completely different sales approaches.

**Understand the context of your conversation:** During a customer conversation, pay attention to your customer's situation and the issues they are facing. Work to envision how your customer sees this situation, from his or her own perspective.

**Listen for the game:** When you're talking with a customer, be aware of the emerging dynamic, tone and mood of the conversation, understanding what type of conversation will best engage your customer. Adapt your approach to the conversation accordingly.

## Habit 3: Create a Series of “Yeses”

A conversation only moves forward if both parties continually agree to let it move forward. At its core, a conversation is a series of “yeses.”

The quality of your persuasive conversation depends on how well you and your customer are moving in sync. Each time you or your customer says “no” or “but” your conversation loses momentum.

In order to learn to Create a Series of “Yeses,” try these practices:

**Say “yes, and...”:** In customer conversations, practice saying “yes, and...” to affirm what your customer says, using “and” as a way to move the conversation forward. Your goal is to create conversational momentum through continuing positive affirmation.

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**Work with what you are given:** You can't anticipate how a customer conversation will unfold. When unexpected situations happen in a customer conversation, don't resist or deny them. Embrace the new situation, looking for ways to continue to move your conversation forward.

**Ensure your customer keeps saying yes:** Practice ways to encourage your customer to say "yes" to you by avoiding situations where they can say "no." Any time the word "no" is said, by you or your customer, the conversation will lose its momentum.

## Habit 4: Explore and Heighten

You can always enrich a conversation by digging into specific details and elevating the topic of the conversation to a higher level in the customer's business or life. When you do this, your customer will be more engaged in the conversation, and share more information with you.

Explore to discover what your customer really cares about. Heighten the conversation by discussing why these things are important.

In order to learn to Explore and Heighten, try these practices:

**Find your customer's path:** In your conversations, don't force your customer to discuss issues based on your pre-determined agenda. Look for the conversational path that best suits your

customer at that moment, and pursue that path. Even if this seems like a detour, you will actually reach your destination more quickly, because your customer will be much more engaged in the conversation.

**Get rid of your but:** Practice not using the word “but” in a customer conversation, as this, would risk slowing the flow of information coming from your customer. Instead, try replacing “but” with “and” or a pause.

**Make accidents work:** When unexpected “accidents” happen in conversations, practice using these situations as a chance to elevate the conversation to a higher level. Any surprise can create an opportunity to hear new things from your customer.

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## Habit 5: Focus the Conversation on Your Customer

Your customer cares a lot more about his narrative than he cares about yours. When you talk about him, you will be talking about what he really cares about.

Resist the temptation to talk too much about your company or your products. Instead, have a conversation that is mostly about your customer, and you will be much more likely to keep him engaged.

In order to learn to Focus the Conversation on Your Customer, try these practices:

**Make 95% of the conversation about your customer:** Focus virtually all of the subject matter of your customer conversation on the customer. Be frugal with the 5% allocated to talking about your products or services; any time you find that you are talking about yourself, immediately look for ways to shift the focus of the conversation back to your customer.

**Obey the one-paragraph rule:** In customer conversations, don't talk more than one paragraph's worth of information at a time. Leave a short break, which will give your customer a chance to talk or absorb the information you have shared. And, it will give you a chance to see how your customer is reacting to what you are saying.

**Weave your stories together:** As your customer shares information with you, look for appropriate opportunities to weave threads of your story into the conversation. If you are careful to keep the focus of the conversation on your customer, your customer will begin to see your offerings as integral to his needs.

## Habit 6: Don't Rush the Story

Your customer won't be ready to hear your ideas as fast as you come up with them. No matter how compelling your story is, or how amazing your insights are, you will not get credit for being compelling or amazing if you bring your ideas forth too quickly.

A persuasive conversation is a process, not a presentation. Let the story emerge through your conversation, at a pace your customer can accept.

Master this habit with the following practices:

**Don't load the slingshot:** Avoid bombarding your customer with too much information at one time. Bring information into a customer conversation at a pace your customer is ready to accept. Recognize that you will often come up with ideas faster than your customer will be ready to hear them.

**Leave things in your pocket:** Your goal is not to tell your customer everything; it is to advance your relationship. Only include pieces of information that are critical to persuading your customer. Bring information into the conversation that your customer will think is important, not that you think is important.

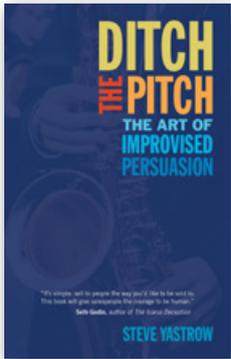
**Create callbacks:** To develop a sense of continuity and personalization, remember things your customer says or does and bring those issues back into the same or subsequent conversations. Side benefit: Your customer will see that you are listening intently and paying attention to what he cares about.

## Putting Ditch the Pitch to Work

Every customer conversation is an opportunity for you to practice and improve your ability to *ditch the pitch*. Developing the Ditch the Pitch Habits happens gradually and your progress will accumulate as you practice.

I am convinced that anyone can learn to *ditch the pitch*, no matter what your job is or where you are in your career. Work toward making these habits second nature and you will transform your ability to engage and persuade customers. **Go ahead... Ditch the Pitch!** 📌

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | In addition to *Ditch the Pitch*, Steve Yastrow is the author of *We: The Ideal Customer Relationship* and *Brand Harmony*. Steve is president of Yastrow and Co., a consulting firm that helps organizations create powerful stories and communicate them in ways that build customer relationships and drive results. For more info visit [www.yastrow.com](http://www.yastrow.com) and find him [@steveyastrow](https://twitter.com/steveyastrow).

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