

Nine Elements Behind a Successful Client Pitch

By MesaFive, LLC



*“Some pitch meetings are absolutely brilliant.
Many are dull, some are painful.
And some are like watching professional wrestling except
wrestling is better choreographed.”*

General Counsel

Fortune 100 Company

As the result of conducting more than 2,000 in-person interviews in which in-house counsel and other business leaders told us what they think of law firm marketing efforts and pitch meetings, one conclusion stands out: **Clients are underwhelmed and disappointed by many law firms’ efforts to conduct an effective pitch meeting.**

After years of listening to in-house counsel talk about their best and worst experiences, we decided to research the firms they consistently identified as the best at pitching work. Our research wasn’t restricted to law firms – when clients told us about other professional service firms, we sought them out as well. We looked at how partners structure their meetings as well as the internal processes they rely upon to prepare and follow up. Our overriding goal was to identify common elements behind the most successful pitch teams. Interestingly, we came across a handful of partners who have never lost a pitch in their career and sought to understand if those individuals have any special procedures or characteristics in common.

What are the elements that create a successful client pitch?

1. Research Before Your Pitch

Almost everyone understands they should do their homework before walking into a pitch meeting: The real question is, what meaningful information should you research about a company in advance? The challenge is there is now more information and raw intelligence available than ever before, and one common misconception is that *more information must be better*. But does more information increase your odds of success?

Lesson: Interestingly, our work revealed that **many of the least successful partners/firms tend to request the *most* research data**, whereas partners with the best track records request and review dramatically less. More importantly, many of these highly successful partners offered comments along the following lines:

“Research is necessary and useful, but I focus on listening to the client. You have a unique but limited opportunity in a pitch meeting to meet and hear from key decisionmakers firsthand. Understanding what worries a client and why is far more important than showing them you know their sales last year in Asia or quoting their General Counsel from some speech two years ago.”

Lesson: Don't ask for reams of research data unless you will read it and it is useful. Too many partners waste the time and resources of their marketing departments gathering information that no one ultimately reads (just ask your marketing department how often this happens).

Lesson: Don't try to impress the client with your all-knowing, deep intimate knowledge of their company. Most clients want to know you understand them and their company, not hear you regurgitate endlessly about what they already know.

In addition to the client and case specific research that needs to be done before any pitch, there are other issues that many firms overlook. For example:

- What do we know about the people we will be meeting with?
- Have we fully explored whether anyone in the firm has had contact with those people? Do we know how close those relationships are?
- Do we know which other law firms have worked for this company (including most importantly, whether *our* firm is/was among them)?
- Do we know if there are gate keepers (those who can't hire us, but who can prevent us from being hired) we need to meet with before we do our pitch meeting or before we meet the decision makers?

2. Who is On Our Pitch Team and Why?

Diversity, size, and composition of a pitch team are common concerns expressed by clients. But two underlying concerns were repeatedly emphasized by clients:

- Law firms often bring far too many people to pitch meetings, and/or
- They bring people who say little or nothing and/or who have a superficial role (either in the pitch or in the project itself).

As the leader of one of the most successful pitch teams told us,

“If you’re on our pitch team then you are coming for a substantive reason and you are going to be an active participant. Yes, we take young lawyers on pitch meetings, but we always debate, outline, and rehearse 2-4 major lines of discussion that each person may be asked to lead depending on how the meeting goes. We use our prep time as critical teaching/learning opportunities for our young lawyers. If you come to the meeting you are going to talk, and if you talk it has to add value to the client.”

3. Who Is the Leader?

Leadership in any presentation is critical, yet clients repeatedly say firms either don’t allow anyone, or don’t allow the right person, to lead the meeting.

According to clients, one of the most important differences between law firm pitches and those by other professional services firms is that non-law firms seem to embrace the idea of having someone who leads and facilitates the meeting, and that person may often be someone who facilitates such meetings as a primary job responsibility.

Lesson: The real lesson for law firms is that the lead shouldn’t automatically be the most senior person, or the most highly compensated person, or even the person who took the initial call, but rather the lead should be the person most capable of running an interesting and effective meeting.

As one highly successful partner put it:

“I might be the featured speaker at a pitch, but that doesn’t mean I should also be the host and emcee.”

Many of the most successful pitch teams put as much emphasis on *what* the leader’s role is as *who* the leader is going to be. They openly talk about the leader’s role:

- How actively are they going to lead the meeting?
- Will the leader determine who/when others speak?
- Who is best at reading others’ reactions and gauging their interests?

The answer to those questions may help identify who should facilitate the meeting.

One of the few partners we came across who has never lost a pitch meeting confided an interesting technique:

“I have a system of hand signals that tell every person on our team when to stop talking, when to ask the clients if this is making sense, and when to switch to someone else on our team. Having the wrong person talk or having anyone talk too much is fatal.”

4. What To Present?

According to clients and firms alike, one of the most successful techniques to start every pitch is to ask the simple question:

“What do you want to get out of this meeting by the time we are done?”

Admittedly every client is different, and each has their own preferences, interests and even quirks. But asking this question up front helps both sides to have a discussion that is focused and productive. We were surprised by the number of clients who said that often the meetings start on the wrong priorities and as a result, valuable time is wasted.

Another criticism by clients is that partners love to talk about themselves – where they went to school, their titles, their personal victories, the breadth of their experience – yet clients say such discussions (other than for the first minute) are largely a waste of precious time. One of the most common observations by clients is that law firms will be 45 minutes into a 90-minute pitch meeting, yet they still haven’t even finished their lawyer introductions.

Going into any pitch meeting every firm should have addressed the basic concepts of content well in advance:

- What is the overall theme? Do we have a clear message? Does it align with what the client wants?
- How are we going to divide our time among the topics, and who will keep us on track?
- What is each person going to present or say? Is each of those topics relevant, or are we bowing to political pressure to bring more people than we need, or more than the client wants?
- How will our content provide value to the client?

Another client complaint is that partners often seem to compete among themselves, perhaps because they didn’t rehearse or because there is a covert struggle over who will get credit for the client, or because unrestrained egos are competing for talk-time. Multiple clients noted the inability to present a cohesive, cooperative team is one prime indication of how and whether lawyers ultimately work together as a law firm, regardless of what they claim about their firm’s great teamwork culture.

“Law firms sometimes seem...amateurish. Even some of the largest firms in the world still don’t pitch well.”

“Sometimes partners seem to have no idea what one another is going to say. Or they interrupt each other in the middle of making a point.”

“You can tell in the first two minutes if they haven’t practiced. We might be awarding millions in legal work, but they couldn’t take the time to prepare?”

5. Practice, Practice, Practice

The number one issue with law firm pitch meetings according to clients? Lawyers appear as if they haven't practiced their pitch meetings in advance. Why do clients have that perception? Because often it is true. Many partners think they will look foolish rehearsing in front of their partners, or think practicing is unnecessary because they "have done pitches before."

Lesson: While many of the most successful firms may not do a word-for-word rehearsal, they routinely run through their pitch, their major points, their alternatives, and they critique one another's messages and delivery. And they do it more than once before they do it in front of a client.

Want more proof? Just ask an existing client that has sat through multiple pitch meetings: Can you tell the difference between a pitch team that has practiced, and a team that hasn't?

One interesting finding in our work: London based law firms receive uniformly better grades at cooperative, team oriented, cohesive pitch meetings than many of their US counterparts. Whether it is by reason of culture, or compensation, or a longer history as panel counsel, they consistently rank higher in terms of presenting a highly integrated, pitch team.

6. What If the Pitch Is Going Poorly and You Need to Call an Audible?

One common differentiator we discovered among the most successful partners and their teams is they think about and plan for a scenario in which their pitch may not be received as they had hoped. Many of the best performing teams confided they have concrete plans for the following issues:

- What will we do if we decide our person leading the meeting isn't relating to the client as well as others on the team?
- Who decides if we need to change the focus of the presentation?
- If the client seems interested in only a portion of our planned presentation, are we clear about how we will transition to focusing on that portion, and who will lead it?
- Do we have one or more back up plans? If so, do we introduce those up front or only pull them out if needed?

7. Pricing

One of the toughest challenges for any firm, especially when large/complex matters are at stake, is that it is often impossible to come up with a price without doing more research into the issues and facts.

And yet if the client asks, “*how much will this cost?*” successful teams said they always know what they are going to say and who is going to say it.

Lesson: You should always know how to respond to this question going in, even if you have to say, “we need to know more before we can quote you a price.” Most importantly, if you can’t quote a price then you should be able to immediately and specifically explain the steps and information you need to come up with a price, and how long that will take.

Just as important as price, do you understand how the client perceives the value of this matter? Don’t make the mistake assuming cheaper is always better – that is a common and occasionally fatal misconception according to in-house counsel, especially among middle market law firms.

8. Follow Up

One area where more (but not all) firms get good marks is in the follow up to the meeting:

- What is the follow up? In writing, email, a written proposal, another meeting, a phone call, a budget, a case strategy, etc.?
- Who is going to do the follow up?
- When is the follow up due?

As one client told us,

“We have occasionally sat through a pitch, loved everything the firm did and said but once the pitch is done, they never follow through. It leaves us wondering, are they too busy? Do they not want the work? Did they forget about us? We have started and ultimately ended several relationships with a bad experience about communications.”

9. Post Op/Lessons Learned

Perhaps the most important differentiator between successful and unsuccessful pitch teams is how they learn from their experiences *after* the pitch.

Lesson: As soon as possible convene the pitch team and your marketing professionals, to ask yourselves, “if we had to do this pitch over, what would we do differently?” One challenge of asking this question is that the quality of the answers is heavily dependent on the leader’s willingness to solicit and withstand constructive criticism.

An advantage for firms that bring a facilitator or marketing person who sees multiple presentations is that person may be able to provide a more objective assessment that the other participants miss.

One of the most successful partners told us:

“I ask each person who was in the meeting, one at a time in front of the whole group, what did you think was the best and worst part of the meeting and what should I have done differently?”

“I discovered long ago that if I set the example allowing myself to be criticized as the leader then everyone on the team is more open to constructive criticism. It’s uncomfortable the first few times you do it, but it is one of the best things we do.”

Interestingly, our research showed that most but not every successful team did some form of post-op assessment. Conversely among the firms that received the *worst* grades from in house counsel – none of them had ever done a formal post-op assessment.

Another variation on feedback that would seem obvious but according to clients is rarely exercised: Ask the client, especially after they have made their decision (and especially if they chose another law firm), for constructive feedback.

If you don’t know how to ask, try this simple phrasing:

“We always want to improve and learn from our weaknesses or mistakes – and that means we have to be brave enough to ask what those are. Is there anything we should focus on to do better? And please don’t hold back.”

Clients comment that most firms seem afraid or uninterested in constructive criticism, yet they are drawn to those that ask for it. Several clients mentioned that it was a firm’s request for feedback that helped sway their decision to use the firm, as it indicated a willingness to have more open communications and is a harbinger of a better relationship.

One of the most important trends over the last twenty years is that clients are increasing their use of formal, competitive selection processes to choose outside counsel. For most lawyers, a pitch meeting will likely always invoke a certain amount of nervous anxiety. But doing a great pitch meeting isn’t difficult if firms focus on the lessons repeatedly emphasized by clients and demonstrated by their most successful competitors.

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