

Fundraising Tip: Ditch the Pitch Habit #2 – Size Up The Scene

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[Today's article is the third article in the exclusive *eJewish Philanthropy* series designed to acquaint readers with the key concepts in Steve Yastrow's new book, "Ditch the Pitch". The message is clear: tear up your fundraising pitch, and raise more money with fresh, spontaneous persuasive conversations. To read the previous articles in the series, click [here](#)]

by Steve Yastrow

Imagine one of these scenarios:

- You arrive at the office of a donor organization, hoping to close a deal to extend your funding arrangement. Your contact introduces you to his new boss, who is joining you in the meeting. You didn't know he had a new boss.
- You arrive at a donor's house for a meeting, hoping to walk away with a big check. The first thing he does is tell you about the major gifts he has recently made to other organizations.
- A board member asks to meet with you, for what you think is a short, casual conversation. He starts asking you detailed questions about the operations of your organization.

In each of these situations, it would be persuasion suicide to give a pre-script pitch. In the first minutes of the meeting you have learned new, surprising information, requiring you to ditch the pitch and improvise a persuasive conversation. One of the very first things you need to do when you *ditch the pitch* is *Size Up the Scene*.

In my [last article](#) I discussed *Ditch the Pitch* Habit #1: Think Input Before Output. As you are listening and observing during a conversation with a donor, you will learn things about your donor and about her situation. This is the essence of *Ditch the Pitch* Habit #2: *Size Up the Scene*.

Every time you greet a donor, you are walking into the middle of a story the donor is living, just like when you start watching a movie in the middle. In order to create an improvised persuasive conversation, you need to assess what is going on in the story. Here are a few key practices to help you do that.

Practice: Know who you are with

When two improvisational actors start a scene, with no script or prior planning to rely on, they focus on establishing their characters before they start developing a plot. Character, and the relationship between characters, is at the heart of every story, so it is impossible to create an effective story if you don't know who the players are.

The same holds true when you are with a donor. Before you can start persuading this person to give you money, you need to know who the person is. This is true even with a donor you have known for a long time; you may be able to learn important new things about the person's mood, enthusiasm or interests that can inform your persuasive approach. Focus on *who* your donor is before you focus on *what* you want to say.

Practice: Understand the context of your conversation

In addition to learning more about who your donor is, it is important to learn about your donor's situation. In other words, you want to learn *what's going on*.

In a persuasive conversation, your ability to improvise is increased as you learn about your donor's situation. Here are some examples of things to look for as you try to understand the context of your persuasive conversation with a donor, whether the donor is an individual or someone working inside a larger organization:

- What's going on in your donor's business or personal life
- What outside forces are affecting your donor or what kinds of outside forces your donor thinks are affecting him
- How ready is your donor to make a decision or commitment
- How easy it is for your donor to make a decision

- Where your donor's overall focus is these days

Be patient, before you start prescribing specific options for your donor, as you piece together an understanding of your donor's situation.

Practice: Listen for the game

As you and your donor begin talking, a dynamic will emerge in your conversation. It will take on a particular tone and pace, and you will tacitly agree on a "feel" for the conversation. You will also develop certain shared themes around which your conversation revolves.

Identifying these dynamics is something improvisational actors call "listening for the game." As they start an improvised scene and establish their characters, they begin to find a "game," or a set of themes and elements that will, eventually, evolve into a plot.

Effective persuaders have the perceptiveness and patience to identify the "game" in a customer conversation before they commit to a particular course for that conversation.

By using these three practices, knowing who you are with, understanding the context of your conversation, and listening for the game, you will be able to Size Up the Scene effectively, setting yourself up to *ditch the pitch* and persuade your donors successfully.

Focus on these ideas this week, and in our next issue, we will explore Ditch the Pitch Habit #3: Create a Series of "Yeses."

For more information on Steve Yastrow and *Ditch the Pitch*, please visit www.yastrow.com, or find *Ditch the Pitch* on amazon.com.