

DITCH THE PITCH

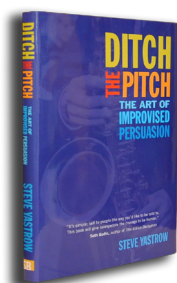
A Guide to Successful
FUNDRAISING



by **STEVE YASTROW**

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Adapted from Steve Yastrow's book
Ditch The Pitch.

<http://yastrow.com/books>

INTRODUCTION

A friend of mine, who is on the board of a local charity, once gave this reason for turning down a lunch invitation from me: “I have an appointment with a potential big donor, and I’m going to meet with him and deliver my shpiel.”

I almost told my friend (but didn’t) that this was a sorry excuse for missing lunch with me, since he would most likely be wasting his time.

Why did I think this?

Because a “shpiel,” which is just a nice Jewish word for a sales pitch, is a very ineffective way to persuade someone to give money to a cause.

Leave your shpiel at home. Nobody wants to hear a sales pitch. Do you? When was the last time a hard sell worked on you? When was the last time you enjoyed hearing someone’s sales pitch? When was the last time someone “convinced” you to do something?

Your donors don’t want to hear sales pitches. More importantly, they are usually not persuaded by sales pitches. If you deliver a sales pitch and walk away with a check, you have succeeded in spite of your pitch, not because of it.

Why sales pitches don't work

Every one of your donors is unique, and every one of them has a unique reason for giving. More importantly, every donor believes that he is unique, and that his reasons for giving are unique. If an individual donor is on the receiving end of a pre-scripted sales pitch, he will feel as if the pitch was written for someone else, not for him. The odds that a pre-conceived sales pitch will be right for a given donor at a given moment are about one in a billion.

If you want to connect with a donor, and walk away with a check, you need to identify her reasons for giving. Your sales pitch summarizes your reasons that she should give. As Aristotle said, “the fool tells me his reasons. The wise man persuades me with my own.”

Ditch the Pitch

If you want to improve your fundraising effectiveness, *ditch the pitch*. Tear up your sales pitch, and replace it with something much more effective: an improvised conversation.

Real conversations are unscripted, unfolding in the moment. What each person says, at any point in time, is informed by what was said before. When you *ditch the pitch* and improvise a conversation, you are able to create an experience for the donor that is informed by what you learn from him during that conversation. This makes the experience much more interesting and relevant for him.

You are already an awesome improviser

Some people rely on a sales pitch as a crutch because they don't feel like they are able to improvise a persuasive conversation. But improvising is actually much more natural for human beings than delivering a sales pitch.

Your days are already filled with improvisation. Every conversation you have at work or with friends, every time you navigate the aisles of a grocery store, every time you play a game with a child, you are improvising. Every hour of our lives is different than the hour that preceded it, and we use our skills of improvisation to navigate our ever-changing, unpredictable world.

How to Ditch the Pitch

My new book, *Ditch the Pitch*, outlines six Ditch the Pitch Habits that can help you develop the fluency to abandon your sales pitches and instead create fresh, spontaneous persuasive conversations.

Here are the six Ditch the Pitch Habits:

1

Think Input Before Output

In a conversation with a donor, let everything you say or do be informed by what you hear and observe.

2

Size Up the Scene

As you listen and observe, take stock of your potential donor's character and situation to understand what this particular donor's reasons for giving may be.

3

Create a Series of "Yeses"

A conversation only moves forward if both parties continually agree to let it move forward. Always find something to say "yes" to as you speak with your donor, avoiding the words "no" and "but."

4

Explore and Heighten

As you engage your potential donor, look for ways to take the conversation to a higher level. Explore to find what your donor really cares about and then heighten by discussing why these things are important.

5

Focus the Conversation on Your Donor

Resist the temptation to talk about your organization. Instead, have a conversation that is mostly about the donor.

6

Don't Rush the Story

Your donor won't be ready to hear your ideas as fast as you come up with them. Let the story emerge through your conversation, at a pace your donor can accept.

HABIT 1 Think Input Before Output

Have you ever noticed that some people are able to respond to situations with the perfect comment or action? What enables them to be so quick on their feet?

Although it's tempting to say that people are quick on their feet because they're smarter, I don't think this is the primary reason. I believe that people who are quick on their feet focus on "input before output." Their in-the-moment responses (output) are based on what they observe or hear (input.)

Being quick on your feet is critical when you are persuading another person, whether you are in a fundraising situation or in another setting where you are trying to get someone to say "yes." You can never predict everything you need to learn about a donor and her situation; you need to *ditch the pitch* and be flexible based on what you hear and observe as your conversation unfolds.

This leads us to Ditch the Pitch Habit #1: Think Input Before Output. Let's explore this habit, and how to use it to make yourself a better persuader and a better fundraiser.

Let's face it; most people look at fundraising solicitations and other forms of persuasion more as processes of telling and convincing than as processes of listening and observing. They rehearse their pitches and create their PowerPoint presentations, then work diligently to tell their donor everything they planned to tell her. This is not an effective way to raise money, because the odds that a pre-conceived pitch will be right for the donor you are trying to persuade, at the moment you are trying to persuade her, are about one in a billion. To *ditch the pitch*, we first need to shift from an output-driven to an input-driven mindset.

Believe the answer will be there

You can develop the confidence to *ditch the pitch* and improvise your fundraising solicitations if you trust that the right course of action will become apparent to you during the conversation you are having with a donor. I interviewed many improvisational actors and musicians while writing *Ditch the Pitch*, and every one of them told me that listening, observing and paying attention are the key factors that enable them to improvise. As author and spiritual teacher Ram Dass said, "the next message you need is right where you are." Yes, *ditching the pitch* might seem a little bit scary, but the best antidote for this fear is to trust your skills of perception.

Here are three practices that will help you develop the habit of thinking input before output.

PRACTICE:

Be alert

We all have many things to think about and a lot to be distracted by. Paying attention during a persuasive conversation is critical for success. When you are persuading a donor, shut out all possible distractions. If you are on the phone, don't look at your email or web browser. If you are in a busy place, such as a restaurant, try to shut out all extraneous noise. If you are distracted by other things going on in your life or work, do your best to put those issues aside while you are with your donor.

Put yourself in a curious mood, genuinely interested in learning things about this donor that you didn't previously know. And remember what Ram Dass said, the next message is right where you are.

Say less to notice more

Every moment you are speaking in a persuasive conversation with a donor is a moment you are not listening to, and learning from, your donor.

My goal as a persuasive conversation starts is to get the other person talking more than me. This enables me to hear many cues from this person that will help me navigate the conversation. It opens me up to discover possibilities for persuading them that I may not have thought about previously.

Practice saying less and see how much more you notice. Be frugal with your words and discover how much less you need to say to be successful in a fundraising situation. You may be surprised to discover how much more engaged donors will be in conversations with you.

Turn down your analytic brain

Thinking too much can kill spontaneity. Don't overanalyze everything that happens, because when you get inside your head, you won't be paying attention to what's going on around you. Don't judge yourself, don't judge your donor, and don't do mental calculations about the odds of closing this solicitation. Turn down your analytic brain.

Yes, it's impossible to completely turn down your analytic brain, but you can keep it at a "low hum" in the background while you are thinking input before output.

Like all habits, practice helps us get better, a little at a time. Work on these practices, and steadily improve your ability to focus on input before output. This is a key step to *ditching the pitch* and improving your fundraising performance.

HABIT 2 Size Up The Scene

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-scripted 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 the last section, 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.

By using the three practices on the next page, know who you are with, understand the context of your conversation, and listen 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.

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.

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.

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.

3 Create a Series of “Yeses”

We all love it when a donor says “yes” and agrees to a gift. But this “big yes” is rarely the only “yes” you hear. Securing a gift is actually a series of “yeses.” Let’s explore why, and how, by exploring Ditch the Pitch Habit #3: Create a Series of “Yeses.”

A key theme of this fundraising guide is that if you deliver pre-written pitches and presentations to donors you won’t have much success. Fundraising effectiveness requires you to *ditch the pitch* and engage donors in improvised persuasive conversations.

Conversation is much more engaging and interesting to donors than listening to a pitch. However, conversations are fragile. One moment two people can be having a good dialogue and, suddenly, if one of them chooses to disengage from the conversation, the discussion can lose its momentum. Conversational momentum continues when the people talking with each other agree to fuel that momentum by continually affirming their participation in the conversation. Every conversation is a series of “yeses.”

Here are some practices to help you create a series of “yeses” in conversations with donors.

PRACTICE:

Say “yes, and...”

One of the primary techniques that improvising actors use on stage to create spontaneous scenes is called “yes, and...” No matter what one actor says or does, the other improvising actors affirm it and build upon it, essentially responding with “**yes**, I agree with what you have offered me, **and** here is my addition to it.”

You can do the same thing in your donor conversations to create a fresh, spontaneous conversation that will interest and engage a donor. As you speak with donors, look for ways to acknowledge, affirm and agree with what they say, responding in ways that build upon what you have heard. Even if the technical answer to a question from a donor is “no,” with practice you can avoid using dialogue-deflating words like “no” or “but,” instead acknowledging what the donor has said and finding something you can say yes to.

Work with what you are given

Donor conversations rarely unfold exactly as planned. You will always encounter surprises, sometimes undesirable surprises, such as when a donor expresses a lack of interest in your organization, or starts a conversation by telling you about his current financial challenges.

As with most things in life, resistance is not always a productive response to unexpected or undesirable situations. We don't have to like a situation to acknowledge its presence. By acknowledging a situation, we have a much better chance of dealing with it.

When a donor presents you with an unanticipated situation, this new situation becomes the material of your conversation. It is what you have to work with. Don't resist it; say yes to it.

Ensure your donor keeps saying yes

In addition to you saying "yes" in your donor conversations, mutual agreement also requires that your donor continues to say "yes" as well. If you lead your donor to a place where she says "no," the conversational momentum can stop just as quickly as if you had said "no."

Here are a few tips to help you avoid hearing "no" from your donors during persuasive conversations:

- **Don't assume anything.** Before making a statement, be careful that it won't put your donor into a defensive mode. If you're not sure, ask. Don't tell.
- **Don't prescribe a solution too early.** Your primary job in a persuasive conversation is not to impress your donor with solutions; it is to move your relationship forward. Only prescribe specific recommendations when you are confident that your donor is ready to hear them.
- **Keep the conversation focused on your donor,** not on what you are trying to persuade your donor to do. Make the conversation about their connection with your organization, not only about your organization.
- **Avoid yes-or-no questions.** Phrase your questions, when possible, as a choice between yeses, i.e., "Which of these two options seems better to you?"

When you look at a conversation as a series of "yeses," you keep your conversations moving forward. And conversational momentum is an important piece of successful persuasion.

Remember, the "big yes" comes after a series of "yeses." When you can create a series of "yeses," you will go a long way to increasing your fundraising effectiveness.

HABIT 4 Explore and Heighten

In our last section, we discussed how to create a series of “yeses” in a conversation with a donor. When you and your donor are engaged in a dialogue of affirmation and agreement, you have set the stage for a successful solicitation. To achieve this success, your next challenge is to take the conversation to a higher level by using Ditch the Pitch Habit #4: Explore and Heighten.

First, let’s define what we mean by “explore” and “heighten.”

- To “explore” when you *ditch the pitch* is to find the things your donor really cares about.
- To “heighten” is to create a rich dialogue about the things your donor really cares about.

When you explore and heighten, you will engage your donor deeper into a conversation he cares about. If the donor really cares about the conversation he is in, he is much more likely to listen to you, and to give money to you.

Let’s discuss three practices that will help you explore and heighten in your donor conversations.

As you are talking with a donor, try to discover the higher-level personal reasons the donor would want to give to you, beyond how noble the work of your organization is. Does his family have a personal experience in the past needing the kind of services your organization provides? Is he looking to model good charitable behavior for his children? Is he interested in the social status of a board position? When you discover the higher-level reasons that would interest a donor in your organization, you have an opportunity to connect with you donor on an important, personal level that can make your organization much more relevant to this donor.

PRACTICE:

Find your donor's path

Sales pitches, PowerPoint decks and brochures all follow a set communication chronology, laying out their stories in an order that seems logical to their creators. However, this isn't always the order that would make the most sense to the person receiving the communication.

Your donor is more likely to be open if you find the conversational path that is most interesting to him, without forcing him onto the path that makes the most sense for you. For example, if a donor wants to start a conversation by talking about one of your least exciting programs, one that you rarely talk about in donor meetings, don't resist this topic – talk about it! There must be a reason he wants to discuss this program, and by exploring this topic with him you may uncover some of his key motivating factors. Additionally, discussing the topic he wants to talk about will engage him deeper in the conversation and encourage him to open up more and share more information with you.

Get rid of your but

Exploring and heightening is a delicate process of navigating a conversation to a place your donor cares about, and doing it in a way that reveals important information that will help you move your relationship forward. As we discussed in the previous habit, the word "no" can stop a conversation dead in its tracks. Similarly, the word "but" can slow a conversation down as soon as it is uttered.

As you explore and heighten in a conversation, avoid using the word "but" at all. When donors hear this word from you, they will perceive that you have disagreed with them, and this can disrupt the flow of the conversation. To avoid using the word "but," you can either substitute the word "and" or just leave a pause where the "but" would have been.

Make accidents work

As you are exploring and heightening with your donor, you will inevitably hear things that you weren't expecting, many of which may be disappointing, such as news that your donor has new, competing philanthropic interests, or that he is experiencing financial challenges this year. Once you hear these things, don't let them faze you; they are the new reality of the conversation.

Improvisational actors have a concept called "every idea is a bridge to the best idea." What this means is that "we can always get there from here." No matter what you hear from your donor, accept it and use it as the place from which to navigate the rest of your conversation.

HABIT 5 **Focus the Conversation on Your Donor**

Your organization does important work. When someone donates money to your organization, they are making a smart, effective contribution to making the world a better place.

The challenge: Communicating with current and potential donors in a way that helps them believe that your organization is important, special and unique.

Your donors live in a world where they have a staggering number of choices available to them every day. They can buy the things they need at many different stores, they can choose to eat in a wide variety of restaurants, and they can choose to contribute their charitable giving to any of thousands of organizations. The result: People see these choices as being interchangeable. It's hard to differentiate your organization from the rest.

But, at the same time people tend to see the choices of where to direct their money as interchangeable, there is something they see as unique: themselves.

Here's my suggestion for dealing with this conundrum – Imagine every donor you speak with is thinking this: “If you want me to think you're different, show me you understand what makes me different.”

In other words, don't try to impress a donor by explaining the features and benefits of your organization. Seek to understand what drives an individual donor – her motivations, interests, challenges, lifestyle, goals – and then connect your organization's story to your donor's story.

This is the essence of Ditch the Pitch Habit #5: Focus the Conversation on Your Donor. When you have a conversation about your donor, instead of making a presentation about your organization, you gain the interest of the donor while also learning what she really cares about. Below are three practices that will help you Focus the Conversation on Your Donor.

PRACTICE:

Make 95% of the conversation about the donor

No matter how much a donor cares about your organization, she cares about herself more. And, she understands herself better than she understands your organization. If you have a conversation with her in which 95% of the subject matter is about herself and her interests, you will have her full attention and engagement, and she will be much more open to making the connection between her interests and your organization.

Obey the one-paragraph rule

It's easy to "get on a roll" when talking about your organization and deliver a long monologue. Don't! You will lose your donor's attention. Instead, obey the one-paragraph rule: As soon as you have spoken about one paragraph's worth of information, stop and leave a break.

Many important things can happen during that break: The donor can ask a question. The donor can absorb what you have just said. You can see if the donor is interested or disinterested in what you just said. You can discern whether it is time to ask for money, or if more conversation is needed.

Weave your stories together

As you are having a conversation that is focused on your donor, you will inevitably find opportunities to weave parts of your story into this donor-centered conversation. For example, imagine you are raising money for a Jewish day school, speaking with a grandparent of current students, and during the conversation the prospective donor reveals his frustration at not being able to understand the Hebrew in synagogue services. He says that he hopes his grandchildren will never have that disappointment. This is a perfect time to weave information about your immersive Hebrew curriculum into the conversation, in a way that is much more effective than if you had mentioned this feature of your school out of context. Hearing about the Hebrew language program as he is discussing his own personal situation makes the program much more relevant and meaningful to him.

When you focus the conversation on your donor, you will find it much easier to gain and hold the donor's attention. More importantly, it will be easier to help your donors see how your organization's work fits into their personal goals and interests.

HABIT 6 **Don't Rush the Story**

You “know your stuff.” You understand your organization well, and you have had many conversations with donors in which you have seen a spark of interest ignite. It is inevitable that, as you speak with donors, you will instantly come up with reasons why your organization perfectly fits their needs and interests.

Here's the challenge: You will understand these reasons before your donors are ready to hear them. Unlike you, your donors do not spend their days thinking about how your organization makes the world a better place, and how you can meet the charitable needs of donors.

This leads us to our final habit, Ditch the Pitch Habit #6: Don't Rush the Story. Let's explore a few practices that will help you build a story with your donor at a pace the donor can accept.

PRACTICE:

Don't load the slingshot

Just as David felled the giant Goliath with his slingshot, it's easy to knock your donor over if you fire surprise ideas at him too quickly. Resist the temptation to tell your donor your ideas as soon as you have them. As described above, you will always come up with ideas faster than your donor is ready to hear them. Bring those ideas into the conversation at a pace your donor can accept.

Leave things in your pocket

Your goal in a donor conversation is not to tell your donor everything about your organization. In fact, if you try to tell him everything, you will overwhelm him and he will end up understanding very little about your organization. Your goal in a donor conversation is to advance your relationship, earning the right either to ask for a donation or to ask for the next meeting.

For this reason, it is important to “leave things in your pocket.” Be discerning about what information you bring into an individual donor conversation, and what you leave out, basing these decisions on the particular characteristics and interests of the donor you are speaking with. Your new program may be the most exciting, most powerful, most innovative thing your organization has ever created, but if it's not interesting to this donor, it's best not to force it into the conversation.

Create callbacks

Watch any good comedy, whether it is improvised or scripted, and you will see many recurring references throughout the show. For example, a Seinfeld episode may start with George saying something embarrassing, and this situation will return a few more times during the show, creating bigger laughs each time it comes back. These recurring references are called “callbacks,” and they serve to tie a story together and make the audience feel like they are part of the story.

Comedians use callbacks to get laughs, but you can use them to help your donor see continuity to the conversation you are having with him, in addition to demonstrating that you are listening and understanding his needs and interests. As an example, imagine you are raising money for an organization that helps disadvantaged teens, and your donor tells you about some moving experiences he had helping young people as a Big Brother when he was in college. If you reference his comments and experiences later in conversations with him, it will help him see a stronger connection between his emotional experiences and what you offer.

SUMMARY

In this Fundraising Guide, we have reviewed concrete tools that you can use to *ditch the pitch* and make your efforts at persuasion and fundraising more effective. When you tear up your fundraising scripts and, instead, create fresh, spontaneous conversations that matter to your donors, you will create stronger relationships with donors and raise more money from them.

And, most importantly, you will be helping your organization become stronger, which will enable it to do more of the important work it does to make the world a better place.

Go ahead ... *Ditch the Pitch!*

About Steve Yastrow



Steve Yastrow is a non-stop idea generator, business advisor and author of three books, *Brand Harmony*, *We: The Ideal Customer Relationship* and *Ditch the Pitch*. Management guru Tom Peters said, “When Steve Yastrow writes, I pay close attention.”

Steve challenges his clients and audiences to answer the question, “Do your customers believe in you?” His fresh, provocative approach to marketing, branding, customer relationships and sales, offers clear action steps to create compelling customer beliefs that drive business results.

The concepts behind Steve’s ideas were developed in the “real world” through his work as president of Yastrow and Company, a consulting firm that has served hundreds of organizations. Steve’s clients include McDonald’s Corporation, the Cayman Islands Department of Tourism, Agilent Technologies and Great Clips for Hair, among many others. In the Jewish community, Steve has worked with The Schusterman Family Foundation, Birthright NEXT, The ROI Community, Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, The Union for Reform Judaism, Jewish United Fund of Chicago, The Community Foundation for Jewish Education, RAVSAK, The Ark, and The National Association of Temple Administrators.

For more *Ditch the Pitch* resources, to sign up for Steve’s newsletter, or to get in touch with Steve about working with your organization, please visit www.yastrow.com.



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