SELL The idea
Before they kill it!



01 / THE DECISION

Sell understanding before certainty

A good idea can disappear inside the presentation built to defend it. By the time the work arrives, the audience has heard a trend lecture, a brand manifesto and a tour of the agency's cleverness. People are then asked to approve something they have barely encountered. The presenter mistakes accumulated explanation for shared understanding.

Begin by deciding what the room must choose. Approval to explore a rough is different from permission to commission production. A concept meeting may need agreement on the central action and the problem it addresses. A production meeting needs scope, cost, feasibility and ownership as well. Do not ask for a large commitment while presenting the evidence for a small one.

Your job is to make the choice clear enough to assess honestly. That includes showing the work, explaining the consequential decisions and admitting material uncertainty. Confidence helps when it is attached to a reason. It becomes pressure when it asks people to overlook a missing fact or a genuine concern.

This guide produces a short pitch sequence you can rehearse and a response plan for objections. It cannot make a weak concept strong, remove organisational politics or guarantee approval. It can prevent the presentation itself from obscuring what is worth protecting in the idea.

02 / READ THE ROOM

Know what each person must decide

Before building slides, identify the decision owner, the people advising them and the people who must deliver the work. Ask what would make the next step possible. A marketing lead may need confidence in brand fit; an operations lead may know that the promised experience cannot happen. Both deserve to be heard, but they are answering different questions.

Separate known concerns from imagined resistance. "The team previously rejected unexplained production costs" is a useful fact. "The client has no imagination" is an excuse that gives you nothing to prepare. When possible, ask which part of the current assignment feels least resolved. That question can tell you whether to bring a clearer rough, a demonstration or a costed production option.

+ Decision: what precise approval or correction is needed at this meeting?
+ Evidence: what must the audience see to make that decision responsibly?
+ Constraint: what cannot change, and who has authority to change the rest?
+ Risk: which unresolved issue could make the proposed next step wasteful?

Prepare for different knowledge levels without presenting every piece of background. Give the room the minimum shared context needed to understand the work. Put detailed evidence where it can be reached when relevant. This is editing, not concealment: anything that materially changes the decision belongs in the main conversation.

03 / BUILD THE SEQUENCE

Give the work a clear entrance

Write the presentation as a spoken argument before laying it out. Each move should make the next one easier to understand. Do not announce that the idea is brilliant, brave or award-worthy. Give people something concrete from which they can form a view. A rough can be persuasive when its central action is legible.

01 State the assignment in the audience's terms. Name the difficulty and the change you are proposing to help create. Use only the context that affects this decision.

02 Show the revealing execution. Let the room experience the film sequence, poster, interaction or product demonstration before listing all the qualities you hope it possesses.

03 Explain the few decisions that make it work. Connect what happens to the audience circumstance and the brand's actual provision. Avoid a rationale for every word and prop.

04 Make the tradeoff visible. State what the route prioritises, what it deliberately leaves out and the material question still to resolve.

05 Ask for a bounded next step. Name the approval, the work it unlocks and the evidence you will bring back before a larger commitment.

This is a practical sequence, not a mandatory slide count. A single sheet can do all five jobs. If the audience needs to know a critical limitation before seeing the work, say it first rather than using the reveal to delay an awkward truth.

04 / WORKED EXAMPLE

Show the pitch, not just the plan

> INVENTED TEACHING CASE
>
> SideNote is a fictional adjustable reading light. The brief and product facts below are invented for teaching, not claims about an existing product.

The assignment is to demonstrate that the light can be directed onto a book in a shared room. The product can be angled and dimmed. There is no evidence that it guarantees another person's sleep. The meeting is to approve development of a rough film, not its production budget.

Opening and execution

Presenter: "The useful choice here is where the light goes. We want to make that choice visible in one familiar moment." Show the rough: a reader opens a book beside a sofa. The room light goes off. SideNote clicks on; the reader adjusts its neck and a patch of light settles across the page. We stay close enough to see the adjustment. The reader turns one more page. End line: "More light on your next page." Product demonstration and name remain visible.

Presenter: "The adjustment is the idea's proof. We are not selling an abstract love of reading or promising undisturbed sleep. We are showing a useful action the product performs. We would like approval to develop this sequence and photograph the real light pattern before writing any stronger claim."

The pitch gives the audience an execution to judge, an explanation of its choice and an honest boundary. It does not require them to applaud a mood before discovering what the film does.

05 / HANDLE THE OBJECTION

Find out what the concern protects

In the SideNote meeting, someone says, "It needs to feel bigger." That sentence could mean a stronger opening, a clearer product role, broader appeal or a concern about launch prominence. Answering it with a more expensive location would be a guess. Ask: "Which part feels too small for the job: what happens, how the product looks, or the number of people who can recognise the situation?"

Suppose the reply is, "I worry that this only speaks to people reading beside somebody else." A useful response is: "The shared-room moment makes the directed light easy to understand. We can explore a second situation, but we should keep the adjustment as the recognisable action. Would seeing the same mechanism at a desk resolve the audience concern, or is the concern about the product's overall positioning?"

That response protects the central mechanism while allowing its expression to change. It also distinguishes a concept correction from a new strategic assignment. If the brief changes, record the change instead of pretending the original route always answered it.

When a concern identifies a genuine flaw, say so plainly. "The rough makes the surrounding room look completely dark. We need the actual demonstration before implying that result." Acknowledging the problem can strengthen confidence in your judgment. Defending every detail makes it harder for the audience to know which detail truly matters.

06 / TRY IT

Cut the preamble, keep the argument

Invented exercise: you are presenting a wayfinding concept for a small exhibition. Your draft opening spends five minutes on the history of visual communication, then says "Our immersive system celebrates discovery." The real proposal gives each visitor a choice between two short routes and shows how to rejoin the main path. Write a thirty-second opening and a specific approval request.

A model response

"Visitors can explore freely and still know how to find the next room. At the entrance, this sign offers two routes: follow the objects or follow the makers. Each route uses a repeated marker, and the next main-path connection is always shown. Here is the entrance sign and the first decision point. We are asking to prototype those two signs in the space before extending the system."

This version puts the visitor's task and the actual design in front of the audience. It leaves room to ask whether the labels make sense. The next step is bounded: testing two signs does not approve every sign, fabrication cost or accessibility detail.

Rehearse with a colleague who has not seen the proposal. Ask them what is being proposed, why it exists and what the meeting must decide. If they cannot answer, repair the sequence before adding enthusiasm. If they identify an important unanswered question, add the missing information rather than another statement about the idea's ambition.

07 / WORKSHEET

The pitch you can rehearse

Complete this sheet before opening presentation software. Then speak the sequence aloud while showing the rough. Keep supporting material nearby, but distinguish what the audience needs to decide from what you merely want them to know.

What is the precise decision, and who can make it?

What is the shortest truthful setup for the work?

Which execution will make the idea visible without a long explanation?

What must we protect, and what can change?

What material uncertainty or likely objection needs a direct answer?

What exact next step are we requesting, and what will it resolve?

08 / AFTER THE ROOM

Record a decision, not a mood

A positive meeting can end without approval. "We love the direction" might mean proceed, explore another route, or return after a different stakeholder sees it. Close by summarising the decision in practical terms: which route, which changes, which unresolved questions and what the team is authorised to do next. Invite a correction while everyone is present.

+ Send the selected execution with a brief account of the decision, not a rewritten history in which everyone agreed from the beginning.
+ Separate required changes from suggestions and unresolved questions. Give each consequential item an owner and a review point.
+ Record any new constraint that changes the assignment, especially a claim, service promise, production dependency or budget boundary.
+ Before the next meeting, show how the revision addresses the actual concern. Do not force the audience to rediscover the logic of the changes.

Use rehearsal and clarity to improve understanding, not to manipulate assent. Some objections are correct; some stakeholders will have priorities your concept does not meet. A responsible pitch can reveal that a route should stop. That is a useful outcome when it prevents an expensive mistake.

The next action is to write your opening, show the rough and state the decision request in one uninterrupted rehearsal. Notice where explanation multiplies. That is often the point where the argument, the execution or the requested commitment needs to become clearer.

READING / PRACTICE / CONTEXT

Where the thinking starts

The methods, teaching scenarios, exercises and worksheets here are original synthesis. The books below inform particular decisions; their authors do not endorse this guide. Page references locate the supplied PDF editions and may differ from printed page numbers.

Jon Steel / Perfect Pitch: The Art of Selling Ideas and Winning New Business

PDF pp. 43-45, 55-56

Steel's discussion of active audiences, presentation flow and the difference between belief and action informed the pitch sequence. His historical anecdotes are not repeated or treated as independently verified evidence.

Pete Barry / The Advertising Concept Book

PDF pp. 9-11

The emphasis on evaluating the underlying idea through rough executions informed showing the work early. The SideNote and exhibition examples, dialogue and worksheet are original teaching material.

Make the tools your own

Read the worked example, try the exercise before its model response, then use the worksheet on a real assignment. Print the worksheet at 100% or annotate a copy digitally. Check your actual product facts, audience context and production conditions before applying the advice.

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