

So, how's the pitch going?

 By [Damon Stapleton](#)

5 Dec 2018

My first big pitch. I had a pitch jacket that made me look like a featured extra from *Miami Vice*. I was sh!tting myself and had a fixed smile on my face in the futile attempt to appear professional.



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I remember the senior suit saying to me, “the client wants to look you straight in the eye. He wants to stare at you to make sure you are not going to f*ck him over.” The suit kept saying, “look him in the eye.” Over and over. Like it was a mantra that would keep him safe.

We walked into a large, mahogany-lined boardroom smelling of Red Bull, Spray Glue and fear. We did our pitch and I had my first out-of-body experience at a corporate level. I felt like I was floating. I was watching myself from one of the expensive light fittings.

There was an awkward atmosphere, because the clients were supposed to be looking at us, yet they were secretly looking at each other.

They were looking for inaudible clues as to what their boss or the big boss was thinking. Also, I was staring intently at every client in the eye like a psychopath. We got to question time. The junior clients asked some vague non-questions that wouldn't get them into trouble. We moved up the chain until we got to the big boss.

The big boss had a far better jacket than me. It was one of those jackets that made you suspect he had a garage with many vintage cars. He stared at me for about 30 long, very quiet seconds. Then he asked me a question. "Do you believe in this idea?"

The suit who kept obsessively straightening the pen and pad in front of him made a weird, strangled high pitch sound that fortunately, only I heard. I looked at the big boss and answered him with the only appropriate answer in the situation.

"Yes."

Another stare. Then he stared at his sweaty people who were trying to say "yes", "maybe" and "no" at the same time, without using language. He nodded and walked out. The next day, we were told we had won one of the largest accounts in the country. Four weeks of late nights all came down to about 45 seconds of staring.

This scenario happens every day, all over the world.



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Vicky Gillan 3 Oct 2018



I have described pitching as the most human part of advertising.

“ It is the part of the business that hasn't really changed. Fundamentally, you can have lots of work and a slick presentation, but trust is the thing. ”

It isn't fashionable to write about this. In a business that uses words like "data" and "algorithm" in every sentence to create a feeling of certainty and precision, trust seems like a very human and imprecise quality. But this is often one of the main reasons business that is worth huge sums of money changes hands.

I have won pitches I thought I had definitely lost. And, I have lost pitches where everybody in the room believed we had hit a home run. I have seen this randomness drive people insane. You catch pitch fever.

“ Did I say the wrong thing? Is our idea sh!t? Did it make sense? Was I funny? Was I too funny? Was the coffee too strong? When Jenny sneezed, did it irritate them? Is my shirt weird? Dave is sweating a lot. Stop sweating, Dave. For the love of God, stop sweating, Dave. ”

The only antidote to this insanity is for an agency to trust itself. Once again, there is that word: Trust.

Strangely, pitching can help with this and do the opposite, as well. Win a few and the confidence grows. Agencies get braver. They back their ideas and tend to win more. But, when an agency loses a few and loses its confidence, it's like watching a planet lose its gravity. And sometimes its mind.

For me, the pitch process is the best example of why the advertising business has always been and will always be about two very human building blocks: **Trust and confidence.**

Clients want to trust.

Agencies want to be worthy of that trust.

Despite what many say, nobody knows what is going to happen tomorrow. The future will always be a journey built on trust.

When that big boss stared into my eyes, he wanted certainty. But his question was if I believed in the idea. Belief.

If pitching has taught me anything, it is that after all the stats, proof, debates and discussions, I am always asked if I believe.

Belief is always the question.

“Nobody knows anything. Not one person in the motion picture field knows for a certainty what’s going to work. Every time out it’s a guess and, if you’re lucky, an educated one.” – William Goldman (1931-2018).

ABOUT DAMON STAPLETON

Damon is regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia. Before that, ECD at Saatchi and Saatchi Australia, before that, group ECD of TBWA Hunt Lascaris and global ECD of Standard Bank. He has won over 500 awards internationally, including a D&AD Black Pencil, Cannes Grand Prix, Grand Clio, ADC Black Cube and most effective ad in the world by Warc 100. Damon is now regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia...

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