

Varga, Shaun – Brilliant Pitch: What to Know, Do and Say to Make the Perfect Pitch

Prentice Hall, 2009, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★★★★

According to Daniel Pink's latest bestseller *To Sell is Human* we are all in sales now. Shaun Varga would probably agree and this book will help you excel in one specific sales process, the pitch. Varga - after a long career in advertising, PR and marketing - manages a consultancy, advising advertising agencies and other clients how to pitch for business. Reading from the cover, the purpose of the book is to help the reader to gain the confidence to deliver a brilliant pitch, to teach him to focus on the needs of the audience and hence to ensure that the pitch is an effective one. *Brilliant Pitch* is quite simply a tutorial on pitching.

I would also argue that it is an effective one. The main insights of Varga could as I see it pretty much be summed up by two quotes from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. "*Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win*" and "*If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. [...] If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.*"

In Varga's hard earned experience the buyer almost always knows what he wants to buy prior to the pitch competition takes place. This means most pitch competitors walk in to deliver a pitch that is doomed from the start. Interest and desire for your specific alternative must therefore arise before the competition officially starts. The task is to early on become the preferred alternative and this means that pitching is a much more integrative and proactive process than normally envisioned. Those who win will be the ones that have figured out which buttons they should press and to know this the winner will have to know the buyer better than the competition does.

The reader will learn to be passionate and knowledgeable of the subject at hand, to formulate an elevator pitch to gain clarity of what's really essential in the message he wants to convey, to make the customer the hero of the pitch – not

himself, to customize proposals to show that he noticed, to research the customers and the competition, to present in a format most likely to succeed, to use stories that help the customer remember what was said, how to conduct and present oneself to make a great first impression that is psychologically hard to change later on plus lots of other useful material. Much of the advice that is given is as sound as it is obvious when you read it. The fact that it still often isn't adhered to comes down to stress and lack of time to reflect, habitual behavior and psychological biases such as over-optimism with regards to ones own ability.

To continue with references to ancient advisory authorities I at times find a slight Machiavellian streak in the author's reasoning. Despite in chapter 10 explicitly saying that it's better to sell the customer what they need than what they want irrespective of if you loose the pitch, there are many examples in the book of advice where the end of winning the pitch justifies the means. In chapter 5 and 8 the advice is that if you are in a competitive disadvantage you should try to hijack the process and change the agenda to you advantage under the premise that "what you want is not what you need", in chapter 6 the reader is advised to research and quickly learn about the buyer's hobbies to be able to point to a common interest and in chapter 10 the author at least doesn't advice against going out on the street, asking leading questions of random passers by, edit it like crazy and present the results as the verdict of Joe Public. "*It's pretty convincing.*" It's up to everyone to make up their mind if this kind of advice is good or bad for business in the long run and I don't want to pretend to be overly idealistic myself, but at times the advice is a bit too manipulative for my taste. I also think it could backfire or to talk with Machiavelli "*it is double pleasure to deceive the deceiver*".

This is a very practical book and I will surely use much of the advice the author gives. I just hope I will not use all of it.

Mats Larsson, August 21, 2014