

“The naked truth about innovation
is ugly, funny, and eye-opening, but it
sure isn’t what most **of** us have come to
believe. With this book, Berkun sets us
free to try and change **the** world...”

—Guy Kawasaki, author of
The Art of the Start

The Myths of Innovation

Scott Berkun

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Expanded and revised
with four new chapters

The Myths of Innovation

by Scott Berkun

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Printed in Canada.

Published by O'Reilly Media, Inc., 1005 Gravenstein Highway North,
Sebastopol, CA 95472.

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Editor: Mary Treseler
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Cover Designer: Mark Paglietti
Interior Designer: Ron Bilodeau
Illustrator: Robert Romano

Printing History:

August 2010: First Edition.

This paperback edition is updated and expanded from the 2007 hardcover
version, also published by O'Reilly.

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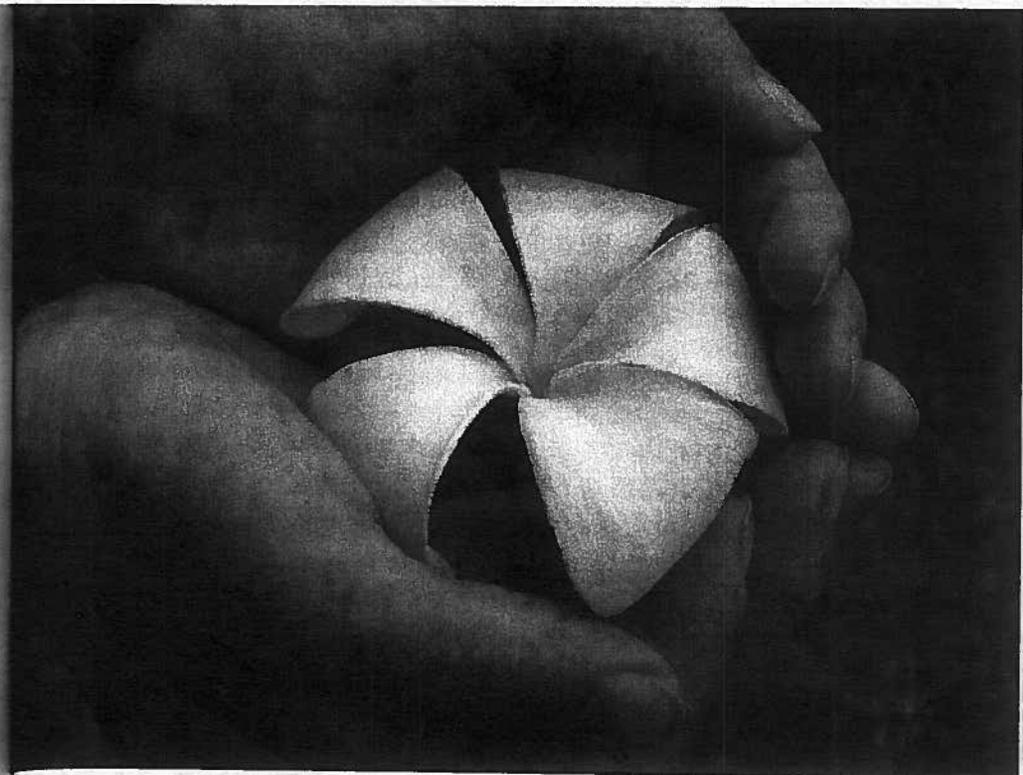
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ISBN: 978-1-449-38962-8

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that it's interesting, and in studying it, you'll discover good ideas you would never have found any other way.

- **Switch modes.** Everyone has a dominant way of expressing ideas: sketching, writing, talking. If you switch the mode you're working in, different ideas are easier to find, and your understanding of a particular problem will change. This is both a way to find new ideas and to explore an idea you're focused on. Working on paper, rather than computers, can make this easier because you can doodle in the margins (a form of mode switching), something you can't really do with a mouse and a keyboard. Or, try explaining your problem to a child, or to the smartest person you know, which will force you to describe and think about the problem differently.
- **Take an improvisational comedy class.** This will be easier and less painful than you think. These classes, offered for ordinary people by most improv comedy groups, are structured around simple games. You show up, play some games, and slowly each week you learn how to pay more attention to the situations the games put you in, as well as how to respond to them. You will eventually become more comfortable with investing in combinations without being sure of the outcome.
- **Find a partner.** Some people are most creative when they're with creative friends. Partnering up on a project, or even being around other creative people who are working on solo projects, keeps energy levels high. They will bring a new perspective to your ideas, and you will bring a new perspective to theirs. It also gives you a drinking buddy when things go sour.
- **Stop reading and start doing.** The word *create* is a verb. Be active. Go make things. Make dinner, make a drawing, make a fire, make some noise, but make. If all your attempts at being creative consist of passively consuming, no matter how brilliant what you consume is, you'll always be a consumer, not a creator. An entire culture of tinkerers and makers is out there, with projects and tools to help you get started. Check out <http://makezine.com> and www.readymade.com, two sites waiting to show you the way.



How to pitch an idea

Pitching is for the powerless. You don't pitch unless you need something from someone else, whether it's money for a start-up or permission to go out on a date. If you put yourself into a position where you need to pitch to get what you want, don't mess it up by pretending you are in control. You're not. You are asking, and if you want to get what you are asking for, you must prepare. The goal is to make it as easy as possible for someone to say yes, and that doesn't happen all on its own. Chapter 4 was about how there has never been an idea that sold itself. In my experience, the skill most deficient among people with good ideas is the ability to persuade others on the merits of those ideas. In this chapter, I'll provide you with a simple way to think about pitching that will dramatically improve your chances.

The act of bringing an idea to someone who has resources you need is called a pitch: movie screenplays, business plans, or just about anything you might call an idea is pitched from one person to another. And although the industries may differ, the basic skill is the same.

All ideas demand change

By definition, acting on an idea means something different will take place in the universe. Even if your idea is undeniably brilliant, it will force someone, somewhere, to change something. Most people do not like change—they fear it. And the qualities of your idea that you find so appealing may be precisely what make your idea so difficult for others to accept. Galileo was certainly proud of his contributions in proving the sun was at the center of the solar system, but his hubris, and lack of interest in explaining it in terms palatable to the Church, made him and his theory unpopular. So, many people who have big ideas, surprised by outside resistance to their ideas, become frustrated. And that frustration makes their pitches worse, making it less and less likely others will ever accept their ideas.

When you, as a creator, put your great idea in front of someone who does not want change, you and your idea are at a disadvantage because the answer will generally be no. So before you pitch, you must study the innovators of the past and be prepared to face the common kinds of rejections (see "Idea killers" on page 90). It's also worth seeking out people interested in change, or who

you know have a clear need or problem your idea can satisfy. Then you're not talking about you and your idea, you'll be presenting a possible solution to their problem. The healthy cultures described in Chapter 7 pitch ideas and make changes much more easily than stagnant, struggling organizations. Wise leaders usually depend on change, and not only encourage positive change to happen, but expect people at all levels of the organization to contribute. It requires maturity for these managers to make this kind of environment successful, but when they pull it off, smart people are systematically encouraged to be smart. But no matter who you work with, the burden of developing a good pitch falls heavily on the creative person's shoulders. The following steps provide you with suggestions for developing and presenting an effective pitch.

Step 1: Refine your idea

The classic mistake of would-be idea pitchers is to present the idea well before it's ready. When most people find an interesting idea, their egos quickly seduce them into doing silly and nonproductive things, like annoying everyone they come in contact with by telling them how amazing their new idea is.

The thrill of being clever is so strong that they forget:

1. There are thousands of good ideas bouncing around.
2. People rarely think about their ideas thoroughly enough to recognize why no one has executed on them before.
3. They have to put together the plans, skills, and thinking required to deliver the ideas to the world before anyone will take them seriously.

So, to present a good pitch, you must think about execution and delivery. Saying "We should build cars that go 1,000 miles per hour and get 100 miles per gallon that easily fold to fit in your back pocket," and "We should make a children's movie that is funny and intelligent for parents and children, but also has a positive spiritual and moral message" count as interesting ideas. They're good starts. But they won't be pitchable ideas until there's a detailed proposal for converting the abstract idea ("build a breakthrough automobile") into tangible and realistic plans ("the trans-warp drive I've already designed improves gasoline efficiency tenfold").

Until the concepts and hard parts are fleshed out enough to demonstrate that the spirit of an idea is matched with specifics, it doesn't have much of a foundation, and the pitch is bound to fail. People can dismiss it quickly just by asking two or three basic questions. Always remember that moving from an interesting but vague idea to a specific and actionable plan is difficult. Getting feedback on a hunch or vague idea is fine provided you have a friend who is a sounding board and doesn't feel like you're wasting his time. But don't take your pitch to your boss or a potential investor until you're able to answer some basic questions, such as:

- What problem does this solve?
- Whose problem is this? Is it important to them? Is there evidence they'd pay to have it solved?
- What are the toughest challenges implied by the idea? How will you solve each one?
- Do you have a prototype, sample, or demonstration (aka proof of concept)? Of the remaining work, what is hardest to do?
- Why are you the right person to solve this?
- Why should our organization give you money/support/time to work on this?

These are the kinds of questions someone who gets pitched to on a daily basis (say, the author of a book about innovation) is likely to ask; therefore, a good pitcher will have done more than superficial thinking on her answers, especially if she believes the person listening is important enough that she'll only get one shot to pitch her idea. And as she prepares the pitch, keeping these questions in mind, her thinking about the idea will improve dramatically, and she'll have discovered many important nuances, traps, and possibilities that the person hearing the pitch would likely mention.

Step 2: Shape your pitch

Big ideas require more changes to take place, and all things equal, this means the pitch must be more thorough. Convincing a CEO to start a new million-dollar project will take more effort than convincing your best friend to loan you his pen. First, assess the scope of your idea, from narrow to grand. Is it:

- A modification to something already in existence?
- A new feature or enhancement to an existing product/website/company?
- A major new area of an existing product/website/company?
- An entirely new but small and simple project?
- An entirely new but large and possibly complex project?
- An organizational, directional, or philosophical change to an existing organization?
- A new organization?
- A new nation, planet, or dimension (sorry, but you'll have to look elsewhere for help petitioning the omnipotent forces that run the universe)?

When you've identified the scope, research how others pitching ideas of similar scope went about it. Find out what they did, and whether they were successful—if they weren't, learn from their mistakes. There are books about pitching business plans, movie scripts, and even pitching yourself (e.g., job interviewing, dating). Do your homework: know some of the basic strategies or industry expectations for the kind of pitch you're doing. I can't list them here, since they vary from industry to industry, but an easy way to have your great idea ignored is not to do the legwork to find out what the format of pitches in your field tends to be like.

Step 3: Follow the power

Make a list of the people who are potential recipients of your pitch (aka catchers). This could be your boss, the VP, another company, a bank, a publisher, who knows. Base this list on two criteria: who you might have access to, and who has the power needed to implement the idea. Here's a rough guide, ordered from fantastic to depressing, of who has the power you need:

- You
- A friend or peer in your organization
- Your boss
- Someone above your boss in the organization
- Someone you know in another organization
- Someone you don't know and don't have easy access to
- You're not sure who has the power

You're not sure who has the power, and you realize you are currently paralyzed on a cold, wet basement floor, and a shifty-looking squirrel is poking you in the ribs with a sharpened pencil (see, it can always be worse). If you don't know who to pitch to, ask around. There's little sense developing your pitch if there's no one to catch it. If you don't have access to the person with the power you need, make a list of who has access to them, working backward until you can list people you actually know. You may need to work through this network, making several pitches, before achieving the results you want. Just getting to the real pitch situation may take days, weeks, or months of preparation and pitching to the wrong people. This demoralizes the idealists, who often say, "My idea is so great, why should I have to go through all this?" The reason is simple: people are bad judges of their own ideas. All the others who claimed to have great ideas, but didn't, sufficiently annoyed those with power enough that they added extra legwork to filter out people. The people who are truly passionate will do it; those who merely claim to believe in their ideas won't.

Step 4: Start with their perspective

Put your pitch aside. Imagine you have mind-melded with the person to whom you are pitching. How does she think about the world? What kinds of things is she probably interested in? What is her typical day like? How many unsolicited pitches does she receive a day? Consider her view of the world and keep it in mind while developing your pitch. The better your pitch fits into her needs, the greater your odds of being successful, or even being listened to for more than 30 seconds. This doesn't mean you should sell out or create ideas that you think only a specific person will like. Instead, you have to be aware of how your perspectives differ, and improve your ideas—and how you communicate them—based on that awareness. This may help you decide who to bring your pitch to: the most powerful person in the organization might share none of your philosophy, but the third or fourth most powerful person might. The latter is going to be a better place to start.

If the best person to pitch to is someone you know, start paying attention to how he handles pitches from other people. Have you ever seen him say yes to a suggestion? There are people in this world who never say yes, in which case your odds are quite long

for reasons that have nothing to do with you or your idea. Others are only convinced by data and won't start listening until there are some numbers to look at. Some need to hear a well-told and relevant story that illustrates the problem. People are so different in their preferences that the more you can learn about the person you're pitching to, and study the pitches he's previously approved, the better your odds are going to be.

Step 5: Make three pitches

Always prepare three versions of your pitch: 5 seconds, 30 seconds, and 5 minutes.¹ The five-second version, also known as the elevator pitch, is the most concise single-sentence formulation of your idea. Refine, refine, refine your thinking until you can say something intelligent and interesting in a short sentence. Practice your pitch on friends, peers, or strangers by giving the five-second version, and then asking them to help you refine it again. "My idea? It's a way to make car engines twice as efficient and five times as powerful." This can be done for any idea: never allow yourself to believe yours is so complicated and amazing that it's impossible to explain in a sentence. If you were to give me this excuse, I'd tell you it means you have not yet worked hard enough on your idea to understand how to express it in simple terms.

As proof, here's a list of diverse and complex ideas and a simple five-second explanation for each.

Discovering DNA

"I'm working to explain how human cells reproduce."

Inventing lightbulbs

"I'm making light from electricity."

Writing a brilliant novel

"The story explores 20-something angst in the Digital Age."

Improving antilock brake algorithms

"I'm making cars safer to drive."

The 30-second and 5-minute versions should grow naturally out of the 5-second version. In 30 seconds, there's time to talk about

¹ Ari Blenkhorn suggested this breakdown to me years ago.

how you'll achieve what you described, or provide specifics for the two or three most significant things people will want to know if they thought the 5-second version was good. If you can't distill what you're doing in 5 and 30 seconds, don't worry about the 5-minute version: odds are you'll never be able to get anyone to listen for that long. However, since some people prefer written proposals for pitches, this gives you a chance to deliver the 5-second, 30-second, and 5-minute versions all at once. In this case, it's often best to keep the same structure. Start with your shortest pitch, then provide the next level of detail, and, finally, provide a point-by-point detailing of how, given the money and resources you need, you'll achieve what you described in the first sentence (the five-second pitch). Remember, you won't have all your materials with you when pitching ideas. So, at least briefly consider how you would deal with the different tools available in the following situations:

- The elevator: it's just you and your mind
- The slow elevator: you, and maybe something to show from your pockets
- The lunch: you, and maybe something to show, napkins to draw on, alcohol
- The executive review: you, your laptop, slides, prepared hand-outs, yes men, splunge men²

Sometimes it can be to your advantage to pitch with a partner. If you can find a partner who complements your skills, and with whom you can happily collaborate, it's worth it (and though your ego may try to convince you you're better off alone, you probably aren't). It doubles your network of organizational connections, your idea benefits from having two minds thinking about it, and you'll have at least one ally in the room with you.

Step 6: Test the pitch

The longer you spend with an idea, the more vulnerable you are to your ego. Get out of your office, cubicle, or apartment, and find smart, honest people who will give you feedback. Ask them to

² The word *splunge* means "I'm saying yes but I'm not a yes man." If you've never heard the word *splunge* before, and you spend time in meetings, you owe it to yourself to watch the *splunge* scene from episode 6 of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

pretend they are whomever it is you plan to pitch to (this can be fun if they behave like Bill Gates, Donald Trump, Machiavelli, Ozzy Osbourne, or a caricature of your boss). Then go through your pitch, responding to their questions (or ignoring their laughter). You won't always get the feedback you want, but you'll sharpen both your idea and the way you talk about it. From your practice pitches, develop a list of questions you expect to be asked during the pitch, and prepare to answer them. Then do it again and again.

Step 7: Deliver (a pitch is a performance)

There are three kinds of people who are rare in this world:

- Those who are excellent communicators
- Those who find interesting and useful ideas
- Those who can convert an idea into a realistic plan

It's exceptionally rare for one person to be good at all three. If you think it's you, you're probably wrong. Get some honest feedback from people who are not your parents before putting any faith in this belief.

Even for those lucky enough to have all three sets of skills, a pitch is a kind of performance. It is done live, in real time, in front of other people. Performing requires practice—and not just at the level of testing described earlier. There are many nuances, like eye contact, tone of voice, and ability to convey conviction, that you can't get a sense of without putting in many hours of doing it for real. And if you do put in the time, there is always the risk of coming off as phony, like Vince, the ShamWow guy of infomercial fame. Too much polish and perfection can work against you. Practice and listening to feedback is your best ally, but sadly there is no magic formula for getting it just right. The people who offer one, or who rely on tricks and manipulations for pitching, are those who haven't worked to understand their audience well or don't believe in what they're pitching.

The best delivery advice I can offer is to make sure you prepare for a positive response. What happens if they say, "That's interesting. What do you want from me?" Do you want money? A team of people? A meeting with executives? A commitment from them to review a longer proposal? Know what you need, mentally

prepare the sequence of steps, and be ready to ask for it. If there are other people involved whose approval you'll need, ask them to set up a meeting for you. If there is a form that needs to be filled out, make sure you have one with you. If you've just pitched to someone you cornered in an elevator, simply ask for the privilege to email her later.

Step 8: Learn from failure

It never surprises me how many people expect their first pitch, for their first big idea, to get them what they want. Most pitches fail. Most businesses fail. And most successful creative people, including entrepreneurs, pitch their ideas dozens of times before getting a single bite. And after they get the funding or support they need, when their idea becomes real, they still have to promote it to the world, which is really just another kind of pitching. This is the burden of the innovator: if you want to make something new, dozens of less-than-fun things come along for the ride. This means when things don't go well, don't waste time complaining about unfairness, because actually it's quite fair in some sense. Everyone gets ideas rejected no matter how good or bad the ideas are. No one is immune. The most useful thing to do is to convert what happened into a learning experience. Don't just plod on repeating the same mistakes again and again. Spend time debriefing on what went well, what didn't, and what you can learn.

Never go to bed after a failed pitch without an understanding of what went wrong. Which points didn't they agree with? Where did they cut you off? Which assumptions did they refute? You might learn there are criteria for green-lighting ideas you didn't know about. It's possible they objected to something about your approach: maybe they didn't appreciate you accosting them during lunch, waving a stack of handouts in their faces. If someone else in the room was observing the pitch, ask for his feedback. In short, maximize the value from completed pitches. Recoup your investment. Do everything you can to make the next pitch better than the previous. And never hesitate to go back to your idea and use what you've learned from your pitches to make not just the pitch, but the idea itself, better than it was before. From a tactical perspective: ask, "To whom else can I give this pitch?"

Every organization's hierarchy has lots of people at peer levels. Would any of them be interested? Go back to your list from step 3. Consider compromising on how much power is needed to make your idea happen, or how to split your idea into smaller ideas. Maybe focus on the first small piece of your larger idea, and revisit the rest after you've had some initial success.

Step 9: Go your own way

In every creative pursuit, there are people rejected by "the system" who went off on their own, scraped together their own resources, and made amazing things happen. Low-budget films like *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Clerks*, and *Pi* happened only because a small group of people believed enough in their ideas to make the sacrifices and do it themselves. Many of the famous corporations mentioned in this book began as self-owned, independent operations. Today, books and novels can be self-published more easily than ever. Businesses, especially those on the Web, can be founded on small-business loans or second mortgages. There is always a way to do it if your ideas sufficiently compel you to take risks and make use of your own time. This will likely demand that you reduce the size of your ambitions, but so what? It was bound to happen anyway, even if someone granted you all the resources you needed. But if you do it yourself, *you* are in control of all the things you care so much about—you're not obligated to heed the opinions of someone whose passions likely diverge from yours. When asking for money, nothing looks better on your resume than having the experience of doing similar projects entirely at your own expense. And nothing is more likely to give you personal satisfaction than completing work where every decision was free of the compromises that come with borrowing money from other people. There is always a way to achieve a dream—if you are creative enough to find it.