

For a startup, an impressive pitch deck is a critical tool for fundraising and growing your company. A good one communicates the basic information, but a great one gets people excited about your idea and engages investors in a conversation that hopefully leads to a long-term relationship. Because of that, we often say the purpose of the pitch is to get to your first date with an investor.

I'm going to share the basic formula for a good pitch deck; then give you tips on how to create a great pitch deck. This formula is based on experience gained from listening to hundreds — maybe thousands — of pitches over the past decades working with companies like Station Houston, TED, and Mercury Fund, and advising startups through the Texas Medical Center Accelerator (TMCx), Houston Technology Center, UH Red Labs, and Rice OwlSpark. I've seen a variety of pitch decks and presentations, listened to and learned from seasoned investors on what they look for, what works and what doesn't, and found that, while businesses may differ, there's a basic framework that wins.

KEEP IN MIND: Goals for Your Pitch Deck

There's a saying that if you want advice, ask for money; but if you want money, ask for advice. With that in mind, while your ultimate goal may be to close a deal and/or raise money, the goal of the pitch deck itself is to **raise interest**. Big transactions rarely happen after just one meeting, so the goal of your pitch is to drive a potential client and/or investor to engage with and learn more about your company. Think of it like dating: Your pitch may be someone's first look at your business, so your pitch deck should influence them to invite you back to strengthen the relationship.

A WINNING PITCH DECK, IN 11 SLIDES:

Slide 1: The Vision and Value Proposition

This is a quick one-sentence overview of your business and the value that you provide to your customers. Make it declarative, not expository. Keep it short and simple. In fact, imagine it as a tweet: Describe your business in 140 characters, in a way your parents would understand.

It's common for tech companies to craft their [value proposition](#) as analogous to a well-known company. For example, you often see pitches like:

- "We're the Uber for Pets"
- "We're the Netflix for Video Games"

This can work, but only if your comparison makes sense. Don't use a high profile company to try to signify growth potential. Your business model should truly be similar to the company you reference.

Slide 2: The Problem

If you aren't solving some problem in the world, your business is going to have a steep uphill journey. Use this slide to spotlight the problem you're solving and the people you're solving it for. You can mention current solutions here, but don't spend too much time on the competitive landscape — you can do that on a later slide.

Ideally, tell a relatable story when defining the problem. [Our brains love good stories](#), so the more you can shape the problem into a multi-sensory and visceral narrative, the better your investors will “feel” your customers’ pain and understand your business and your goals.

Slide 3: The Solution

Dive into your product or service. Describe how it addresses the problems that you outlined, and show how customers will use and benefit from it. You’ll be tempted to move this slide to the beginning of the pitch deck, but resist that. This is classic storytelling: Build up the problem and describe how challenging it is for a lot of people, then show how you are coming to their rescue to help solve that problem.

Most entrepreneurs tend to focus on their product, when they should really focus on how their customers would benefit from the solution. Focus your pitch on the customer, and you’ll tell a better story. If possible, use pictures and stories when you describe your solution. Visualize your value!

Slide 4: The Opportunity

Continue the story with the scope and scale of the problem you are solving. Use this slide to expand on the market, outlining your ideal customer and how many of them exist. How large is your [TAM, SAM and SOM](#)? How will you position and establish your company within your target market?

Show data: Investors will want to know how much your target customer currently spends on similar solutions. If it makes sense for your business, divide your market into segments that you will address with different types of marketing, and perhaps different types of product offerings.

Don’t overstate the opportunity. Be careful with your market sizing. It’s tempting to define your market to be as large as possible, but investors would rather see that you put real research and data into defining a specific and reachable market. Instead of top-down forecasts where you “only need to get 1% of a huge market” to succeed, work on bottom-up forecasts where you detail expectations for how you’ll gain traction. The more specific you can be, the more believable your pitch will be.

Slide 5: The Revenue

Now that you’ve described your product or service, you need to show how it makes money. What do you charge? Who pays? Sometimes your customers can be different groups of people, so it’s important to provide a full picture of revenue streams. You can also reference the competitive landscape and discuss how your pricing fits into the larger market. Are you a premium offering that delivers luxury value, or a budget offering that undercuts existing solutions?

Slide 6: The Competition

Every business has competition in some form. Even if you are opening up an entirely new market, your potential customers must be using alternative solutions to currently solve their problems.

Describe how you fit into the competitive landscape and how you’re different than current alternatives. What key advantages do you have over the competition? Do you have some “secret sauce” that others don’t? The key here is to show why customers will choose you instead of anything else in the market.

Slide 7: The Go-To-Market

How will you capture customers' attention and mindshare? What will your sales process look like? Use this slide to outline your marketing and sales plan, or, if you're in the earlier stages of your company, use it for your "go-to-market" strategy.

Describe the key activities you'll use to get your product in front of prospective customers. Finding and winning customers can sometimes be the biggest challenge for a startup, so it's important to show that you have a clear strategy to capture your target market. If your marketing and sales process is different than that of your competitors, highlight that here.

Slide 8: The Roadmap

If you already have sales or early adopters, share that here. Demonstrate traction and momentum. Investors want to see that you have proven some aspect of your business model and are establishing product-market fit, so any proof you can show that validates this is extremely powerful.

You can also showcase your milestones. What major goals have you achieved so far? What are major 'next steps' you'll take? Offer a product or company roadmap that outlines key milestones.

If strategic partners are critical to your success — for instance, a key distribution partner who will be taking your product to market or intellectual property licensed from a university — and/or you've already secured a pilot with a strategic client/customer, make sure to include them in your roadmap.

Slide 9: The Forecast and Financials

While investors will eventually want to see your sales forecast, profit and loss statement, and cash flow forecast for the next one to five years, leave these details for the Appendix. For a pitch, avoid in-depth spreadsheets that would be difficult to read and understand during a pitch presentation. Instead, focus on well-designed charts that clearly depict trends in sales, customers, expenses, and profits. Prepare to discuss the underlying assumptions you used to derive your sales goals, and explain the drivers of your key expenses.

Remember to be realistic. Investors see "hockey stick" projections all the time and will probably do the mental math and/or cut your projections in half. If you can explain your growth based on traction you already have, or compared to a similar company in a related industry, that is extremely useful.

Slide 10: The Team

If an idea has legs, it's the team that makes it run; so investors always seek a good team at the core of a company to ensure that it can go farther, faster.

This slide should answer why you and your team are the right people to build and grow this company. What expertise and experience do you have that others don't? What achievements and accolades do they bring to the table? Highlight the key team members, their previous successes, and the specific impact that they make on the business. Even if you don't have a complete team yet, identify the key positions that you will fill and why those positions are critical to company growth.

Slide 11: The Ask

It's finally time to make your call to action. That's why you're creating this pitch deck, right? I know I said that this pitch deck is more about raising interest than about raising money, but your potential investors do need to know how much money you need to grow.

You need to explain why you need the amount of money you are asking for, and show how you plan to use those funds. Investors will want to know that any money they give you is being used wisely and will help you achieve the goals you set for your business.

If you already have some investors on board, now is when you should mention them and highlight the reasons why they chose to invest in your idea or company.

Finally: The Appendix

While you want to keep your pitch succinct, sometimes you may need to include an Appendix at the end with slides that help explain your business in more depth. Here are some that can be helpful:

- **Demo and Screenshots**

If you have a "show and tell" opportunity -- like a product prototype or screenshots of your app -- include a placeholder in your pitch deck where you will show your potential clients or investors how your product or service actually works and how it can benefit your customers. Make sure to plan for the worst-case scenario (no internet access, no power outlet, etc.) and rehearse this, though, to make sure your pitch goes smoothly when you meet.

- **Detailed Forecast and Financial Spreadsheets**

POST-PITCH: FOLLOW-UP DOCUMENTS

I can't emphasize this enough: Keep your pitch deck focused and succinct. Deluging investors up front with all the information you think they need to make a decision won't help you seal the deal. You need to entice them to invite you to an in-depth meeting/discussion by telling a strong story, building excitement, and providing enough high-level information to whet their appetite.

Prepare yourself in advance for that invitation, though: Have the following documents ready to send when requested. Knowing you have them will help ensure that you don't overwhelm your deck with too much information, but can easily send them when investors ask during further diligence.

The most common documents you should have ready for investors post-pitch:

- **Executive Summary.** An [executive summary](#) is an overview of your business that investors can share with their partners and firm so they can get a better understanding of who you are and what you do. It should cover what's in your pitch deck, but in written form.
- **Technical Documentation.** If you're starting a tech or medical company, you may need to provide some additional detail on the technology and/or science behind it. Investors in these types of companies will often want to vet your technical claims with an expert, so providing more detailed documentation, diagrams, workflows, and so on is important.

- **Detailed Financial Models.** An investor that's seriously interested in your business will want detailed [financial forecasts](#) for the next three years, so they can better understand the underlying assumptions driving your forecasts. Investors will want to see your plans for hiring and employee-related expenses, R&D expenses, manufacturing costs, marketing expenses, and so on. Be prepared to provide a detailed sales forecast, profit and loss forecast, and cash flow forecast. A balance sheet is often requested.
- **Detailed Market Research.** You may be asked for more details on your target market and the market research you've done to date. If you have a consumer-facing business or one that is addressing a very specific market, be ready to present this information in some format.

BONUS POINTS: Tips for a Successful Pitch!

Some things to keep in mind to make sure your presentation is as successful as possible:

Keep It Clear, Compelling, and Concise. Entrepreneurs often spend countless hours “in the weeds” trying to describe every last detail about their business. But investors prefer that you keep your slides simple and straightforward: Convey high-level ideas on the slides, while verbally walking them through the concepts. Invite investor engagement. Make sure you leave plenty of time for questions and discussion about your business. If you have a one-hour meeting, make the pitch 20-30 minutes.

Tell A Strong Story. Facts are useful, but stories are powerful. Get your audience excited about your business by telling stories about how much your customers love your solution, and about how they were seriously affected by the problem and how you helped make their lives better. Use images wherever possible to help build empathy for your business. The more stories you can tell that investors can relate to, the more you'll get them interested in your company.

Make The Deck Stand On Its Own. Your pitch deck will always be better when you present it, but it should ideally be able to tell some of your story without you. Investors might want to flip through the deck again after you're done with your presentation, so it needs to have enough content and imagery that it can communicate your core ideas with impact.

Keep It Current. Fundraising takes time. You'll likely pitch your company many, many times. As legend has it, [Pandora pitched more than 300 VC firms](#) before getting investment! You're probably building your company while raising money, so make sure to update with your latest progress, roadmaps, and so on. Avoid presenting an out-of-date deck to potential investors.

Send a PDF: You'll almost always be asked to either send your pitch deck ahead of time or to leave a copy behind. If this happens, don't send Powerpoint or Keynote files that can get messed up in translation between different computers and software. Instead, send a PDF. This means anyone who receives your pitch deck will see it exactly as you intended, with your chosen fonts and styles.

Make The Ask! Yes, it's a slide in the deck, but entrepreneurs sometimes forget to make their call-to-action. Prepare to intelligently discuss how what you're asking for will help you grow.