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Animal Instincts

We seek fund-raising advice from, of all people, a dog trainer. Turns out you *can* teach an old investor new tricks.

EVEN IN THE BEST OF TIMES, asking for money is a foreign, excruciating process for almost every small-business owner. With your future entrepreneurial life resting on the outcome of a few sweat-producing minutes, no one can afford to screw up. In vulgar terms, the whole process is a bitch. Which is why it doesn't hurt to have a few pointers from a real expert—a dog trainer.

It's not so weird a concept. Dog trainers deal with the psychology of shifting power from the dog to the human. In the art of asking for money, you are trying to shift power from the person who has the money—and wants dearly to hang on to it—to you, the entrepreneur asking for it. Understanding the dynamics of what goes on beneath the surface is crucial to improving the odds for success.

Face-to-face pitch meetings are about "body language and theater," says one expert—you can't appeal to logic alone.

A common misunderstanding is that pitches are simply about presenting information to make people change their minds. Stephen Bayley, a former marketing consultant for Coca-Cola and other major companies and author of *Life's a Pitch*, begs to differ: When the face-to-face meeting finally happens, he says, "it's more about emotion, body language and theater than information." Why? When asking for money, you can't appeal to logic alone—no one can promise a successful outcome. (If you do, you're probably breaking the law.) Shifting power hinges on emotional persuasion. "It is not trivial," says Bayley. "It is real."

Which brings us to Chris Onthank, dog trainer and founder of Nano Pet Products, a Wilton, Conn., company that has licensed a high-tech, water-repellent material to make its Dog Gone Smart dog beds. During a recent fund-raising round, Onthank and his partner, Richard Vinchesi, made a pitch to a pair of Manhattan society women—two true alpha females. Vinchesi arrived first at the two-story Fifth Avenue apartment of one of the women, a skeleton-thin Goldman Sachs veteran. As she led him from room to room, trailing smoke from a cigarette holder, Vinchesi found her a dead ringer for Anne Bancroft in *The Graduate*. The house was filled with pictures of her dead cat. Clearly, the woman was mourning. Assuming the cat's demise was quite fresh, Vinchesi delicately inquired when it had passed away. "Three years ago," the woman replied.

When Onthank arrived, the Mrs. Robinson character was very particular about where the two placed themselves. "You can sit in that chair, it's okay," she said, pointing a slender finger at one antique armchair, "but not that one over there." Onthank noted later she was "controlling her space"—very alpha dog.

On to the textbook part of the Dog Gone Smart pitch, the part that showed how their product solves a problem—in this case, "stink." Dog beds that don't repel a dog's body oils end up smelling nasty after about five months, according to Onthank's research. And because most don't wash well, people throw them away. On Fifth Avenue, Onthank dutifully demonstrated how a glass of water dumped on their fuzzy dog bed rolled off—into a metal wastebasket supplied by their hostess's manservant. The bed remained dry, thanks to its nanotech-engineered fibers.

Moments after the PowerPoint presentation, one of the two women—who, as it happened, was already a client of Onthank's—agreed to invest. But the Mrs. Robinson clone objected. "Not so fast!" she shrieked. Now she was referring to the men in third person. "Look, he's a playboy—a rock 'n' roll star. Why would you trust him?" she said, with a puff from her cigarette. To punctuate her point, she reached out her long lacquered fingernails and fluffed Onthank's collar-length blond hair, reducing the 6-foot-tall trainer to a kind of stuffed puppy. "She was ripping us!" says Onthank. And the other investor's commitment was clearly wavering under the angry onslaught.

Luckily for the entrepreneurs, Onthank is a dog aggression specialist. From his point of view, the woman who owned the apartment had bared her fangs. Fluffing his hair violated his personal space and reinforced her control, to say nothing of diminishing their chances for leaving with a check. She owned the power. In life seen as a dog-training exercise, Onthank had to defuse the angst of the, er, bitch, so she could relinquish control. He had to show that he had power and confidence without coming across as a threat. But how?

To gain the trust of an alpha dog, you have to exhibit confidence without coming across as a threat.

First, he reminded himself that the power in the room was not entirely one-sided. Their interviewers wanted something too—a chance to invest in a success. That realization bucked up his self-assurance, and of course, as Bayley reminds us, "nothing is more attractive than self-confidence. You get the girl, the money, the friends." And how do you radiate confidence when you're sitting with your tail between your legs? Basically, by bluffing. As the great ad man David Ogilvy reputedly said, "When in doubt, confuse the issue."

So instinctively, Onthank the dog man tried to connect with the dead cat. Dead cats aren't always easy to slip into conversation, but during a pause, Onthank inquired about the framed photographs. "You're not a cat lover!" the woman hissed. "I am, too," Onthank said gently but firmly, "and I'd love to see your pictures." This calmed her down enough to restart the dialogue, first on felines, then back to dog beds. The air shifted.

What Onthank had done, in dog-trainer speak, was "a look away." When a dog is aggressive and you want her trust, you show submission by looking to the side. Eye contact for dogs is threatening. Onthank wanted to show the woman that he was worthy of being in the room—deferential, respectful, but no runt to be picked on. "I'm no threat," Onthank says, "You want me in the pack." And thus, he deftly wrested control back to his side.

Of course, he's a professional who deals with misbehaving dogs five days a week. For others less gifted in channeling their inner retriever, there's plenty of help available. As corny as its name may sound, the Toastmasters organization offers great practice in public speaking at its regular meetings. Or if you are as hopeless as a bespectacled, painfully shy dude by the name of Warren Buffett, you could try his solution: Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People," a course that Buffett swears cured him of presentation anxiety. (It's entering its 97th year.) There are also peer advisory groups, like The Alternative Board, or consultants like Turning Point Presentations, of Golden, Colo., that can help you rehearse a pitch in front of a friendly audience.

In the end, Onthank and Vinchesi made it into the pack. They left with the promise that a lawyer would review their offering. The Goldman Sachs lady chose not to invest—it's hard to teach some dogs new tricks—but she didn't stand in her friend's way, either. Two weeks later Onthank received a $100,000 check. S

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