Episode Book

EPISODE #6090

Unconventional Pitch Tactics That Actually Win Clients

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SYNOPSIS

What happens after you find the hidden pocket in the AI market — how do you actually win the work? This episode climbs a ladder of unconventional client pitches, starting with the mild (no slides, one page, a pre-mortem) and rising through live demos, recorded support calls, physical props, and a human pretending to be the AI behind a folding screen. Each rung gets more effective and more dangerous, and the top of the ladder is a tactic that either wins the room or ends your career. If you pitch AI work to clients — or sit on the other side of the table — this one is for you.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A consultant walks into a boardroom with forty slides, and the client checks his phone on slide three. Somewhere in the same city, a different consultant walks in carrying a cardboard box, says nothing, and puts it on the table. Everyone looks at the box.



Corn

That's the territory today. We did the hidden pockets in AI careers not long ago, and Daniel's follow-up is about the moment after you've found the pocket, which is the pitch. Unconventional ways to present to a client and win the work. And he wants a ladder of them, starting with the mildly unusual and climbing all the way up to the kind of tactic that ends a career, or at least ends the meeting. Which means the man in the chair is the same man as last time, because nobody has stood in front of more strangers asking for things than Hilbert.



Herman

Herman Poppleberry, and I'd like it on the record that I brought a deck.



Corn

To a podcast.



Herman

It's only nine slides. That's under the Kawasaki limit.



Hilbert

Put the deck down, Herman. The deck is the bottom of the ladder. The deck is the floor the ladder is standing on.



Corn

So rung one is no slides at all.



Hilbert

Rung one is that you arrive and the screen stays off. That alone. In a room where the last four people plugged in a laptop and spent two minutes looking for the right cable, the man who doesn't plug anything in has already won the first two minutes.



Herman

It has respectable ancestry, too. Bezos banned slide decks from Amazon's senior meetings in an email in two thousand four. His argument was that a narrative memo forces better thinking than twenty pages of bullet points, and the meetings there famously start with everyone reading the memo in silence for the first twenty minutes or so.



Corn

Twenty minutes of silence. You'd last about four, Herman.



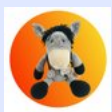
Herman

I would last the full twenty. I'd just be reading it faster than everybody else and looking up.



Hilbert

You don't need twenty minutes. You need one page. You hand it over, you say read this, and you sit there. Silence is the most unusual thing you can bring into a sales meeting. Everybody else fills it. The client is braced for you to talk at them, and you don't, and they read. The page has three things on it. What's broken. What it costs them each month. What you'll do in the first fortnight.



Herman

I'll defend the deck for a second, though. Some clients want the deck. They want something to forward to the person who wasn't in the room.



Hilbert

Then the page is the thing they forward. A page survives forwarding. A deck forwarded without the man who made it is forty pictures of nothing.



Herman

Fair. Corn, would that work on you? If someone sat down across from you and handed you one page and went quiet?



Corn

I'd read it twice, because I'd assume it was a trick. Which is the same thing as paying attention.



Hilbert

Rung two. You open with how the project dies.



Herman

The pre-mortem. That's Gary Klein's technique. Before a project starts, you tell the team to imagine it's a year from now and the thing has failed, and then everyone writes down why. Klein wrote about it in the Harvard Business Review, and he leaned on earlier research suggesting that imagining the failure as already having happened makes people noticeably better at naming the causes. Something on the order of thirty percent better.



Hilbert

In a pitch it does something else as well. Every other consultant who comes through that door tells the client how well it will go. You say, here are the four ways AI projects die at companies like yours. The pilot nobody uses. The bot that tells a customer the wrong refund policy. The bill. The one person who understood it leaving. And here is what we do about each one. The client has been lying awake about at least two of those. Now you're the only person in the building who has said them out loud.



Corn

You're selling the cure by being the only one who admits the disease exists.



Hilbert

You're the doctor who mentions the side effects. People trust him more. They don't know why.



Herman

There's a risk, which is that you talk them out of the project.



Hilbert

Then it was a project you shouldn't have won. Better they change their mind in the meeting than in month four.



Herman

Rung three, then, if we're climbing. I've got a guess at it.



Hilbert

Go on.



Herman

You build the thing before the meeting.



Hilbert

You build the thing before the meeting. You take what's public. Their website, their help pages, their price list, the questions people ask about them online. You put a small assistant on top of it. It takes an evening now, that's the whole shift in this business. And



Hilbert (continued)

when they ask what it would look like, you don't describe it. You turn the laptop round and say, ask it something about your own company.



Herman

The famous version is Dropbox. Before the product was finished, Drew Houston posted a short demo video, a few minutes long, showing it working. The beta waitlist reportedly went from about five thousand people to around seventy-five thousand practically overnight. Nobody was signing up for a pitch. They were signing up because they'd watched the thing do the thing.



Corn

And the first question they ask the demo is the one it gets wrong.



Hilbert

Always. Which is the best moment of the meeting, Corn, because now you explain why it got it wrong, and how you'd fix it, and you've stopped being a salesman and started being the person who knows how it breaks.



Herman

That links back to the evaluation pocket, really. The demo getting one wrong is your opening for the testing work.



Hilbert

It's not an accident. Leave one wrong on purpose if it doesn't find one by itself.



Corn

That's rung three and a half, and it's already a bit morally ambiguous.



Hilbert

It's a demo. Every demo is morally ambiguous.

L

Larry

Running out of ways to stand out? Introducing Rung of the Month, the subscription box that delivers a brand new unconventional pitching tactic to your door, every thirty days, whether you have a client or not! Starter members receive one prop, slightly pre-pitched. Professional members receive two props and a laminated card reading I have deliberately not brought slides. Executive members receive a live prop, which may not survive the post. Every box includes a sealed envelope of authentic pre-mortems, failures guaranteed! To cancel, simply present a twenty minute pitch to our cancellations committee explaining why you deserve to leave. The committee does not read slides. The committee does not read memos. The committee meets in silence. Rung of the Month. You're already on the ladder.



Herman

I have one of those. The live prop arrived in March and it's still in the bathroom.



Hilbert

Rung four. Bring the client's customer into the room.



Herman

Bezos again, slightly. There's the old story about the empty chair in Amazon meetings, the seat left open to stand for the customer who isn't there.



Hilbert

An empty chair is too polite. Bring the actual customer, in the form of a recording. Before the meeting you ring their own support line. Three times. At lunch, in the evening, and on a Friday afternoon. You record what happens. Then in the meeting you play it. The hold music. The menu with nine options. The voice that says your call is important. And then you say nothing, and you let the managing director listen to his own company not answering him.



Corn

That's a wonderful way to be thrown out of a building.



Hilbert

It's a coin toss. Half of them throw you out. The other half go very quiet and ask how fast you can start. I don't pitch to the first half anyway.



Herman

I'd actually put that on a higher rung than you have. You're playing their failure back to them in front of their own staff. That can humiliate somebody who'll then quietly kill your contract.



Hilbert

That's why you ask for the meeting with the person above the one responsible for the phone.



Corn

The ladder has an org chart built into it.



Hilbert

Every ladder does.



Herman

Corn, where are you on this one? Brilliant or cruel?



Corn

Both, which is why it works. If I were the client I'd hate you for a day and hire you by Thursday. I'd never invite you to anything again, but I'd hire you.



Hilbert

Rung five, and now we leave the respectable part. The object.



Herman

Props.



Hilbert

Something they can't ignore and can't throw away. Herman, you'll know the mosquitoes.



Herman

Bill Gates at TED in two thousand nine. He was talking about malaria, he said malaria is spread by mosquitoes, opened a jar, and let some loose in the auditorium. His foundation said afterwards they weren't carrying anything. Accounts differ on how many there were, the organisers said only a few, but the point was made. He'd said that more money went into baldness drugs than malaria research, and then he made a room full of very rich people feel slightly bitten.



Corn

The only TED talk with a genuine call to action.



Hilbert

That's the principle. Make the problem physical. If you're pitching document processing to an insurance company, you don't show a slide that says forty thousand claim forms. You hire a trolley, you go to their own post room, and you wheel in one day's paper. Put it on the boardroom table. Leave it there. Say, this is Tuesday.



Herman

That's actually good. I was expecting it to be worse.



Hilbert

It gets worse. The Airbnb founders.



Herman

The cereal. In two thousand eight, broke, they designed novelty cereal boxes for the American election, Obama O's and Cap'n McCain's, sold them for forty dollars a box, and by Chesky's own account raised about thirty thousand dollars. It's part of the story of how they got into Y Combinator. Paul Graham reportedly figured anyone who could sell forty dollar cereal could survive.



Hilbert

So the leave-behind is merchandise of their own problem. For the insurance company, a cereal box. Claims Flakes. The back of the box is a maze, and the maze is their actual approval process, every step, drawn properly. There's no way out of the maze. That's the joke, and also the finding.



Corn

Is there a toy in the box?



Hilbert

A tiny rubber stamp. It says pending.



Herman

I'd buy that.



Hilbert

Everyone would buy it. That's the problem with it. The marketing department will want to know who made it and then you'll be doing cereal for three years.



Corn

That's a hidden pocket of its own.



Hilbert

Rung six. You become the product.



Herman

Oh, I know what you're going to say. The Wizard of Oz.



Hilbert

Say it, then, you're going to anyway.



Herman

It's a real technique in interface design, going back to IBM in the eighties. You test a system that doesn't exist yet by having a human hidden behind it, pretending to be the computer. The user types, a person in the next room types the answers back, and you learn how people would actually use the thing before you've built it.



Hilbert

In a pitch, you sit behind a screen. A real one, a folding one, the kind from a hospital ward. The client's staff type questions into a laptop on the table. You answer them, from behind the screen, as the assistant you're proposing. In a flat voice. And you only use the information they'd actually give the system. If they haven't given it the refund policy, you say I don't know. After fifteen minutes you fold the screen away.



Corn

And the room realises it's been chatting to a consultant in a cupboard.



Hilbert

The room realises the system is only as good as what they put into it, which is the most useful thing they'll learn all year. And they've seen you being patient for fifteen minutes. Nobody else they've met in this field is patient.



Herman

That's genuinely the best one so far, and it's also the one where you're crouching behind hospital furniture.



Hilbert

The best ones usually involve crouching.



Corn

We're at rung six and things have stayed technically legal. When does that change?



Hilbert

Rung seven. You turn them down.



Herman

The reverse pitch.



Hilbert

You do the full meeting, you ask all the questions, and at the end you say you don't think you can take them on yet. You list three things they'd need to fix first. Their data's in nine places. Nobody owns the project. The budget is for a demo, not a system. You stand up and you leave. You leave the list.



Corn

And then you wait by the phone looking casual.



Hilbert

You wait about nine days. They fix one of the three, and they ring you, because now they want to prove to you that they're worth it. You've turned a pitch into an audition, and they're the ones auditioning.



Herman

That one makes me nervous. It assumes you can afford to walk away. Plenty of small consultants can't.



Hilbert

You can afford to walk away from the ones who were never going to pay. The trick is you were always going to lose those. You're just losing them sooner and on your own terms.



Herman

I'll take half of that. Corn, would you do it?



Corn

I'd do it once, by accident, because I'd gone slowly and they'd lost interest. And I'd call it a strategy afterwards.



Hilbert

That's how most strategies start.



Corn

Rung eight. I'm assuming we're now in reputational damage.



Hilbert

Rung eight. The pitch is delivered by your AI, and you attend as its assistant.



Herman

You're joking.



Hilbert

An avatar. Your face, your voice, a cloned voice, on the big screen, presenting. You sit at the side of the room with a notebook. When it says something wrong, you raise your hand and correct it, politely. When the client asks it a difficult question, it says that's a great question for my human colleague, and turns, and you answer. You're the man who manages the machine. That's the job you're selling.



Corn

There's a version of you in the meeting that's more confident than you are.



Hilbert

There's a version of all of us that's more confident. Mine has never been asked to leave a building. And the thing about it is, they'll remember it for ten years. Whether they hire you is a separate matter. Nobody forgets the man who brought himself.



Herman

There's real risk in that one beyond the novelty, though. Half of what makes a client trust a consultant is the feeling that the person is fully present. You're deliberately putting a machine between yourself and them.



Hilbert

Some clients want exactly that. They want to see the machine. The ones who don't, you'll know within a minute, because they'll keep looking at the man with the notebook instead of the screen.



Corn

Rung nine.



Hilbert

Rung nine is the one I wouldn't do. Not anymore. You hold the pitch somewhere it can't be ignored. The client's own car park. A table and two chairs and a flask, set up at seven in the morning in the space next to the managing director's. When he arrives, you're there, you stand, you say, I have nine minutes, and you show him one page.



Herman

That's ambush.



Hilbert

It's ambush, Herman. Ambush with a flask. It worked twice for a man I know. The third time security moved the table and he kept pitching, standing up, to the barrier.



Corn

Did the barrier go up?



Hilbert

The barrier went up for the managing director. Not for him.



Herman

For the record, that is the rung where you start being talked about, and not in the way you'd want.



Hilbert

Every rung above six, people talk about you. The question for the consultant is which story they'll tell. The one with the trolley of paper gets told at their Christmas party as a good story. The one with the car park gets told to the security company.



Herman

I'd like to bring this back down to earth for a second, because I think there's a pattern under the whole ladder, and it's the useful part. Every rung that works does one of three things. It shows rather than tells. It makes the client's own problem physical, the paper, the hold music, the maze. Or it turns the power round so the client is the one doing some persuading. The rungs that fail are the ones where the stunt is about the consultant.



Hilbert

Twelve.



Herman

Sorry?



Hilbert

Twelve. You said the Amazon meetings start with twenty minutes of silence. It's closer to the length of the memo. Six pages at the speed most of those people read is twelve, perhaps fifteen. Nobody sits for twenty, they're finished by twelve and pretending to reread the appendix.



Herman

I'll take twelve.



Hilbert

I only know because I tried it on Waterford County Council. Not the memo, the silence. I needed a roundabout renamed. There was a roundabout at the end of my road, four exits, and it had no name, and the delivery vans couldn't find me, because the sat nav called it unnamed roundabout and turned them back toward Dungarvan. The council's roads department had a man called Desmond Phelan who dealt with naming. Senior executive officer. He had a rule that he would hear any member of the public for exactly nine minutes, on the first Tuesday of the month, at a desk on the second floor, next to the photocopier. So I prepared. I wrote one page. Three things on it. What's broken. What it costs. What I'll do in the first fortnight. I handed it to him and I sat there, and I said nothing. Desmond read it. Desmond read it again. Then he said, Mister Flumingtop, you've used four of your nine minutes being silent. And I said yes. He didn't know what to do with that. Nobody had ever handed the minutes back. He gave me the roundabout on the spot, subject to a public consultation, and the consultation is the part that went on.



Corn

How long did it go on?



Hilbert

Fourteen months. I had proposed calling it Flumingtop Cross. There was an objection from a man two doors down, Gerry Kinsella, who kept geese, and wanted it named after his oldest goose, which was called The Bishop. He did his pitch in the car park. He brought the goose. He brought The Bishop to the council offices in a cat basket, on a Tuesday, and he stood in the space next to the county manager's car from seven in the morning. Herman, there's a little click on your end, every time you say Bishop, you're closing your mouth on the mic, I'll take it out later. He stood there until the county manager arrived, and The Bishop got out of the basket, and that was more or less the end of the consultation. Desmond rang me himself. He said, Mister Flumingtop, your page was very good, and the goose was in the minutes. The roundabout is called Bishop's Cross. There's a sign. The vans still go to Dungarvan, because nobody updated the sat nav, but now they go to Dungarvan past a sign with a goose on it. I couldn't use the council's laser pointer either, the button sits too far down for a claw, so I'd brought my own page. Gerry didn't need a laser pointer. He had a goose.



Herman

That's the car park rung working, though. That's the one you said you wouldn't do.



Hilbert

It worked for Gerry. I'm not Gerry. I don't have the goose.



Corn

The car park works if what you bring into the car park can't be argued with.



Hilbert

The Bishop died in two thousand nine. The sign is still up. Desmond retired and the new man answers emails in under a day. I wrote to him in August about the sat nav. He wrote back in four hours and said the roundabout has always been called Bishop's Cross, and asked if I'd like to submit a page.



Herman

Four hours. That's a council that learned something from a goose.



Corn

Whatever the council learned, there's something in that for Daniel past the poultry. Every tactic that worked on this ladder, the silent page, the trolley of paper, the hold music, even the goose, put something in the room the client couldn't argue with. Most pitches are arguments, and people defend themselves against arguments. They don't defend themselves against their own Tuesday sitting on the table.



Herman

And the gap between a story they tell at the Christmas party and a story they tell the security company is about one rung, so it's worth knowing which rung you're on before you climb it. Thanks, as ever, to our producer Hilbert Flumingtop, who kept the levels tidy through all of this.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've enjoyed this one, a review on Spotify helps other people find the show.



Herman

We'll be back soon.