

# HERE'S THE PITCH

You won't hit a home run with investors or customers if your pitch puts them to sleep.

BY VICTORIA REYNOLDS

**S**herry Huff Carnahan, president of Total Office Inc. in Akron, was missing too many opportunities. As a free-lance office professional, she sought to liberate others from tedious administrative tasks. But what seemed an easy sell wasn't landing clients at networking events.

"I lost prospective clients because I couldn't seem to describe the services I provide," Carnahan says. "I would just go around in circles with a lot of 'ums' and 'ahs,' and people would just hear 'Total Office' and assume I was an employment agency."

Yet Carnahan's struggles are not unlike those of many small-business owners and

entrepreneurs, whose problems are not in their product or service, but in their pitch.

"Many entrepreneurs and professionals have a valuable product or service, but they can't hook prospective investors or clients because they get in the way of their own message," says presentations trainer and communications coach Leslie Ungar, president of Electric Impulse Inc. in Akron.

Ungar says that in any situation, you have 30 seconds to hook your listener. If you can't clearly and concisely describe your product or service in that time, you've missed your chance.

"If you get hung up on the specifics of what you do instead of the *results* of what you do, and if you don't have enough breath to finish your sentence, you're getting in the way of your message," she says. "That's why the best pitch is a brief mission statement that quickly and effectively communicates the benefits of what you do — not what you are."

For example, Ungar says a chiropractor might use the mission statement, "I free people from pain." An accountant might say, "I help people keep more money in their pockets."



Ungar helped Carnahan focus on her mission and encapsulate her offerings in a compelling statement. "I free [people] from doing the things they don't want to do, have time to do or know how to do — without the cost of hiring and training a new employee," Carnahan says. "Now, I use that mission statement and everyone wants to be my client, because it's something everyone can relate to."

But a mission statement isn't just a phrase. It's an image and a state of mind. "You cannot successfully sell yourself to anyone else if you're not sold on yourself and your importance," says Ungar. "So let your body language, posture, facial expressions, handshake — let your overall demeanor convey that you're the proud gatekeeper of your company. Do this, and you can convince that investor to invest in you or sway the customer to give you that big chunk of business."

Such is the case with Don Reinhart and Joe Bishay, who became so adept at raising money for their Akron company, Incipio Inc., that they decided to help others do the same.

When Reinhart and Bishay partnered to

launch the Internet- and e-commerce-solutions provider, which assists with business-plan development, capital acquisition, prototype development and other e-business-consulting services, they secured private-placement funds. They credit their success to a home-run presentation.

"In working with others to raise capital, we've found that the entrepreneurs most successful at attracting investors are those who can effectively present themselves," Reinhart says. "They know how to hold the investors' interest, and they know what they should and shouldn't say about themselves and their company."

Reinhart adds that when investors walk away, it's often because the entrepreneur baffled or bored them, failing to paint the benefits in a big picture.

"Some entrepreneurs use industry jargon and technical terms that go over an investor's head. Others give lengthy presentations that suggest they're either oblivious to the rules of engagement, or uncertain about what information is most important," he says. "It's tricky, because once you've lost their interest, you've lost their investment."

While science is the topic of the day for Laura DeYoung, the principles of good presentations still apply. DeYoung, senior environmental planner for Davey Resource Group, a division of Davey Tree Expert Co. in Kent, helps communities and land developers protect or develop their resources by complying with environmental regulations.

"That calls for a lot of public education," she says. "So presentations are a key part of my job." Those presentations inherently involve elaborate scientific data and explanations, forcing DeYoung to simplify, simplify, simplify.

