Pitching Essentials

AFM 2013

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About The Author

Stephanie Palmer was a studio executive with MGM Pictures and has moderated the Pitch Conference at AFM for the last three years. As an executive, she heard over 3000 pitches, and as a pitching consultant she has helped writers and filmmakers to find representation, sell their material, and secure financing for their projects.

She is the author of the book *Good in a Room: How To Sell Yourself And Your Ideas And Win Over Any Audience*. She has been featured on The Today Show, The Early Show, Los Angeles Times, National Public Radio and in Inc., Atlantic, Variety, Script, and Speaker magazines.

As a studio executive with MGM, Stephanie supervised the acquisition, development and production of feature films. Some of her projects included *21, Legally Blonde, Be Cool, The Brothers Grimm, Agent Cody Banks, Agent Cody Banks 2, A Guy Thing*, and *Good Boy*. Prior to MGM, she worked at Jerry Bruckheimer Films on *Armageddon, Con Air*, and *Enemy of the State*. Palmer consults with creative professionals, teaches online pitching classes and shares pitching advice on her blog.

Stephanie Palmer is the coordinator for the video pitch submissions for AFM 2013.

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Overview

Pitching, much like writing, directing, and producing, is a huge topic. We could spend a long time talking about the art and science of pitching and just scratch the surface. In this document, I'm going to share with you some tips to help you develop a compelling pitch for your project so you can achieve your goals at AFM.

So often people spend lots of time developing their projects, seeking attachments, honing their script, but too little time preparing what they will say when they actually meet with a decision-maker such as an agent, financier, producer, distributor, or studio executive.

If You Only Learn One Thing...

The key to pitching, attaching talent, selling your work, and getting financing for your projects is your ability to answer questions.

Just like screenplays are structured around Acts, beats, and themes, pitches are structured around questions and answers. In fact, every aspect of a pitch is designed to answer a particular question. Often, it's a question that's asked directly, but sometimes the questions a pitch must answer are hidden or implied.

In this document, we're going to talk about three of the most important questions:

- What's your project about?
- What project is this most like?
- How did you come up with this idea?

At AFM, you'll have opportunities to pitch your projects, including the Pitch Conference, formal pitch meetings you may have scheduled, and casual conversations with people you're meeting at screenings or other events. Your answers to these three questions are options that you can use when considering how to deliver a pitch in a particular situation.

Let's start by talking about the most important question: "What's your project about?"

What's Your Project About?

Your answer to this question is sometimes called your logline, short pitch, or premise pitch. It's the 1-3 sentence version that encapsulates the premise of your story. As you know, this representation of your story is crucial and it's worth investing the time to polish, hone, and make it as strong as possible.

Premise Pitch Structures

- "My story is a (genre/sub-genre) called (title) about (hero) who seeks (goal) despite (obstacle)."
- "My story is a (genre/sub-genre) called (title) about (hero) who faces a dilemma: should (outcome A) or (outcome B)?"
- "(Title) is a (genre/sub-genre) about (hero) who seeks (goal) despite (obstacle)."

Premise Pitch Examples

*"My story is an action comedy called **Nerd Ops** about two competing National Security Administration computer geniuses who learn to work together as field operatives to save the world from a terrorist hacker organization."*

Even non-fiction and reality projects benefit from clarifying the narrative within:

*"**The Taste** is an American reality TV cooking show where professional and amateur chefs see who can create the best single-bite of food and defeat the competition in a blind taste test."*

How To Create Your Premise Pitch

Often, to create your premise pitch you have to hone and focus your story. This process can have implications for your actual project and not just your pitch.

For now, I recommend that you really define the five elements (genre, title, hero, need, and obstacle). When doing this, you may face some common situations, such as:

- *You have more than one hero:* You have two choices. You can identify the central and most important character in your ensemble who carries the story. Or, you can make the group the "hero" and say "My story is a (genre) about (six people), all of whom are trying to get (goal) despite (obstacle).

- *Your hero has more than one goal:* You need to clarify the goal. Your hero needs a specific and singular goal that they are trying to attain. Now, your hero may have multiple goals, e.g., save the world, get the girl, become a man, prove to his father that he deserves respect, and be home for dinner. One of those goals is the primary goal, and it's very hard to write well—or pitch well—without knowing what that is. A clear story begins with the need for realizing the goal, and ends when the final goal is realized (or not).

- *You don't like the term "obstacle":* Just to be clear, when I use the term "obstacle," you might hear, "antagonist," or "internal conflict." The question is what most accurately characterizes your story and makes it clear to someone hearing or reading it for the first time?

- *You reject formulas:* Okay. I hear you. Feel free to develop your pitch into something less formulaic—provided it contains the five elements.

However—and I'm going to be very direct here—if you are unable to get your story to work in this premise pitch format, in my experience it's likely that you do not have as clear or compelling a story as you hope, or you don't understand it as well as you think.

Think about it like this: if an agent hears your premise, likes it, subsequently requests your script and likes that, the agent might call a producer and share the same short premise pitch. The producer likes it and calls the studio and shares the same short pitch. The studio buys it and the same short pitch is often used to help attract stars and investors.

The point is that you should spend more time developing your premise pitch. It can make its way through the Hollywood channels quite quickly.

What Project Is This Most Like?

This is a question you are very likely to be asked in a meeting and has huge implications for how decision-makers evaluate your work. The answer is your "comparison pitch."

Choosing the right comparison can seem simple, but is actually complex because there is a question hidden within. The hidden question is:

"What is ONE successful, recently produced project in the same genre as your project which has a similar tone?"

Comparison Pitch Structures

- It's [THIS] meets [THAT].
- It's like [Produced Project] but with [One Difference].

Comparison Pitch Examples

- It's like *Die Hard*, but with a female hero.
- It's like *Hamlet*, but set in 1929 against the backdrop of the financial crisis.
- *Nerd Ops* is like *The Other Guys*, but with spies instead of cops.

You'll notice I didn't give any examples of [THIS] meets [THAT]. That's because most of the time this strategy backfires and activates totally different associations in the mind of the other person than what you intend. Here's more about why I recommend you avoid this pitch structure.

How To Create Your Comparison Pitch

If you don't already know the right comparison, choosing it requires some research. Here is a case study with a detailed step-by-step process.

How Did You Come Up With This Idea?

Your answer to "How did you come up with this idea?" is called your "genesis pitch." Because in the same way that every superhero has a genesis story, every project has one as well.

However, "How did you come up with this idea?" isn't really asked to determine exactly when, where, and how the idea popped in your head. There's a question hidden within.

The hidden question is: Are you an expert?

When someone buys your work, finances your project, or hires you for a job, they aren't just buying your ideas or material. They are investing in your expertise.

That's why your genesis pitch should position you as an expert.

Genesis Pitch Structures

A good answer often focuses on your genre knowledge, professional skills, or life experience.

- *Genre knowledge:* "I've seen just about every [GENRE] that's ever been made, and I realized that all of the successful ones had [COMMON ELEMENTS]…."

- *Professional skills:* "As a former [OCCUPATION], I know how serious it can be when [SITUATION]…."

- *Life experience:* "I first got the idea for [TITLE] when [UNUSUAL EVENT] occurred…."

Genesis Pitch Examples

- *Genre knowledge:* "I've seen just about every vampire movie that's ever been made, and I realized that all of the successful ones had three things in common…."

- *Professional skills:* "As a former member of navy intelligence, I know how many intel operations take place on battleships, destroyers, or submarines, but I never thought that an underwater oil rig could be so relevant to a spy story until…."

- *Life experience:* "I first got the idea for *Full Reverse* when my apartment was incinerated by a private jet that fell out of the sky…."

How To Create Your Genesis Pitch

Here's a 5-step process you can use to generate material for your answer:

1. Think about how you actually did come up with the idea. What influenced you? When and where did it happen?

2. Consider what skills or life experiences you have that made it possible for you to have the idea. Does it relate to your current job, past experience, or personal life?

3. What can you brag about? Without regard to the project, what's on the highlight reel of your life? Is there something that relates or could be tied into your project?

4. What are three personal stories that demonstrate expertise that relate to your project?

5. Then, choose the one or two elements that make the strongest case for your expertise, and draft your answer.

You may not have an answer right now that sufficiently demonstrates your expertise. That's ok. You can build expertise by reading, seeing, and learning about the genre your project is in. Here's [more information about positioning yourself as an expert](#).

Remember, you don't want to seem like someone who inadvertently bumped into a great idea. You want to be the person who discovered the idea because of your knowledge, enthusiasm, and dedication.

Pitching Do's And Don'ts

Now I'd like to specifically give you some key pointers about two things you should DO and two things you DON'T want to do. Let's start with the Do's:

DO: Lead With Genre

Genre is the key detail that explains to the listener how to interpret the details which follow. For example, consider a pitch that begins:

"This is a love story about an eccentric man and a quirky, vivacious woman...."

Do you know what genre this is? It could be romantic comedy, dark comedy, drama, period piece, documentary.

The point is that you don't want the reader or listener to be confused about any detail of your project. No matter how you've constructed your pitch or how obviously the hook conveys the genre, you must—literally—explicitly—tell the genre of your story.

DO: Refer To a Max Of Three Characters By Name

You know your characters very well, but the other person is hearing their names for the first time. Too often, instead of focusing on the story, the person reading or listening is thinking things like:

- "Is Helen the same person as Ms. Ford?"
- "There's a Matt and a Mike?"
- "Is Sammy the same as Samantha?"

Refer to the supporting characters by how they relate to the main characters, for example: Karin's boss, Tim's sister, Ryan's evil twin.

DON'T: Talk About Who Has Been Involved

Don't say things like:

- "Attached was (some star) and (some director)."
- "We've had interest from (producer)."
- "We've sent it to (some production company)."

Anyone who really liked your project would buy it, attach themselves, or otherwise put skin in the game. If that hasn't happened, your project isn't moving forward (even if it sounds like it is).

Sentences like the ones in the bullets above are the equivalent of saying, "Here is a list of the people who have already passed on this project." Don't talk about who has read, or been interested, or previously was interested.

Here is a more complete list of things you should not say: <u>the 13 commonly used phrases that make you sound like a Hollywood rookie</u>.

DON'T: Give Your Positive Opinion

No one wants to hear your predictions about success, nor do they want to be told how to think or feel about your work.

- *You say: "This will be a #1 hit movie."* They think: "Oh, good—you're a fortune teller now. Can I get some lottery numbers?"

- *You say: "You're going to love this!"* They think: "Really? I'm so glad you know how I'm going to respond."

- *You say: "I have an amazing idea for you."* They think: "You've concluded that your own idea is a winner? I'm stunned."

Instead, just pitch your story. No pre-qualifications, no hype, no raving about how great it is in advance. Simply tell the story.

Then, give the other person the space to think, feel, and form opinions on their own. Let them be the judge. After all, they are.

Here is <u>a more complete list of ways you should not "hype" yourself or your work</u>.

Conclusion

If you only remember one thing, remember this:

The key to pitching, selling your work, getting hired for jobs, and being good in a room is your ability to answer questions.

You've learned how to answer some of the most important questions:

- What's your project about?

- What project is yours most like?

- How did you come up with this idea?

For more information and to get updates on the latest pitching techniques and meeting strategies, sign up for my newsletter at goodinaroom.com.

Best,

Stephanie

PS. If you would like feedback from me on your pitch, you can consult with me.