

Selling the Sizzle: Three Steps to a Great Pitch!

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Quick! In thirty seconds or less tell me what your book is about. Can't? Then you need to work on your pitch.

First, congratulations. You've completed your novel. You can't wait to see your words encased in the covers of a book, sitting face out on the bookstore shelves and being bought by the truckload. But before you can see that dream come true, you have to persuade a publisher to buy it.

Many new writers don't understand one fact about publishing that all established authors know. Those of you who are of a more artist temperament will find what I am about to say rather vulgar, but I will not apologize for unveiling the truth. Writing is a noble art, but once you enter into Publishing you are now in the sales business.

How so? You're selling a product (your book) to an investor (the publisher). Once you understand the true nature of this business, you will be miles head of those ego-lead writers who feel that the world owes them a living because they tell stories. Don't make this mistake. Nobody cares that you're a writer; your job is to *make* them care.

Developing a great pitch is a career writer's best tool. A pitch is a short summary of your story told in about three sentences or less. If you want to get an idea of what a pitch looks like go to your bookshelves or the library and read the back covers/ jacket copy of books. See how one story pulls you in and another leaves you cold. Why? Because you're buying an emotion: fear, love, ambition. Authors who represent these emotions include Stephen King, Nora Roberts, and John Grisham. That's what pitches sell to readers: Emotion. To editors, pitches sell the emotion of "This will make money!". You can also look at your TV guide to see how two hour movies are compacted into one to two lines. They're considered 'hooks' because they leave the reader wanting to know what happens. Here is an example of a basic hook:

"A battered wife fakes her own death and assumes a new identity in a desperate gamble to escape her abusive spouse. **Sleeping With the Enemy**"

A pitch will go further and reveal what happens (she does escape). A writer needs to know how to use a carefully crafted pitch. It will help sell a story in many ways: In a query, in a synopsis, at conferences and interviews, press releases, cover copy, etc... But let's not get ahead of ourselves. First you have to plan your pitch.

Step One: The Three Pre-pitch Steps

1) Know Your Product. A writing career is similar to opening a shop for business. You need to know what you will sell, so that you will know how to market it. What kind of book do you have to sell? What genre does it belong to? You need to be able to identify this in a short sentence. Not "It's a sci-fi, fantasy, coming-of-age, mystery romance." But instead "It's a fantasy romance with elements of mystery." It's the same as knowing whether or not your store will sell upscale or custom jewelry. Once you know what you're selling, then you're ready for step two.

2) Know Your Audience. At this stage your shop is ready to open. Now you need to identify the customers who will benefit from your product. A number of aspiring romance authors think because romance is such a booming market that they will have a huge audience for their work. They don't. All

romance readers don't enjoy every romance story. Some readers like stories with ghosts; others enjoy history, or family drama. Identify what your audience likes (demon hunting werewolves or long contemporary dramas) and keep them in mind when you're developing your pitch.

3) Know Your Investor or Client. You need money to start your business. That's fine, but what will the investor get? Research what your investor (agent/editor) needs. Are they over inventoried with historicals and are desperately seeking chick lit? Are they behind a certain trend or are they the best with a certain genre and your product could help improve their list? I am not implying that you 'write for the market', just know where to send your product for consideration. You wouldn't want to pitch your Christian romance to someone interested in erotica, would you? You would be wasting your time and theirs. Do your research.

Step Two: Breaking It Down

Now that you know your product, your audience, and your prospective buyer, it's time to develop the pitch. A basic pitch has four parts.

1) A Character

Stories are about people solving a problem. Who is this story about? Who are we rooting for or who should we hate? At this stage it is okay to use clichés to describe your characters. You've already made them unique in your story. Take the easy route for now. Why? Because you want to elicit an emotional response. When you describe your hero as a burned-out cop, what images/emotions come up? A tired warrior? Good that's what I want. How about a carefree party girl? Do you see her as a lighthearted, selfish innocent? What if I were to say they would fall in love, wouldn't you be curious how that would happen? That's what you want the editor to *feel*: Curious.

You don't always have to use an adjective/noun combination to introduce your hero/heroine. You can just state what the character is. Cara is a nurse (you think of a nurturer). Malcolm is a man with secrets (you think of a wounded soul or someone dangerous).

2) You Need to Tell the Setting

By setting I mean both where the story is set and how it begins. Does the story happen in the present day or the future? North Carolina 1975, 1875, 3275? Are we on another planet? When will the story happen? Is the character going through a divorce, has she lost a loved one?

3) Now You Need Conflict

What is the problem? What does the protagonist need? Give the storyline; not the story itself. This is where your theme comes in. What is your theme? Love conquers all? Patience is a virtue? Greed leads to death? Use emotionally stimulating words. Theme is what makes a story resonate and captures an editor's interest.

4) Resolution

How does it end? Does the protagonist accomplish her goal or not? How is s/he changed?

Step Three: Developing Your Own

AN EXAMPLE:

In the following pitch look for Character, Setting, Crisis, and Resolution.

“When Isabel Lawson’s husband deserts her, she closes her heart and focuses on her career. World weary gardener Martin wants to get away from his past and is glad to be hired by Lawson’s Landscape. But when these two damaged souls work together to landscape a wealthy widow’s garden, they learn that true love can bloom in the toughest climate.”

Okay so it’s a bit hokey, but you get the drift. In a short time you know what the story is about. Now it’s time for you to work on your own pitch. Make it short, sweet and emotionally stimulating; anything that will shout, “This will make money!”

Learn how to sell the sizzle and one day I’ll see your novel on the shelves. Good luck!