

Chapter 7

LIFE'S A PITCH

There are times when it is more important to sell the story than to tell the story. Pitching is one of those times. Pitching is the selling of a story or idea for film or television by describing it verbally. We have all done it with varying degrees of success, but not everyone realises that there is more to it than just a few well-chosen words.

Pitching is when writers, script editors or producers have to get up on stage and perform. Because we do not work in a 'pitching culture' in Europe this applies both to those pitching and to those receiving the pitches there is not enough preparation for this performance and too little importance is placed on it. Whether you enjoy pitching or not, your career as a writer will benefit from being able to do it well.

Pitching is important for the simple reason that good projects are too often rejected because the 'buyer' loses confidence not in the story but in the person pitching. The result? A rejection.

There are specific preparations that you can make to improve your verbal pitching. Writers and producers rarely put as much effort into preparing themselves as they do into preparing the descriptions of their projects. But you are part of the pitch, and you can easily let yourself down.

Once you understand why so many people pitch badly at really important meetings, you can do something to prevent yourself from doing so. Most of us have had the experience of coming out of an interview or meeting knowing the answer to a question that we couldn't answer in the room. This can be prevented.

You can find out how to tell when to stop talking, or when to change direction. You can learn why it is more important to sell the story, and how to stop yourself being inexorably drawn into telling it. You can also learn how to control the direction of a meeting to get what you want to out of it.

Why is all this so important? Because the film and television industries thrive on 'confidence'. If someone has confidence in you, you are half-way there. Much of what is said in the industry is simply not true. For example, the sentence 'I have a deal' often means no more than 'I have had an optimistic conversation!' Industry insiders are inured to this; there is a lot of scepticism to overcome with your verbal pitching. Many commissions result from one-to-one meetings with producers and commissioning editors. Having read your calling-card script or seen something you wrote on television, you are invited to meet them or your agent sets up the meeting. The conventional wisdom is that you should be able to make your initial pitch in less than one minute. This is not all you will say about the project (unless the listener hates it!). If someone likes your short pitch you will undoubtedly be asked for more information. Personally, I prefer to offer them a written document next, although sometimes you are asked to talk about it.

THE SUCCINCT PITCH

What is the best way of getting the succinct pitch to work? Everyone has a different approach. What seems to work reliably is to distil the essentials of the project down to the minimum. For example:

- 1 What it is about. You do not need to tell the story, just indicate what sort of story or programme it is.
 - 2 Why it will appeal to audiences and to which audiences will it appeal.
 - 3 If you are the producer, where you hope the finance will come from.
- Pitching therefore involves 'packaging'. It is something writers and producers and film-makers do without necessarily calling it that. But to be able to do this successfully you need to know your way around the players in the industry.

The package

The term 'packaging' reaches its ultimate expression in the methods used by the biggest Hollywood agencies to bring together their own clients (producer, writer, director and stars) in a 'package' which they take to a studio to wholly finance. The package is so bankable that the studio cannot (or does not) refuse, whatever the budget. Or it may be that the studio is so anxious to get one of the elements in the package that they take them all. This is the ultimate deal-led approach to financing; it has some advantages but many disadvantages.

An obvious disadvantage is that the script is not always given the priority it ought to receive, since packages tend to be vehicles for stars rather than writers. The result is that many films with star-studded casts either flop or are dreadful but still popular. In both cases, more attention to the script would have benefitted everyone.

For a writer, particularly at the beginning of a career, the package may consist of only a calling-card script, a CV and a covering letter explaining why you have written this particular script. Packages like this shouldn't be sent in cold, according to many agents. Agents, producers and script-editors are always looking for new talent, but a large parcel landing with a thump, unannounced, on a desk, is not always the best start. First find out if they are willing or interested in reading your material. In effect, make them ask for it by making it sound attractive. Psychologically, it can make a difference.

Once you have assembled your package, you need to be able to sell it and yourself. This will, at some point, involve verbal pitching. An essential part of your preparation is to have written out several pitches of different lengths for your project. The idea is not that you will recite one of these in a wooden tone, but that you will have the confidence to do justice to the project in under a minute or, if requested, at greater length. The point is that you must start with a punchy, succinct, easy-to-remember description. The benefit of this is twofold. The person listening to you will know that they can easily pitch it to someone else (which means it will be easier to sell to the public) and their interest will grow so that they start asking for more information.

Three words are better than four

It is often thought that the shorter and more memorable the initial pitch line the better. Don't worry if you find it difficult to come up with something as good as 'We are not alone' (Close Encounters of the Third Kind), 'In space no one can hear you scream' (Alien), or 'Jaws in Space' (also Alien). These are usually poster slogans, not initial pitches. A story concept or short pitch usually encapsulates the central character and the key action of the film: 'This is a story about a man who did something...' You should be able to reduce almost every proposal to that formula: 'This is a film/play/novel about X who Y.'

A log-line is different from a story concept or full pitch. It is usually very brief, and is designed to catch the eye. Log-lines are what gets viewers to watch TV shows every

evening. They are specifically written to appear in the daily or weekly TV guides or evening papers, or on the posters of films.

Famous feature film log-lines include 'There are two sides to this love story' (Kramer vs Kramer), the notorious 'Love means never having to say you are sorry' (Love Story) and 'You don't have to assign him to murder cases you just turn him loose' (Dirty Harry).

Apart from making it easier for the tired executive to remember your pitch, you need to impress with your passion for the story. If you don't care about it, it is unlikely that anyone else will. Passion is important, which is why if you go in with five or ten ideas it begins to look as though you are promiscuous or fickle and not interested in a serious, long-term relationship.

Remember that a major Hollywood studio could receive up to 50,000 pitches or proposals a year, yet they can only make ten to twelve movies. This is why writers have a relatively low status. In Europe the ratio may not be as extreme, but there are clearly an enormous number of ideas floating around the desks of the industry over here. Our agency alone receives about 150 applications per week from writers who want to join the agency (this does not include material submitted by the 150 plus clients) and the bigger agencies must receive more than that.

So competition for pitches to be heard is tough and pitching is one activity that can always be improved, whereas if you have no writing talent there is not much you can do about it. So if you are able to pitch well it will help get you onto the first rung of a very long ladder. Again, flexibility being prepared to pitch to any length, whether fifteen seconds, one minute or an hour is desirable. And be prepared to do it without notice, you never know when you may get introduced to someone who could say 'Yes'. I once heard an impromptu pitch by a young producer standing at the men's urinal in the Majestic Hotel during the Cannes Film Festival. I stood washing my hands, filled with admiration for the producer. It may not have led to a deal, but he had initiative.

BASIC PITCHING GUIDELINES

At the end of this chapter I will list a number of specific points which can usefully improve the way you pitch, but here I would like to mention a few general guidelines:

1 Keep it short. You can always expand at the invitation of those you are meeting, but brevity will prevent you from being boring, which is the most common quality of pitches.

2 You need to let them see the story or film in a few deft strokes.

3 Have a back-up, in case what you are pitching isn't suitable.

If you remember these points (and the fact that a pitch is not a story, so you should not go into detail), you will avoid the biggest pitfalls. If you can pitch to someone who can actually say 'Yes' to you directly so much the better. It is not always possible to do this, because most people who can say 'Yes' sensibly hide behind 'gatekeepers' whose primary function is to say 'No'. However, the bottom line is that a good pitch may get you a deal, but it won't necessarily get you your film made. If you are very adept at coming up with 'high concepts' (ideas for films that can be easily grasped), good at articulating them and persuading people that they're worth doing, but you are not a good enough writer, then perhaps you should be a producer. There is not much point in pitching yourself as a writer if you can't write. And you must always have good material ready to follow up your pitch meeting.

There are some differences between feature films and television when it comes to pitching, but what's important is to remember that in general stories are about characters with whom audiences can identify. This is not simply because audiences want to experience the lives of those characters but because the audiences want to gain insights into themselves. You must be able to get an audience to invest its own emotions in a character, so that the audience experiences (rather than only observes) what the character is going through. It is this vicarious form of experience that is the key to success. For documentaries, the audience's motivation for watching is obviously somewhat different. However, the essential question can still be asked: why would someone want to watch this film or this programme?

Whether it is a feature or an episode of a soap opera that you are pitching, you need to enable the listener to relate strongly to your characters. You also need to remember that for the purposes of packaging and pitching you are the centre of attention. Your opportunity to pitch may be over a drink or in a script-lined office, but it's up to you to go out on that stage and be the star of the show. The stage is crowded with others out to impress the same limited sources of finance. Being able to present yourself and your project well is nearly as important as having a good script. Many of the worst films you've ever seen were financed because they had a brilliant pitch and were an attractive-looking package.

Do not underestimate the importance of the way in which you pitch. Learn about body language, learn to negotiate, read books about techniques of selling and closing deals. The fact that these books may not have anything directly to do with film or television is not important. They have everything to do with your skill as a player in the business.

There are a number of basic points against which you can test your pitching preparations. These are:

- 1 Yourself
- 2 The buyers
- 3 Non-verbal communication
- 4 Handling meetings
- 5 The pitch

These checklists will cover most of the points you should be aware of before you go into a pitch meeting.

Checklist 1: Know Yourself

- 1 What is your perception of how you pitch? Do you speak fluently and with conviction? Think about it for a moment. Find out how you sound use friends, a videocamera or tape recorder.
- 2 Much more effort usually goes into the preparation of projects than into the preparation of the pitch. So prepare yourself. What reaction do you normally bring out in others? What is your perception of your strengths and weaknesses, particularly as a negotiator or team member?
- 3 Learn negotiating techniques because the art of pitching certainly involves negotiating. It involves your reacting to the reactions of those you are meeting. These techniques are well articulated in dozens of books.
- 4 Learn to relax. Breathing exercises, a good night's sleep before you go in and a healthy dose of fatalism will all help your performance on the day. When people are very nervous, oxygen is redirected to the muscles so they can see and hear better but don't necessarily think or speak more clearly. The brain 'appears'

to decide, in a 'fight or flight' situation, that you don't need continuous logical thought as much as the ability to run or hit! In order to counteract this, make sure you breathe deeply and properly to get more oxygen to the brain. When you have come out of a meeting knowing you've pitched or dealt with the questions really badly, although you had all the information to deal with them well, a possible cause might have been lack of oxygen to the brain.

Checklist 2: Know the Buyers

- 5 Know who you are meeting, their names, positions, track records. Offer a business card to each person you are pitching to, so that you get theirs.
- 6 Know what they've done: how well it performed, what their specific role in it was.
- 7 Know what they want.
- 8 Know what they can pay and have paid in the past.

Checklist 3: Non-Verbal Communication

- 9 Shaking hands is important, but don't do it too hard, especially if you are male and the other person is female. And don't seem limp or timid.
- 10 You give out and perceive signals from a very early age. Body language is something you ought to know something about if you want to succeed. There are no books about body language in film and television pitch meetings, but there are many about body language in general, so read at least one.
- 11 Try to have direct eye-contact and make open gestures. For instance, sit with your arms open rather than folded tightly across your chest.
- 12 Leaning towards someone, not away from them, is more likely to make them feel you are engaging with them.
- 13 Mirroring their behaviour and body language can also be subliminally flattering. It's not usually done consciously, but it's interesting to observe. Watch couples trying to pick each other up at parties to really see mirroring in practice!
- 14 Making notes about what they're saying will give them a sense of being important and of being taken seriously. It may also help you remember what both you and they said.

Checklist 4: Handling Meetings

- 15 Establish rapport at the very beginning of the meeting by asking the person(s) you are meeting questions about themselves, their company, their films or programmes, their country. It's perfectly OK to spend at least the first five minutes doing this in other words, get them to pitch themselves to you. It breaks the ice and gives you great leads and cues.
- 16 If you don't both have the same mother tongue, make sure you speak slowly and clearly. Speaking slowly tends to lower the voice and this increases the apparent authority of the speaker.
- 17 Encourage criticism and frankness. Start by emphasising that you really want them to tell you what they think.
- 18 Do you know how to control the direction of a meeting? It's done using intelligence, perception and the ability to think fast on your feet. If you are bad at it, get someone else who can do it to accompany you.
- 19 Do you know how to be a good listener?

20 Do you know how to be a perceptive watcher? Can you observe while you are talking and listening? In other words, can you stand back a bit while in full flow?

21 If they ask difficult questions, keep your integrity by saying you'll get back to them later with an answer, rather than 'improvising' and possibly being caught out.

22 Don't react negatively to criticism. Say, 'That's interesting and I'll certainly think about it', even if you think it's not interesting or just plain stupid. Be cool.

22 Finally, remember that you are not a one-story writer or producer.

Checklist 5: The Pitch

23 Passion and clarity are the two most important qualities in your pitch. This is particularly true in a longer pitch, where it is more difficult to maintain passion and clarity.

24 Know in advance how much you want to say.

25 Learn to be aware if you are running over time. Know when to stop (do this by watching and listening to them).

26 Don't over-sell.

27 'High concept' means something easily grasped. Can you find a way of putting your project into those terms?

28 The pitch should sell the story whereas the treatment should tell the story. Don't confuse the two. Never get into the boring 'and then...and then...and then' storytelling rut. It's deadly to listen to.

29 Remember the three 'rules' about pitching:

a) what is it about? This breaks down into three sections:

i who is the main character?

ii what does the main character want? (and what's stopping him or her from getting it?)

iii how does he or she get it?

b) why and to whom will the story appeal?

c) where do you think the finance will come from?

30 A lousy story and a bad pitch can sometimes still get you a result if the people you are dealing with think you are someone they can work with.

A LAST WORD

I think it was William Goldman who once described Hollywood as being 'about your next project'. Never lose sight of the rest of your career. So don't put too much emphasis on this one project. Don't ever appear desperate (i.e. don't plead). Always try to open doors for yourself. You are part of the pitch. It's what most writers and most producers forget as they invest all their available time in working on the story. In the end, the pitch and the treatment will be in the past. Remember, the story is not as important as the way you tell it. A mediocre story in the hands of a great writer will be more successful than a great story in the hands of a mediocre writer. Everything will ultimately depend upon the script.