

SECRETS OF THE 3-MINUTE PITCH

by Michael Hauge

The opportunities in Hollywood for 20-minute pitch meetings are fairly rare, especially for newer screenwriters. But as soon as you complete your first screenplay, you'll repeatedly face the challenge of having less than 60 seconds to convince the people in power to read it.

Every time you phone an agent or production company to discuss your story or script, you must be prepared to answer the question, "What's your movie about?" Your response will often make the difference between getting rejected and getting your material read.

The recent advent of pitch marts has further increased both the opportunities to market your work and the competition you face, making the need for a succinct, powerful, 1- to 3-minute pitch imperative.

So here are the best techniques for convincing an agent, manager or executive that your script is worth considering, plus a free bonus tip at the end:

Secret #1: ESTABLISH A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BUYER.

Prepare for your pitch by thoroughly researching the people you're approaching. Using the web, your contacts, the *Hollywood Creative Directory: Producers* guide, the *Spec Screenplay Sales Directory*, and the biographies in the pitch mart catalogues, learn as much as you can about your buyers' backgrounds and film credits.

When you first meet an agent, manager or production company executive, briefly acknowledge him for what he's done – or at least what his company has produced or who they represent. Thank him for giving up his Saturday to be at a pitch mart, or his willingness to take your call. Tell him how much you liked a specific film his company was involved. Better yet, ask a question that shows you really liked it, and aren't just being polite: *"Before we begin, I have to ask you something. You know that moment in ICEPICK IN THE EYE where she slaps the killer even though he's holding a jackhammer? Was that scripted, or did the actress improvise it?"*

Risk sharing something genuine about yourself as well – your passion for writing, or how much getting to share your story with him means to you (more about this later). I know of many situations where people were persuaded to read a script that didn't sound all that good, just because they felt a connection to the writer. It doesn't matter *why* they want to read it, only that they do.

Secret #2: SHARE YOUR PASSION!

When I coach writers and filmmakers on their pitches, both one-on-one and in my seminars, this is the skill I focus on more than any other. You can't possibly expect a manager or producer to get enthusiastic about your project if you're not. Yet I've heard

itches that sound more like grocery lists than something the writer or filmmaker wants to devote years of his life to.

Why is your story burning a hole in your soul? Why does it simply *have* to be told? Why does it have special meaning for you? And why will audiences flock to see it?

Does it explore themes the world needs to hear? Does it grow out of your own personal pain, or longing, or ideals? Is it the type of film that made you want to be a screenwriter?

Maybe you love this screenplay simply because your mission in life is to scare the shit out of people, or to make them laugh so hard that snot comes out their noses. Fantastic!

Passion is contagious. I've known of many stories whose plots sounded like two hours at the DMV, but the writers were clearly so excited by them that an agent said, "OK, let me take a look."

Passion is also the best possible means of establishing a relationship with your buyer (see #1 above). The people who are turned on by what they do are the fun ones to hang out with, the ones we all want to support and attach ourselves to. They're also the ones who get deals.

Secret #3: DON'T TRY TO TELL YOUR STORY!

By far the biggest mistake most writers make is to try to cram an entire plot into a three-minute pitch, rather than emphasizing only those elements that will captivate an executive. The writers take up too much of their listeners' time, and (at a tightly timed pitch mart) they get cut off with no remaining opportunity to get the buyers' reactions, or even to reveal the good stuff about their scripts.

Be clear about your objective: to persuade the person in power to read your script. That's it.

Secret #4: ELICIT EMOTION

As I repeatedly emphasize in my book, tape and seminars, audiences go to the movies to *feel* – to participate emotionally in the story. It's no different with a development executive hearing your pitch. You must convey the elements of your story that will give her an emotional experience (or at least the promise of one). If your buyer believes that reading your script will make her pulse race, her eyes tear up or her heart swell, she'll want to read it.

Emphasize the *conflict* in your story. Whatever your hero is trying to do, tell the listener why that seems impossible. It might be the brilliant cunning and awesome power of your villain (as in **RED DRAGON** and **SPIDERMAN**), the fact that your hero's background never prepared her for the challenges she faces (**ERIN BROCKOVICH** and **LEGALLY BLONDE**), or the sheer emotional terror your hero feels over leaving the comfort of her

identity in order to find love, passion and fulfillment (*TITANIC* and *SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE*).

It's the anticipation of your hero facing insurmountable obstacles that will keep the audience, and the buyers, wanting more.

Secret #5: EMPHASIZE THE KEY TURNING POINTS

Just because you're not taking the listener scene-by-scene through your entire plot, doesn't mean you won't reveal anything that happens. While the specific events you discuss will vary from one project to the next, here are some of the major elements to consider (for a detailed explanation of the 5 key structural turning points, please see my article at www.screenplaymastery.com/structure.htm):

- ***What is your hero's situation at the beginning of the film?*** What is her everyday life like before the story gets rolling? What is the unusual, interesting or compelling world she occupies? What wound from the past is she still, consciously or subconsciously, struggling to resolve? Most important, how will this introduction to your hero create empathy and identification with her?
- ***What opportunity is your hero offered by page 10, and what new world or situation do we now enter?*** Is he taken away to a school for wizards (*HARRY POTTER*)? Or does she meet a young man who offers a relief from her dead-end life (*THE GOOD GIRL*)?
- ***What specific, visible desire grows out of this situation and defines your story concept?*** In other words, what finish line are we rooting for your hero to cross by the end of the film?
- ***What major setback will the hero face at the end of Act 2?*** Does he break up with his true love, or does he discover the psychotic killer isn't really dead after all and is coming after his family?

Again, don't try to reveal ALL of these; pick the ones you can succinctly convey that will elicit the greatest curiosity and anticipation in your buyer.

And notice I didn't include revealing the climax of your story. If they want to know how it ends, make 'em read it.

Secret #6: THINK LIKE A BUYER.

As she hears your pitch, every buyer is silently asking the same question: "Can I sell this?" The more commercial potential your script has, the better your chances of getting it read. So be prepared to mention antecedents – box office successes that are similar in genre, tone, theme or style. And describe your hero in such a way that your story's appeal to bankable stars will be apparent.

Secret #7: ASK THEM TO READ IT.

This may sound obvious, but most writers end their pitches by just letting them fizzle out, and then wait awkwardly to see if their listeners realize they're done.

My favorite exit line for any pitch is to say, "So would you like me to send you a copy, or do you have some questions about the story?" This gives them two options, both good for you.

This is also why you NEVER want your pitch to exceed three minutes – and why one minute is even better. You have to leave time for them to discuss the story with you. And if it's not a story they're interested in, you still have time to ask if they'd like to hear the other project you're working on.

Secret #8: NEVER TELL YOUR ENTIRE STORY!

I know I already used this one, but believe me, you needed to hear it again.

Secret #9: PRACTICE

Once you've formulated your pitch, rehearse, rehearse, rehearse! Try it out on friends, members of your writers group, other writers at the pitch mart, and your inflatable doll. Know it well enough that it will sound natural and conversational, rather than memorized.

Don't be afraid to use notes, but never read your pitch. Passion and dry recitation are mutually exclusive.

And don't worry about nervousness. The fact is, you're going to be nervous. This phone call or meeting is an important opportunity for you, you have a lot riding on it, you're way outside your comfort zone, and you feel like the buyer holds all the power. So nervousness is natural.

But here's an extra little secret: *NOBODY CARES!* The people hearing your pitch have heard a thousand stories, mostly from scared writers, and the truth is, they just don't give a shit.

I've heard all kinds of reasons for rejecting projects in my career, but never once have I heard an executive say, "*What a great story! That movie would make a hundred million bucks! But unfortunately, the writer was so nervous we had to pass.*"

Added Bonus Secret: HOW TO BEGIN YOUR PITCH

The most difficult moment in the meeting will usually be right after you've had some brief personal interchange to acknowledge the listener and establish some connection. Then there'll be an awkward pause, nobody will say anything, and you'll be wondering,

“Should I start? Dive right in? Ask their permission? Wait for them to say go? Go home and become a pharmacist like my mother wanted?”

This makes it tough to overcome your own nervousness and pull them into your story. So now I’m going to share my favorite way of opening your pitch:

Don’t wait for the buyer to do anything. Once the introductory connection is made, simply say, *“Let me begin by telling you how I came up with this story.”* Then tell the buyer what led you to write your screenplay.

This accomplishes many of your objectives: it puts you in control of the meeting; it reveals the commercial, artistic and thematic elements that make your story strong and unique; it pulls the listener into the story in the same way you were drawn to it in the first place; and by the time you hit the key character elements and turning points of your plot, it gets the buyer fully involved in your pitch.

Best of all, this is a powerful way to immediately convey the most important element of all: your passion for your story.

(Originally from <http://www.screenplaymastery.com/3MinutePitch.htm>)