

# 11 Tips

## California Writers Club, Sacramento Branch

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# PITCH IT! PITCH IT GOOD! A Writer's Guide to Developing Content for Your Pitch to a LITERARY AGENT

Looking for a book deal? You'll need an agent. Sometimes your encounter with a prospective agent will last only 30 seconds, whether as part of a formal pitch slam, an elevator ride, or a Twitter chat. If you want to make a lasting impression, you'll need to tailor a crisp and compelling statement starting with these eleven pitch tips. Success means your potential agent will be asking for more.

### 1. Your Pitch Bait

Your book has an opening hook,

so should your pitch – a reason to arouse curiosity and motivate the agent to care. While this could be similar to the hook for your book, your pitch bait could be something else, for example, your niche, your celebrity, your platform, your sponsors, or your marketing plan. Use all your imagination to answer a “so-what” question, polish your answer, and make sure that your introduction sparks interest.

### 2. Your Title and Storyline

Of course, your agent wants a

grasp of your book's content. Here's a quick storyline formula from former film executive Stephanie Palmer: “My story is a (*genre*) called (*title*) about (*hero*) who wants (*goal*) despite (*obstacle*).” For a non-fiction business book, a similar formula might be, “My advice centers on (*business domain*) about (*business problem or conflict*) and how (*target audience*) can (*business goal*) despite (*common obstacle, practice, or conventional wisdom*).

### 3. Your Handle

A handle gives your storyline context. A handle is a simple statement short enough to be written on the back of a business card. You must offer a sentence or phrase that positions and distinguishes your story in the marketplace of a million books.

Screenwriters often pitch their handle by combining two movies: *When Harry Met Sally* in *Waterworld*. However, this technique can return hackneyed and dangerous results. San Francisco literary agent Michael Larsen has better advice, suggesting models that pair something familiar with spin reflecting your own work. For example: “*Fast Food Nation* about fashion.” Doesn't that phrase make it easy to position

the potential story in your mind?

#### **4. Your Competitive Edge**

What's your competition and what about your project will make it better than your competitors? Have you looked at the top 100 books on Amazon in your category? Think, "My proposal will stand out from top-selling competitors because..." Is your assertion tested? Is there objective information to back up your assertion? Michael Larsen, again, suggests you write a one-line statement of competitive advantage. Such a statement can begin, "This is the only book that ..." Or "This is the first book to..."

#### **5. Your Genre**

Put the proposal for your book in context by genre. The key here is meticulous specificity. Your pitch must define not only the high-level genre or category but also the narrower niche. Imagine putting your genre in a funnel that narrows and filters content to its atomic essence. If yours is a non-fiction book, you might say, "Non-fiction, business, in the domain of human resources, specifically conflict resolution among employees." For fiction, it could be, "Romance, but a comedic romance with a subcategory of love triangle." Mentioning these definitions can take just one second out of 30, but your work must be categorized.

If you are not familiar with standard categories, go to Amazon, and look at the side-menu of subtopics under any genre. Browse the hundreds of granular categories.

#### **6. Your Platform**

Even if your book is flawless and arousing, an agent will have a hard time promoting an unknown writer to a publisher. A publisher

is taking a risk and making an investment. The more you do your part to position yourself as an author and brand, the more success you and your publisher will have. Therefore, brag about your platform, that is, your reach to an audience of friends, readers, and fans.

If your platform is weak, explain that you understand how to build a platform and that you will have a following that meets your target relationships within a reasonable time frame.

#### **7. Your Marketing Plan**

What will you do to publicize your book? A publisher wants you promoting yourself and your work. Please, say you have a plan. You should have read about the fundamental ingredients for a marketing plan: target audiences, messages, activities, media, and ways to measure results. You have just seconds for your pitch, so highlight something practical out of your plan and something unique. For example, "Included in my plan is the use of Hoot Suite to plan and schedule daily tweets to my 10,000 followers."

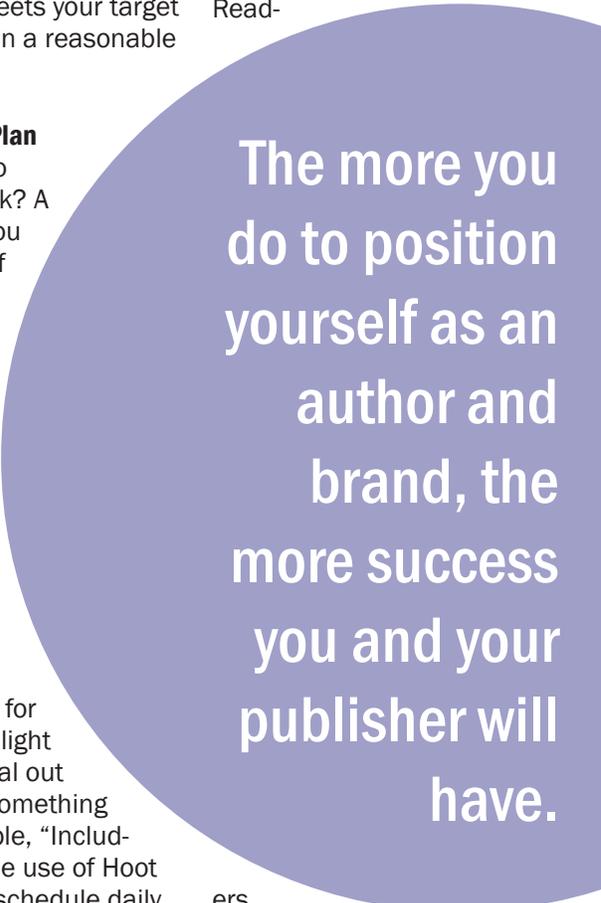
#### **8. Your Craft**

Prove you are a good writer. Agents may be tickled by your storyline and marketing plan, but if they hold any hesitancy about the quality of your writing, they'll turn their attention to another proposal. They have no time to waste on books riddled with grammatical mistakes or

plot holes. Explain your credentials and give evidence of any third-party review of your project. Do you have an MFA? Say that. Have you been to a Squaw Valley writing conference? Brag about it. Are you part of a critique group that has reviewed your manuscript? Mention your members' credentials? Do you have reviews? Offer to email them.

#### **9. Your Emotion**

Read-



The more you do to position yourself as an author and brand, the more success you and your publisher will have.

ers buy books because books make them feel good, whether by way of entertainment or attainment of knowledge. Buying decisions – not only about books, but also cars, clothes, and cocktails – are usually made on emotion. So don't leave emotion out of your pitch, not necessarily the feelings generated out of the pages of your book, but real-life emotion

related to *the sale* of your book. One way that happens is by making the agent *feel good* about you and your project. Help her do her job. Make it easy for her to please a publisher. Are you easy to get along with? Prove it. Will you contribute your own money to marketing? Name the amount. Have you already secured blurbs from well-known personalities? Name them. The more you put yourself in the agent's role and solve her problems, the more your agent will bond with you – and that's feel-good emotion leading to a book deal.

#### **10. Your Call to Action**

If you don't ask for anything, you won't get anything. Whenever you are pitching, you must include a call for action. Ultimately, you want to ask the agent to accept you as a client or to accept your

book proposal? But getting there can be a process. One way to start is by asking a question you know the answer to? For example, "Is your agency buying non-fiction for primary grade children books?" This puts your relationship on a positive track. If possible, develop a call to action that has no risk and is likely to get an affirmative answer? For example, "Book A is number two on Amazon for children's biographies of women. Would you like to see how my graphics, photos, and interviews about Sally Ride make my book more readable and saleable?" Always develop a call for action that throws benefits to the agent, not you.

#### **11. Delivery**

Now that you have strategies for developing content for your pitch, it's time to talk about logistics.

First and foremost: NEVER READ YOUR PITCH. However, write it out so that you think through all your thoughts. This task will be hard: A 30-second pitch consists of no more than 100 words. Strive for 75. Writing your pitch may be more stressful than writing your book. Write several versions. Take out the unnecessary words. Use verbs. Find nouns agents can visualize. Skip the adverbs. Translate your final version into bullet points.

Now practice, practice, practice. Become so familiar with your introductory pitch bait that it rolls off your tongue without sounding memorized. Use your bullet points only if you forget your major points. Look the agent in the eyes like she is your best friend, and feel comfortable with yourself and your work.

**An elevator pitch  
must be narrowed down  
to 100 spoken words  
to be delivered  
in 30 seconds.**

**Strive for 75**