

Ten Tips to a Killer Elevator Pitch

By Laura Brennan

Brevity may be the soul of wit, but it is also the heart of communication. You have at most three sentences in which to capture the attention of a producer, an investor, or a potential client.

The Elevator Pitch is the Killer App of sales.

Creating an effective elevator pitch isn't difficult. The real problem is, most of us don't *want* to be in sales. We want to be writers or creators, inventors, designers, therapists, entrepreneurs, lawyers — almost anything but a salesperson. Which takes us to Tip #1.

Tip #1: Pitching Isn't Selling

If you get nothing else out of this e-book, this one concept can change your life:

Pitching is NOT Selling

When you pitch, you are opening up your treasure chest and showing off your glittery toys. Your only job is to see if the other person wants to play with your toys or not. That's it.

This isn't just semantics. Yes, absolutely, we want to make money from our work. But just as not every screenplay is right for every producer, so too not every client is right for your business. And you may not be right for them. Your elevator pitch is a quick and painless way to see if you're a good fit.

If you are clear on what you offer — whether your treasure chest has Legos or Tree Change Dolls or awesome new software — the other person can decide freely whether or not they want to play.

Your elevator pitch is not the same as a sales pitch. You are, at this point, selling nothing. You are only opening up your box of toys.

One last thing: this works because it's okay for them to play, and it's equally okay for them to pass. You're not trying to coerce them or to misrepresent what you offer in order to meet their needs.

Which takes us to Tip #2.

Tip #2: Make Sure Your Pitch is True

Never, never fib in your elevator pitch.

Fibbing in your pitch, whether it's about yourself, your services, or your project, is the equivalent of "bait and switch." Nothing will slam a door faster than making the other person feel cheated.

There are two kinds of fibs:

- You deliberately misrepresent what you do to match what you think they want.
- You mistakenly misrepresent what you do, because you're not clear yourself.

Both will end a business relationship before it has begun.

I have a friend who produces light, quirky comedies. A writer called her, gave her his elevator pitch, and described his screenplay as a comedy. She agreed to read it, and when she did, she discovered that it was a dark comedy. Very dark. As in, a high body count.

Not only did she not option the screenplay, she won't take his calls anymore.

The barest glance at my friend's credits would have shown that this was not the kind of movie she produced. Sometimes we think, okay, it's not a perfect fit, but I'm so good at what I do — or my project is so intriguing — or my cause is so noble — that they will love it anyway.

No they won't. What they *will* do is no longer trust you.

In the end, it doesn't matter whether you're stretching the truth to make it seem like a better fit or whether you really don't understand what it is you're selling. The end result will be, not just the loss of a job, but the loss of a relationship -- something that has a much greater impact on your career.

Which takes us to Tip #3.

Tip #3: Know What You Offer

What is it that you are pitching?

I can tell you what you're NOT pitching. You are not pitching yourself, your services, or even your novel. But you may be:

- pitching your savvy and compassion as an expert in family law.

- pitching revolutionary software that will simplify their accounting.
- pitching a haunting coming-of-age story set in the days leading up to WWI.

Not everyone will be interested in your specific offer, but no one will be interested in the generic version.

If you really don't know what it is, if you're too close to be objective, ask your friends and colleagues. Find a mentor. Research the common labels within your industry. Combine more than one "genre" if, in fact, you're pitching something that falls within two categories -- a documentary/satire such as *This is Spinal Tap*, or maybe edutainment software for history buffs. It doesn't matter if it spills over boundaries, all that really matters is that, when you pitch, you are accurate.

But what if you are pitching yourself?

Tip #4: Never Pitch a Job Title

Job titles shut down the conversation. You can say what you do ("I write" or "I design T-shirts") but don't pitch it as a title ("I'm a writer" or "I'm a T-shirt designer.")

Job titles put the burden of understanding on the person listening to you. It forces them to come up with some understanding of what you mean by "V.P. of Operations," and makes them feel dumb if they can't. Besides, most job titles are boring. Who you are -- your passion and your expertise -- is the real meat of your pitch. Don't shut that down before you even get there.

Besides which -- and this is the most important thing to understand -- you actually control the conversation by deciding what information to give them. Here's an example. If I only say, "I'm a writer," the conversation will go something like this:

"So, what do you do?"

"I'm a writer."

"Oh. Have you written anything I may have read?"

And since I am neither J.K. Rowling nor Stephen King, the answer is, "No." And the conversation is over.

Instead, you want to say something like: "Well, I was a journalist for eight years, traveling the world and on occasion meeting royalty..."

This opens up an interesting conversation. You have all the power here; you want to open with something that will make them want you to share more, not less. You need to be intentional, thoughtful, about what you say because you want

them to respond in a way that keeps the conversation going. The very first words out of your mouth set the tone for the entire pitch.

Which takes us to Tip #5.

Tip #5: Make Sure They Can Hear You

Before you pitch, you need to make sure people can hear you.

Unless you let them know what it is they're going to hear, they can't retain the information.

So do what I just did: give a short sentence or two letting them know the broad strokes of what they're about to hear.

For instance, if you're pitching a TV series, you start by saying, "My one-hour TV dramedy, *Bah Humbug*, is..."

See? Not hard. But absolutely essential. They can't hear what you say next if they're struggling to figure out whether to file *Bah Humbug* under "sitcom" or "modern retelling of *A Christmas Carol*."

If you're pitching yourself, it's the same idea. The trick is to give the big picture, but not to stop there. Let them know the arena, let them know what you do, then give them the specifics that set you apart.

Just make sure the box you give them -- that broad picture that you open with -- matches the tone and substance of whatever you're pitching. In my example, above ("I started out as a journalist, traveling the world and dining with royalty..."), you want to follow that with a pitch about your high-end travel concierge business, or your memoir about the six months you spent learning to cook in Italy, or your mystery series about a journalist, like you, who unlike you kept stumbling across dead bodies.

They will be able to hear you because they'll have created a mental box of you, glamorously jet-setting, pen in hand, from your intro. But be aware that they will automatically put the next bit of information you give into that same box.

Tip #6: Don't Get Too Cute

There is a large school of thought that the most important thing is to be memorable. I disagree. I once had a gentleman in my writers group who had a restraining order against him from a production company. He was memorable alright!

I had one client who wrote psychological thrillers and wanted to start his pitch with something short and intriguing.

He decided on something along the lines of “I screw with your head.”

I hated it. Not that this wouldn’t spark a conversation!

But this kind of statement is very off-putting *at the beginning* of a pitch. Remember, the first thing you say sets the tone of the entire pitch. It gives them a box in which to put everything else that you say. It is supposed to allow them to hear you -- not set up defenses that keep them from wanting to be in the same room.

If he had moved it to the end, like a tag line -- having first set up their listening by explaining that he wrote psychological thrillers, for instance -- he could then pitch his current project and toss off the line, “My mission in life is to screw with people’s heads.” That would have been much less confrontational and yet still memorable. I was able to talk him out of it, but only after he’d seen a few people back away in terror.

I mean that, by the way. People actually took a step back from him when he opened with that. Quick bonus tip here: don’t ignore body language.

Tip #7: Don’t Start With a Blank Page

We make things much harder than they have to be. Facing a blank page, we have no idea how to open a pitch or presence ourselves. Rather than making ourselves crazy, the solution is, don’t start with a blank page, start with a fill-in-the blank page!

For a book or movie, answer these questions:

1) Title: _____

2) Genre or comparable (and successful) movie or book:

3) Single most important thing they need to know to understand the project:

4) Optional clarifying or personal information that takes it up a notch:

Then create a simple, first draft elevator pitch:

(Title) is a (Genre or Comparable Work) about (Single Most Important Thing) and (Optional Extra Info).

Yes, it will be clunky to start -- but at least you have a place to start.

Here's an example:

1) **Most Likely To Die** is a horror film about a bunch of friends being stalked by a serial killer and murdered in a way that mocks their high school yearbook "most likely" award.

That's not too bad. Now, the first thing I nearly always do when finessing is move the genre before the title. Again, I want them to know what they're going to be listening to. So now it would read:

2) My horror film, **Most Likely To Die**, is about a bunch of friends being stalked by a serial killer and murdered in a way that mocks their high school yearbook "Most Likely" award.

I like that a bit better because it lets them know right off the bat that this is a horror film. But it's more than that - it's a low-budget horror film. All the action takes place at a single location, a cabin in the woods. That's practically its own genre. Also I would probably finesse that "bunch of friends" line a little. Which gives us at last:

3) My cabin-in-the-woods horror film, **Most Likely To Die**, is about a group of friends trapped with a serial killer -- and they are each being murdered in way that mocks their high school "Most Likely" award.

Either the second or the third version would work just fine -- in fact, even my rough draft is pitchable. The difference between versions 2 and 3 would be the audience: if I were at a networking event, just chatting, I'd use the simpler version. If I were talking to someone in the horror world, letting them know it's a "cabin in the woods" setting would be more meaningful.

Clearly, this film is not for everyone -- and that's good. It makes for an easy yes/no answer. That's exactly what you want: to be so clear that there is no possible confusion. If it's not for them, you want to know that quickly.

Tip #8: Pitch Your Product

Pitching a product is very much like pitching a screenplay:

1) Name of product or company: _____

2) Type of product or comparable (and successful) product:

3) Single most important thing they need to know to understand the product:

4) Optional clarifying or personal information that takes it up a notch:

Let's pretend you run a business that matches up part-time home health workers with families in immediate, short-term crisis. Here's how you start:

(Name of Company) is a (Type of Company or Comparable Product) that (Single Most Important Thing), but what really makes us special is (Optional Extra Info).

In our example, it would be something like:

Laura's Health Helpers is a home health services company that provides home health aides to families in emergency care situations, but what really makes us special is how we match you to someone who is an expert in whatever health crisis you're facing.

It needs to sound comfortable coming out of your mouth, so you would finesse as needed, but even this first draft is something you could say in a networking meeting and still be understood.

It doesn't matter if you sell software or widgets, something sets you apart from all your competitors, be it quality, cost, or philosophy.

One last thing: don't get caught up in industry jargon, whatever your industry might be. Be precise, but don't be precious; the goal here is to communicate, not to overawe.

Tip #9: Pitch the Story of You

If you are pitching yourself or your expertise you don't have a genre, right?

Wrong. You have both the arena in which you work, and a subgenre in terms of how you work and the benefits that working with you will offer.

Try this:

I'm a [Job Title] in the [Arena] who excels at [Signature Strength], but what I'm really passionate about is [Passion].

I know, I know, Tip #4 is "Never Pitch a Job Title." But this isn't your final pitch, this is your first, very rough, draft.

So, for me, I'm a **consultant** in the **entertainment industry** who excels at **pitching** but what I'm really passionate about is **structure**.

Finally, we have an example I wouldn't pitch out of the gate! You can see how clunky this is, but it still gives me a place to start.

But before we start rearranging, let me go back to Tip #5, giving them an idea of what they're about to hear before the actual pitch.

When you're pitching a script or a product, your first couple of words -- title, genre, name of company, type of company -- those details set the stage for you. But when you're pitching yourself, launching right into what you do means they're not able to hear you until half-way through the pitch.

So don't start with the pitch.

Start with a preface.

Say something true and clear like, "Well, I've been writing professionally for twenty years and I was lucky enough to discover a tiny little niche that I do very, very well."

Or set up the problem that you solve:

"You know how everyone dreads having to answer that 'So, what do you do?' question?"

Or share some personal information within the arena:

"I spent twenty years writing for every medium you can think of: theater, short stories, news, television, I have a movie coming out this year... But what I realized was..."

And then you launch into the real pitch. Which might now sound something like:

“But what I realized was, my real strength is **structure**. I **consult with writers and producers, but also with entrepreneurs and professionals in all sorts of fields** who need help **honoring their brand and pitching their projects**.”

It’s a little long; I might just mention the writers and producers and save the “entrepreneurs and professionals” for later in the conversation, or vice-versa, depending on the situation. But it opens a conversation.

Here’s another example: let’s say you’ve just started your own design company. You can preface the pitch by talking about the journey: “I spent the first ten years of my professional life working for a high-profile, high-stress ad agency, and the last ten years unlearning all the ‘rules’ that job taught me.”

Or, short and sweet, you could say, “I run my own design firm.” Just don’t stop there. No matter what you choose, your next sentence -- the elevator pitch -- would be something like:

“I’m a **designer** who specializes in **book covers** that **are affordable for writers** but **look like they cost a fortune**.”

The information you need in an elevator pitch is always the same: what’s the arena, what’s the specific project, and what makes it interesting. As long as your pitch contains those three things -- in no more than two sentences -- it will work.

Tip #10: Rein in Your Expectations

All an elevator pitch needs to do is get someone to say, “Tell me more.”

That’s it.

There are no magic right words that will immediately cause people to pull out their checkbooks. In any case, the elevator pitch isn’t a sales pitch (Tip #1). You’re not trying to sell, you’re sharing your marvelous, fun project or expertise and seeing if the other person is interested.

A good elevator pitch will let a prospect know if what you offer (be it product, script, or expertise) meets their current needs -- or not.

Getting a “Wow, that sounds cool, but it’s not really something I’m interested in” is also a good answer. Because then it begs the follow-up question:

What are you interested in?

Pitching is about listening just as much as it is about talking. You are trying to make a genuine connection with this person and explore whether or not you should work together, either on this project or in the future. You are playing a long game; it's your career, not just one project or one sale.

You will have many elevator pitches. Not only will each project require one, you need one for yourself, if only to finally explain to Aunt Hazel at Thanksgiving what it is you do for a living. And your business will change, your passions will evolve. Your elevator pitch will shift right along with your goals.

Bonus Tip! Create a Win-Win

If your only win, when you give your elevator pitch, is to sell a script or get a client, you are going to be sorely disappointed most of the time. You will get discouraged and you may even give up.

So that shouldn't be your only win.

Create a laundry list of possible wins, a cascade of benefits that can occur every time you pitch. Here are some to get you started:

Wins From Pitching:

- You meet a new person.
- You practice your pitch.
- You see where someone's eyes glaze over during your pitch, and you refine it accordingly.
- You get feedback on your pitch.
- You get feedback on your project.
- Someone says, "Tell me more."
- Someone asks for your card.
- You get someone's card.
- You find someone who shares your passion.
- You meet someone whose own pitch piques your interest or solves your problem.
- Someone requests your script or pitch packet, or further information.
- You got out of your comfort zone and pitched!

Congratulations! You have made it to the end of "Ten Tips to a Killer Elevator Pitch." If you'd like, go ahead and e-mail me your elevator pitch -- just that one or two sentences, as if I were meeting you at a networking event -- and I will send you my thoughts on it, no charge. My e-mail is Laura@PitchingPerfectly.com.

Good luck and happy pitching!