

Guidelines for Pitching and Submitting

The collected wisdom of Samantha Horley and James Norrie of Salt.

1 | Who are you pitching to? While you should know who you are pitching to and why, you would be extremely wise to also find out what The X Company is up to right now and what they are looking for in terms of projects, it may save everybody a load of wasted time.

There's no point going into the minutiae of the artistic merit and aesthetics of a film to a financier who just wants to know how they are going to make any money from your project. Be ready to tailor your pitch for each meeting. Samantha was recently at a Pitching Market in Mexico and in two days and twenty five pitches, only two people even asked who she was.

And if it doesn't sound appropriate for them, give them the briefest blurb (see 4) and ask them if they'd like to hear more. Hopefully you've engaged them enough with your dazzling charm for them to say yes.

2 | Don't ask The X Company what kind of deal they do or what kind of money they can put in before even ascertaining any interest in you or the project. That will probably wind them up and all they will probably say is "it depends on the project".

3 | Who are you, what is your experience, briefly why have you attached yourself to this project?

4 | Who are the other key people on the project who may sound impressive in terms of director, producer, writer, EP, HODs, cast?

5 | Come up with a succinct and snappy attention-grabbing opening gambit, it's a sales pitch, so sell it on the most of its merits, this may or may not include a bit of the story, eg:

"it's a comedy about a London East-End Muslim cab driver who discovers he's adopted and Jewish" (The Infidel)

"it's an Irish music based comedy from the writers of The Commitments" (I Was Bono's Doppelganger)

"it's a new drama thriller from Paul Andrew Williams who did London to Brighton" (Cherry Tree Lane)

NB These are all Salt's titles in various shades of production.

6 | Make sure you mention the genre. If you don't know what genre your film is, that is always scary to us, you need one. Try not to come up with a totally made-up one, eg two real examples we heard recently are "adult fairytale" and "rock comedy". Work out what category would it fall into on iTunes or Lovefilm. It's perfectly fine to cross genres as long as it makes sense, eg comedy drama, sci-fi horror, action comedy.

NB if you are calling it a comedy, you should avoid adding "offbeat" or "quirky" or "black" as to us that just means it's not funny. These films usually fail and again, we run a mile.

7 | Whatever you do don't try and tell the whole story, unless specifically asked, if they are interested they will read the script or a longer written synopsis. But come up with a very brief outline, eg:

"A boy from the Mumbai slums appears on the Indian Who Wants to Be a Millionaire and, as each question is asked, a flashback to his incredible life reveals how he knows the answer."

"Kiera Knightly is Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire, the most famous woman of the 18th century, The Princess Diana of her day, she managed, despite an unhappy marriage, to have a secret and passionate

affair with the future Prime Minister and became the toast of England for her flamboyance and fabulous frocks.”

8 | What are your comps? ie what films would you compare yours to? It's an excellent shorthand for folk who need to work out numbers in their heads while you are pitching. If it's a British film it's really best to compare it to British films. On the other hand we heard a great pitch recently which called a film “a Welsh Napoleon Dynamite”; sadly after reading the script it certainly wasn't, but it made us read the script.

All money people and especially studios “run comps” which are spreadsheet after spreadsheet of numbers on other films, so if you say your film is “unique” or “like nothing ever seen before”, you won't see them for dust.

Many producers and sales people like to use the “x meets y” formula, eg “it's Little Miss Sunshine meets Twilight”. If you are going to use this, please be realistic, use appropriate comparisons, no point trying to sell your gritty British drama about pregnant teens doing karaoke as “Juno meets High School Musical”.

By the way Juno, Little Miss Sunshine, Twilight and Slumdog Millionaire are currently the most overused comps by a long way.

9 | Know your audience and your market. Any kind of sales agent or financier running comps will need to know in their head they have the same film that's in your head. So they will be thinking “is it 15-24 year old boys” in which case it had better have some exploding helicopters, gruesome violence or Danny Dyer. And do your research here, really will your \$8m drama set in India with an all Indian cast really appeal to 15-25 year old boys worldwide, as in a recent example.

In other words, as a writer, director or producer, you need to know who your film is targeted at, and if it's arthouse, that's completely fine too, but be realistic. Us pitchees don't like being pitched films which are described as “universal”, there is no such thing, if Transformers, the biggest box office film this year is not universal, how can yours be?

10 | Be careful not to try and impress your pitchee with facts which you are not entirely sure of and which they are likely know way better than you, eg:

“I have cast Malcolm McDowell because I know he means so much internationally”

“This is the only independent 3D film going into production in 2010”

11 | Don't be too creative with the truth, remember everyone talks to everyone, eg:

“Universal want to take UK”

“The Film Council has offered us 35% of the budget if we bring in a UK distributor”

If your pitchee is interested, one phone call disproves this.

NB all these examples in 6 and 7 are real examples.

12 | Know your budget. It's fine not to have a proper budget done but you need to have an idea of what the budget should be based on how much you need to get it made but also, most importantly, its value in the current market. A pitchee will not take you or your movie seriously in any way if you tell them your black and white film with an unknown cast about drug addicts on a council estate is going to cost £4m, even if Ken Loach is directing it.

13 | Don't be afraid of admitting you don't know something but whatever happens know your stuff. You can always check if you don't know something, we do this a lot, you often get weird questions fired at

you. It's far better than scrabbling around in your head for the info or trying to make something up. That said, you should know your stuff that pertains to your position on the film inside and out. On a recent panel we asked a writer what audience his film was aimed at and he told us to ask his producer; he then proceeded to shoot himself in the other foot by saying that he believed that if a film was good enough it would find its own audience...wonderfully idealistic but who would put their money into developing/producing/financing/selling/releasing that? There is no excuse for ignorance. You need to understand the industry, whatever your job is in it.

14 | Timing. If you are thinking about submitting a project or contacting someone, be aware of what else may be happening. As a sales person, the most annoying thing, which also belies inexperience and not understanding the industry, is to call us immediately before, during or the few days after one of the main markets or festivals (ie Berlin, Cannes, Toronto, AFM). Also don't expect them to give you any time during these markets if you happen to go, certainly not till the end, and certainly not if you live in the same country, nothing more annoying than Brits trying to make appointments with you during Cannes. A British producer wandered into our Cannes office this year, tried several times to get an appointment, was finally told to contact us after the market, there was a script in our inbox by 8am the Monday after Cannes, not cool.

15 | Don't send a script unless you've ascertained they even want to read it. Send the most polished one you possibly can, it's unbelievably difficult to get anyone to read the same script twice, unless there's enough interest from them to look at it now with a view to helping you push it forward. Samantha was once sent a second draft of a script she'd already passed on with a cover letter saying "and in the next draft we plan to...", it went straight in the bin.

15 | Finally, be friendly and try to engage your pitchee. The worst kind of pitch is the one which is babbled in entirety without drawing breath. It's easily done, but it's not a performance, it's a meeting, so you are looking for feedback as to their interest. Give them space to ask questions. And if they look totally disinterested then stop, smile, and say something like "maybe this isn't one for you". That is completely fine and will happen a lot, it does to us all the time, though we do our very best not to pitch a film to someone we know is inappropriate, it's annoying and pointless for everyone.

Don't take it personally, don't be embarrassed, above all don't get angry, and don't respond in any way other than gorgeously magnanimously. Deep inside you can go "Ha! I'll show you you're wrong", but not out loud as one producer actually did once, drunkenly pinning Samantha to the wall at Soho House. For the record, he didn't prove her wrong.

In any case feel free to ask questions as to why they aren't interested, you'd be smart to do so, and, depending on the rapport you've struck up, ask them who they think may be interested, or for any advice they may give. But be prepared to hear some hard truths or even not to get a reply, people are busy. In our case buyers can be horribly blunt, and of course we usually disagree with a negative appraisal of a project, and often we tell them why, politely of course. But sometimes their criticism can throw up something so useful it ends up being fed back into the project and help make it better.

16 | Very lastly, don't forget that at all times we are all looking for new and exciting projects and ideas from new and exciting filmmakers. So please be new and exciting. But do have someone experienced on your team.

Good luck and we look forward to hearing from you!