

Tips for Pitching an Editor or Agent at a Conference

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1. Research editors/agents ahead of time. Pitch to an editor/agent who is interested in the kind of project you want to pitch. Then find out everything you can about the editor/agent and the guidelines for their line.
2. If possible, find out whether the appointment will be group or individual, and how long you'll have. If that information isn't accessible, assume it will be a short group appointment (e.g., three minutes) and prepare accordingly. It's easier to expand your pitch than to cut it.
3. Consider your goal for the pitch appointment. It can't be to sell your book, because that's not going to happen. The goal, typically, is to get a request – if the book is really suitable for the editor/agent and they're interested in it. There's no point getting a "politeness" request from someone who has no interest in your project.
4. Now, prepare your pitch with that goal in mind:
 - (a) Start with a sentence that conveys the basic information. For example, "[Title] is a [length] word [description; e.g., romantic suspense] targeted to [line; e.g., Silhouette Romantic Suspense]."
 - (b) Follow with a one or two line snappy summary of your book (also known as an "elevator pitch," which comes in handy any time anyone asks you what you're writing). There are various ways of doing this. For example:
 - Try using this basic structure, and fancying it up a little – or at least try to include these basic elements in your pitch. [Heroine] wants [goal] in order to [motivation] but she can't have it because [conflict]. [Hero] wants [goal] in order to [motivation] but he can't have it because [conflict]. (This approach focuses on goal, motivation, conflict. For more information, check out Debra Dixon's book.)
 - Try the "high concept" pitch that compares your book to a couple of famous movies or books – e.g., "Mary Poppins meets The Terminator". If you can come up with one that's catchy and honestly reflects your story, that's great, but if you can't, don't use something that sounds forced.
 - Try this approach, suggested by Gayle Wilson. In one sentence starting with the word "When," describe the situation, the characters, and the objective. In a second sentence, a question starting with the word "Can," describe the opponent/obstacles and the potential disaster.
 - (c) From that initial summary, move on to state a bit more about your book. Think of the back cover blurb. You want to cover the basic elements: heroine, hero, conflict, story line, character arc, resolution. You must be able to summarize your story concisely and effectively, in a way that conveys information and gives a sense of the unique elements that will hook the editor's or agent's interest. Know your book inside and out, and love it. Figure out how to put that knowledge and passion into a concise, effective summary that reflects the tone of the book as well as your own voice. You want to give the editor/agent a clear indication that this story is something readers can identify with, that it's original, and that it has a gut emotional appeal. And you want to do it briefly, so that,

ideally, the entire pitch takes no more than two or three minutes. The goal is to keep it short and whet the editor/agent's interest.

- (d) Be prepared to expand and/or or answer questions.
5. Practice your pitch, preferably in front of an audience. See what questions they ask, what interests your audience, what things aren't clear to them. Use that input to hone your pitch.
 6. It's all right to write your pitch down and ask the editor/agent if you can read it. Be aware, though, that occasionally they will say they'd prefer you didn't.
 7. Try not to be too nervous. Editors and agents are generally pretty nice people. Also, they know their own goals in the appointment: i.e., they know what information they need to get from you, and if you don't provide it, they'll ask. Also be aware that you can't always guess what information is relevant to them. For example, they may be aware of a new line or trend at their publishing house that hasn't been made public.
 8. Consider how to dress and present yourself. Aim for a business professional look that conveys your own personality and style. You're a romance writer, not an accountant. Present yourself in a friendly, professional, confident manner. Organize your possessions before the appointment, so you don't arrive and have to deal with a jacket and several bags, pull things out of a tote bag, fumble to find your business card, etc. Have a notebook and pen handy to take notes if the editor/agent provides any information you might not remember.
 9. Think about your audience. The editor/agent is a professional who's doing a job, and a human being who probably traveled to this conference, has a backlog of work, is handling numerous appointments – and may well be tired, jet-lagged, or headachy. Be concise, considerate and pleasant. And at the end, don't forget to say thanks.
 10. If it's a group appointment, be considerate to everyone else who is pitching. Don't take more than your fair share of time. Don't fidget when someone else is pitching. Listen to their pitches and the editor/agent's responses. You can learn tips to improve your own pitching, and get a sense of the editor/agent's interests and personality.
 11. In most appointments, it's fine to ask questions. You may want to ask an editor about a trend you've observed in their line. You may want to ask an agent about something you read on their website. With agents especially, the appointment is more of an interview; you are using it to obtain information about them, as well as to see if they're interested in your work.
 12. If the editor/agent invites you to submit material, ensure you know what they're asking for. Do they want a synopsis, chapters, a full manuscript? How much, how long? Should it be sent by mail or email? Be sure to get their business card. If they suggest you submit to a different editor (e.g., Harlequin editors often hear pitches for lines they don't personally acquire for, and refer the authors to the appropriate editors), make sure you get the name of the editor and where and how to reach them (e.g., Harlequin has New York and Toronto offices).
 13. If you don't get a request, don't view that as a failure. All it means is that this particular project wasn't something this particular editor/agent was interested in on this particular day.

©Susan Lyons. Award-winning author Susan Lyons writes sexy romance that's passionate, heartwarming and fun. She is published by Kensington, Berkley, Harlequin, The Wild Rose Press, and Freya's Bower. She sold her first two books as a result of pitching to an editor at a conference. Visit her website at www.susanlyons.ca.