

PITCHFALLS

Why bad pitches
happen
to good people

Erica Mills
www.claxonmarketing.com

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WHY ARE PITCHES SO IMPORTANT?

The average adult uses 15,000 words a day.¹ Using Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hour rule on becoming an expert,² we're all expert word users because we've used them day in and day out since we were toddlers.

Why is it, then, that pitches cause so much grief? Seriously. You blaze through 15,000 words a day, and yet somehow, when you know you have to pitch someone on something, suddenly you're like a tongue-tied teenager. What's that about?

It probably has something to do with the fact that:

1. You think the point of every pitch is to close a deal. (Oh, the pressure!)
2. You've heard too many bad ones. (Really, really bad ones.)

We've all had those moments when we've asked someone what they do and their response made us cringe. Or been at a fundraiser and all we wanted to do was curl up and nap, it was such a snore-fest. Whether you're pitching your case for eradicating extreme global poverty or for why your kids should pick up their toys, you don't want someone to cringe. Or yawn. Or fake like they have a bunch of important emails to look at on their smart phone.

You want people to engage. You want their eyebrows to go up and their heads to tilt to the side in the international sign for, "That's interesting. Tell me more!"

That's why pitches are so important: good ones pique people's interest. And getting people interested is the all-important first step in generating support. Bad pitches, on the other hand, have a similar effect to a nighttime sleep aid.

*“Handle them carefully, for words
have the power of atom bombs.”*

Pearl Strachman Hurd

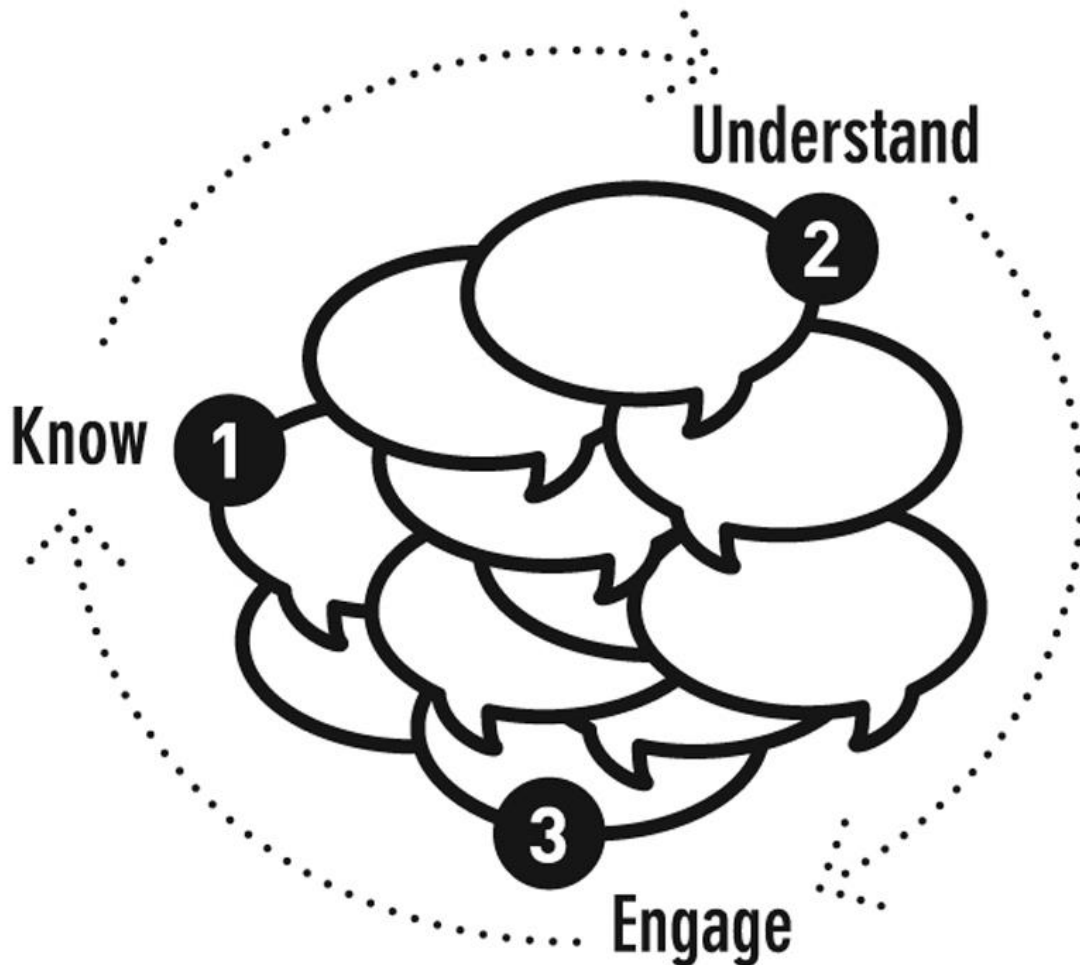
¹ Yep, 15,000 words, according to “Do women really talk more than men?”, an article by Matthias R. Mehl, et al published in Science Magazine and based on research from the University of Arizona. Those strong, silent types aren't so silent after all.

² In *Tipping Point*, Gladwell breaks it down for us: 10,000 hours is the tipping point for becoming a full-on expert in anything. Whether it's raising money, baking cupcakes or becoming a mixed martial arts champ, plan on 10,000 hours.

WHAT IS A PITCH ANYWAY?

Before we go any further, let's be clear on what we mean by 'a pitch'. Really, you shouldn't think of having a single pitch, so much as a collection of pitches that move people along an Engagement Cycle — from knowing about you, to understanding what you do and, eventually, engaging with you.³

You need different pitches for each point on the cycle because your listener has different questions rattling around in their head depending on where they fall on your Engagement Cycle.



Let's break this down a bit:

1. **KNOW:** The 'know' pitch answers the question: 'What do you do?' You want a pitch that is remarkable — meaning interesting enough for people to remark on it to you and (pay attention because this next part is very important in terms of word-of-mouth marketing) to others.⁴
2. **UNDERSTAND:** Once you're on someone's radar, i.e. they know you exist, you need to make sure they really, truly understand what you do and why you do it. Of all the organizations out there, why should they engage with yours?⁵ What makes you special? Compelling? Unlike any other? Your 'understand' pitch answers these questions.

³ 'You' can refer to you, your organization, your company, your cause, your school, etc.

⁴ We have Seth Godin, marketing guru extraordinaire, to thank for this definition of 'remarkable'. So obvious once you think about it—interesting enough for someone to remark upon to others—yet we don't tend to set our bar that high.

⁵ Lots of organizations skip this step. They leap from Know to Engage. Big mistake. BIG. Leads to 'one and done' engagement. Never good.

It answers the question: 'Why you?' Understanding leads to enthusiasm. Enthusiasm leads to, you guessed it, engagement.

3. **ENGAGE:** Donate. Advocate. Volunteer. Buy. This pitch answers the question: 'How can I engage?' This is the pitch that moves people from learning to doing.

All of your pitches are door openers, not deal closers. A successful pitch sparks a conversation that leads to a next step. Even when you're inviting someone to, say, write you a great, big check, your pitch's job is to set up the conversation that will lead to that check. (Takes the pressure off a bit when you think of it that way, now doesn't it?)

“It’s not what I do, but the way I do it. It’s not what I say, but the way I say it.”

Mae West

WHY YOUR PITCHES ARE (PROBABLY) BAD

We strike up conversations all the time. So if pitches are simply a means to sparking a conversation, we should be good at this, right? Sadly, in general, we're not.

If your pitch fails to get a conversation going, it's likely for one, or all, of the following reasons:

1. You sound like a robot
2. You only talk about yourself
3. You talk too much
4. You use jargon
5. You sound like a talking tagline

These are pitchfalls — common mistakes that people fall into when making a pitch.

The good news is they are all avoidable and fixable. (Hooray!)

This pint-sized book will walk you through all five pitchfalls. You will learn what they are, why they happen, and how you can fix, or avoid, each one.

Each pitchfall is independent of the others, so you don't need to read them in any particular order. See which ones sound familiar to you and focus on those.

They're your pitches. Make them awesome.

Pitchfall #1:

YOU SOUND LIKE A ROBOT

A monotonous-robot-like-voice is boring. People don't ask questions about stuff they find boring or can't understand due to mono-tonal delivery. They don't want to engage in boredom. Nor do they tell others about it. So ditching the robo-talk is supremely important.

The two main reasons for robo-talk are:

1. **You've been forced:** You were told by the marketing people, or your boss, or the brand police or someone else that you can't say no to, that you have to use a set of words verbatim. And you don't like the words. So you comply by using them...and you sound like a compliant robot (not a fun one like C-3PO).
2. **You're scared:** This is particularly true for those who care deeply about their work and are motivated by mission. (Sound like anyone you know...?) When you put your passion out there for all the world to see (or, in the case of your pitch, hear), you risk being rejected. Someone might laugh at your idea and, by extension, you. It's like a horrible teenage movie replaying in your mind.



Pitchfall Fix

Fear not, there is hope for those inclined toward pitch-induced robotitis.⁶

For #1:

Each of us has our own unique way of talking. We have different vocal intonations, hand gestures and mannerisms.⁷ Your pitch should be easy enough to say that your staff, board, volunteers, customers and clients can, and will, all say it while sounding like themselves. People repeat things that are concise and compelling. They repeat things that are easy to repeat. If the people closest to your organization — staff, board, etc. — still sound like robots no matter how much they've practiced, simplify the pitch.

For #2:

Not everyone is going to like your idea, your cause, your recipe for a better world. Your job is to use your pitch to find your believers. Believers are people who believe what you believe. Maybe, like you, they believe all kids should have a chance to be great readers. Or, that small loans can make a big difference to women entrepreneurs. Or, that the arts matter. Or, that a perfect cup of coffee is worth waiting for.

If you bust out your pitch at your next networking event and someone gives you a blank stare, that's totally fine. It means they're not one of your believers. Move on.

When you stop worrying about the people who won't like, or care about your pitch and focus on your believers, robotalk evaporates. So go find your believers. Fine tune your pitch for them. That's who matters.

⁶ Not a medical term. No need to consult with your physician before starting a rigorous program to fix your pitch.

⁷ For those of you who like fancy words, this non-verbal stuff is called 'paralanguage'. It accounts for somewhere between 80-90% of what people hear when you speak.

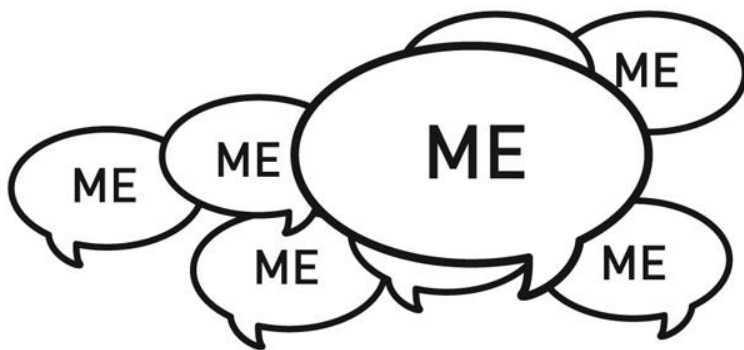


Pitchfall #2:

YOU ONLY TALK ABOUT YOURSELF

Most of us like to think of ourselves as nice people. Nice people listen to others. Nice people care about others. That's nice.

The reality is no matter how nice someone is, they still care most about themselves — their kids, their to-do list, their job, their stuff, etc. They will listen to you (they are nice, after all!) but unless you draw a connection between what they care about and what you're talking about, it's going to be a short, unremarkable conversation. And if people don't remember you, they won't tell others about your work and they won't take a next step with you.



Pitchfall Fix

1. **Speak to what's in it for them (WIIFT):** When you live and breathe something, what's in it for them is so obvious to you that you don't even think about mentioning it. Consider the difference between these two pitches:

- a) We teach people how to do public speaking.
- b) We teach people how to be confident when they speak in front of a crowd.

The only thing people fear more than public speaking is death.⁸ It's scary. Paint a mental image of what it would feel like for them to get over that fear. Most people would love to feel confident when they speak in front of a crowd. Start a conversation about how you can make that happen. Sell the sizzle, not the steak.

2. **Add 'you' or 'your'.** So easy, yet so effective.

Let's continue with the example from above. Notice what happens when you add "like you" to our example:

I teach people like you how to be confident when speaking in front of a crowd.

And, voilà! It's no longer about you and your business. It's about solving a problem for the person, or people, with whom you're chatting.

Take your current pitch and add some 'you' to it. Depending on your audience, it might be "you and your family" or "like you and the people you serve" or "you and your community".

A couple of before and after examples for you:

Before: *We make it easy for people to get where they want to go.*

After: *We make it easy for you to get where you want to go.*

Before: *We build eco-friendly housing.*

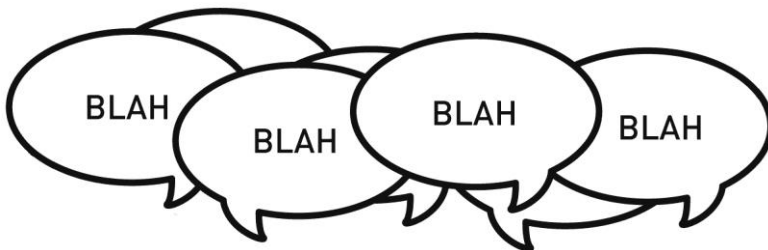
After: *We build eco-friendly homes for people like you and your family.*

Pitchfall #3:

YOU TALK TOO MUCH

We've all been there. You meet someone. They ask what you do. You give them your pitch and, although it's clear they don't really care (what with them checking their watch), you keep blah blah blah-ing.

Whether your thing is saving puppies, saving the planet, or saving up for retirement, you care about your thing. You want to talk about it. Because you think it's cool, you think others will think it's cool and so you start telling them everything there is to know about your thing and it's not until you're on point 37 about how cool your thing is that you pause to take a breath. You can't help yourself. You share because you care.



Care away. Caring is great. Caring makes the world a better place.

But remember: when you tell someone everything, they remember nothing.

Pitchfall Fix

1. **Practice:** When it comes to pitching, practice really does make perfect. If you are someone who is prone to over-talking (or you know some staff and board members who need to reign it in a bit), practice, practice, practice.

2. **Develop 3 different versions:** small, medium and large. Small should be around 10 words, medium around 25, and large around 50. Having a scripted pitch will help Big Talkers stay on point.

In general, here is what each size pitch is good for:

SMALL

⁸ The 1973 *Book of Lists* cited public speaking at the top of the list. In a 2001 Gallup poll, snakes were scarier than public speaking. Key take-away regardless of source: people get scared when they have to talk in front of an audience, which is why you see this example. Not trying to freak you out by making you envision yourself delivering a pitch in front of a crowd. That may happen one of these days, but that's not the point of this example.

You're in a setting where you don't know what the person cares about, e.g. you run into an acquaintance at the supermarket. Ideally, this sentence is 10 words or less.

MEDIUM

You're at a networking event or some other setting where the expectation is you'll be learning what people do.

LARGE

You have a captive audience, e.g. a Rotary meeting, a speech, a meeting you are leading.

*“Perfection is reached not when
there is nothing left to add, but when
there is nothing left to take away.”*

Antoine de St-Éxupery

Here are the three versions that Idaho Nonprofit Center uses, depending on the situation.

SMALL

We represent the interests of our state's 4800 nonprofit organizations.

MEDIUM

We represent the interests of our state's 4800 nonprofit organizations. We do this by strengthening individual nonprofits and by serving as a bridge between the nonprofit, public and private sectors.

LARGE

We represent the interests of our state's 4800 nonprofit organizations. We do that in two main ways: by strengthening individual organizations' internal operations through training, technical assistance, and one-on-one coaching; and through research and public speaking, we act as a bridge between the nonprofit sector, and our private and public counterparts.

Your Turn:

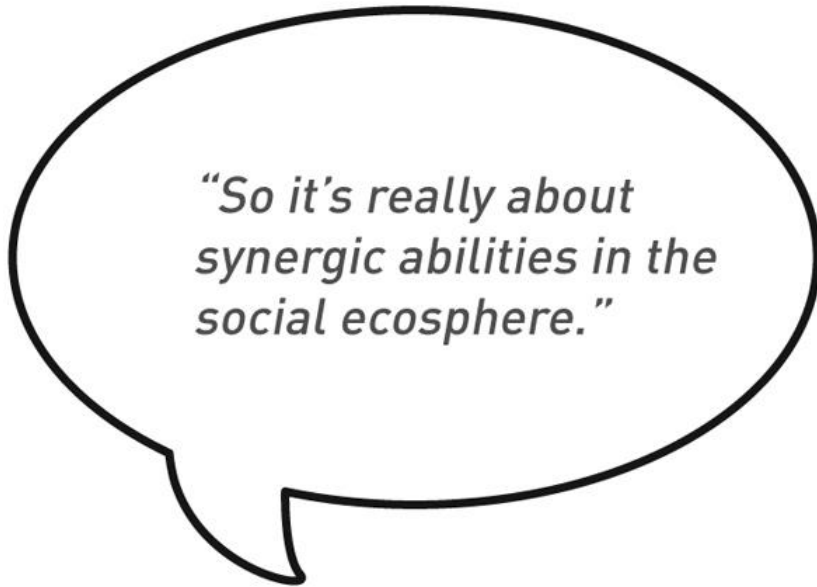
Write your short, 10 word pitch about you and/or your organization.

Pitchfall #4:

YOU USE JARGON

Jargon is handy. When you're talking to people who are also in the weeds with you day in and day out, it's really, really handy. You all understand each other because the jargon is part of your culture. It gives you a short-hand. It's internally efficient.

As soon as you get outside your inner circle (meaning beyond the person with whom you share a cube), jargon becomes meaningless gobbledygook.



People won't repeat your jargon for two reasons:

1. They've tuned it — and you — out, and/or
2. They don't understand what you're saying and, therefore, feel dumb. This is really, really bad. When people feel dumb, do they ask questions? No. They clam up. You want people to open up, not clam up!

In sum: using jargon is useless.

Pitchfall Fix

Every year, Lake Superior State University publishes a Banished Words List. It consists of words or expressions (e.g. "just sayin'") that should no longer be used because they have been so overused that they've lost their meaning.⁹

To fix the jargon pitchfall, come up with your organization's very own Banished Words List. In this case, these will be words that shall not be used when talking with those outside your organization.

A great way to do this is to go around the office and take quick videos of everyone's pitches. Then show them to people outside your office. People like your donors and your customers. They care about what you do, but aren't as close to it. They will tell you which jargon to ditch from your pitch.

You can also have an outsider read your homepage, About Us, and other key pages and highlight all the jargon that's there. Usually, if it's being used on those pages, it's being used in pitches here, there and everywhere. Banish it!

Here are some before and after examples:

Before: *We offer wrap-around services to entrepreneurs receiving technical assistance.*

After: *We get entrepreneurs everything they need to be successful.*

Before: *We offer a comprehensive suite of services based on best practices that helps low-income families achieve optimal health.*

After: *We make the connections families need to be healthy.*

⁹ Work for a nonprofit? Check out Big Duck's annual *Words to Avoid List* for additional fodder.

“Our business is infested with idiots who try to impress by using pretentious jargon.”


David Ogilvy

Pitchfall #5:

YOU SOUND LIKE A TALKING TAGLINE

At the risk of stating the obvious: taglines are read, not said. Nike employees likely don't walk around saying, "I work for Nike. We help you just do it." When you say it out loud, it sounds silly and contrived, doesn't it?

Having a great tagline is great. But it doesn't mean you have a great pitch.



*“I work for Nike.
We help you just do it!”*

Pitchfall Fix

“Translate” your tagline into something human beings — your board, staff, volunteers, clients and others — can say without sounding weird, robotic or creepy. (See for yourself: Go ahead and read a bunch of taglines out loud. Weird, robotic and/or creepy, right?)

Here are a few examples of how taglines can be translated into pitch material.

Smithsonian Institute

Tagline: Seriously Amazing

Pitch: We give you access to amazing information about the world around you.

Mobile Alliance for Maternal Action (MAMA)

Tagline: Putting the power of health in every mama's hands

Pitch: We put the power of health in the hands of mothers around the world.

Although some FedEx employees might say “absolutely, positively” repeatedly, you up your odds of having a consistent pitch by substituting flashy words (which are great in writing but not so much when spoken) for something more straight-forward:

FedEx

Tagline: When it absolutely, positively has to get there overnight.

Pitch: We get your packages where they need to be overnight.

The most important thing is that you don't just read your pitch — you have to say it out loud. Otherwise, you'll sound like a talking tagline. And no one wants to chat with a tagline.

PERFECTING YOUR PITCHES

It's time to perfect your pitches, to make them pitchfall-free. That means practicing. If you don't practice, you will run the risk of comfortably sliding back into pitchfall territory.

If you're working to hone pitches for an organization, everyone will need to practice. They will groan and there will be eye rolling. Remind them that the point of all this is to be able to engage more people more deeply in your work — more clients, more donors, more customers, more volunteers. Having the words to engage these people effectively will rock everyone's world!

Try out your pitches on people outside your organization exactly as you've practiced them (with co-workers or in front of your mirror) at least 10 times. You're trying something new, so it might not feel comfortable at first. You have to do it enough times to get over the "this is new and kind of clunky" hump.

Note the questions people ask when they hear your pitch.

Then ask yourself, did the pitch:

1. **Expand your circle:** Is it remarkable? Will people talk about you, your work, your cause to others?
2. **Lead to a next step:** Do people ask questions that will lead to a conversation? Is it one that will eventually lead to engagement in, and support of, your work?

"I've always believed if you put in the work, the results will come."

Michael Jordan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erica Mills is an internationally recognized expert on how to use words to make the world a better place. She heads up Claxon, a company on a mission to teach those doing good how to get noticed. She is on faculty at the University of Washington and Seattle University, and has lectured at the University of Chicago. Mills is a lover of words in general, and verbs and adverbs in particular.

For more help finding your words and perfecting your pitch, visit www.claxonmarketing.com.

“A bird doesn’t sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.”

Maya Angelou
