



THE ART OF PITCHING FOR IMPACT

A Guide for Documentary Filmmakers

Developed for the International Festival and Forum on Human Rights

Revised February 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I. TEN KEY QUESTIONS

II. TRAILER TIPS

III. SCRIPTING YOUR PITCH

IV. THE PRACTICE OF PRESENTING

A. Zoom Time: Your Online Presence

B. Pitch Meetings

Addendum

A: MAPPING AUDIENCES TO OPPORTUNITY

B. EXPLORING THE LOGLINE

INTRODUCTION

Imagine telling the story of a future in which your film contributes to positive change in the world. Whether you hope it leads to a specific outcome, strengthens an existing movement, shifts a dominant narrative, etc. your goal with the verbal pitch is to help the audience to also imagine that possibility and see how your film can be transformative.

This guide is intended for documentary filmmakers who are preparing to pitch projects to prospective impact partners, supporters, and funders. While it incorporates key elements of creating an impact strategy, it is not a complete guide to that process.

Pitch presentations in the international documentary world are generally 7 minutes long, a good split is 4 minutes (give or take) to speak and 3 minutes for your trailer. Most formal pitch programs—such as the FIFDH program—also include a series of one-on-one meetings lasting approximately 25 minutes. The approach to pitching to an industry-only audience is obviously different, elements of this guide are useful in that context.

The task is to share the story of your film and explain why it matters to change leaders. You may have been working on your film for years and written dozens of proposals. Yet you have just minutes to articulate your vision and invite partners to join you!?

Clearly, the pitch cannot capture the entire story of your film or specifics of your planned campaign. It *can* entice audiences to want to see it and put it to good use.

How to use this Guide

If you are just beginning to script your pitch for impact, the following ten questions are designed to surface that which is essential to you and your team. You need not craft detailed answers that might go in a grant application. Give yourself a few minutes for each question and write what comes to mind. If you are part of a team, try answering separately, helpful to note what you see differently and get on the same page before you enter meetings. Then gather your notes and move on to writing out your pitch script so you have a draft.

*Written by Patricia Finneran, Executive Director, Story Matters
E: Patricia@StoryMattersMedia.org*

At Story Matters, we believe in the power of story to advance transformative social change. We work with individuals and organizations on storytelling, strategy, partnerships and funding to help them realize their vision and maximize the impact of their work.

TEN KEY QUESTIONS

**** START WITH THE LOGLINE ****

Ideally, the logline sets the context, tells us who we will meet, and it invites curiosity that captures the imagination of the audience.

1. Why you? Why are you making this movie?

What do you bring to this that no one else does? What's new about the approach or idea that your film brings to the issue(s) addressed in the film?

Consider representation and voice. If you are **not** part of the community that is centered in the story, what is your relationship and proximity to the affected communities? How have you addressed ethical concerns around representation and concerns about extractive filmmaking on your team and in your process?

2. Who benefits and how are they framed?

The corollary to who gets to tell the story is who benefits from the proposed change. How are they framed in the film and how do you talk about them? Asset framing is a powerful and simple way to think about social change: talk about people in terms of their aspirations rather than their deficits. Are you telling the story of at-risk children, or students seeking better opportunities? Rape victims or women who deserve justice?

3. What is the problem - or opportunity for change - that will your film and campaign address? Can you state the problem succinctly? If your film is part of a larger social movement, what does it bring to the movement leaders? That framing is important to potential partners and impact funders.

4. What's the distribution plan and timeline?

Note if you have some distribution agreements in place, or if you have a strong distribution track record. Keep it simple, aspirational and realistic.

Note: these questions were originally developed for Good Pitch, a global program created by Doc Society which provides a platform for the best new documentaries to partner with change makers and funders to create high-impact social justice impact campaigns.

Tips, Examples & Resources

This is a story about... who is taking some action... and what's at stake is...

Tip: You cannot include all of the answers to these questions in your pitch. Identify what's most relevant and allude to it when you introduce yourself.

Reference: Natalie Bullock Brown and Sonya Childress address these issues in "The Documentary Future: A Call For Accountability in Documentary.

Reference: Check out the work of Trabian Shorters and his work on asset framing here.

Go deeper: explore Theory of Change. Your film may support or power a particular intervention that is an element of a larger strategy. Example: Big Problem: climate change. Intervention: wind power. Film: Cape Wind

The ideal audiences for the film and impact campaign may differ. Consider how to ensure that your distribution partners allow you to get to the priority impact audience(s).

TEN KEY QUESTIONS, continued

5. Who is the target audience for the campaign and where will it roll out?

Knowing who you need to reach is essential. Knowing where the film can do the most good is key for an impact oriented pitch such as FIFDH as you are talking to groups that have international constituencies.

6. How will your film function as a tool for change?

Does it add to or change the dominant cultural narrative? Reveal something new? Provide context to a narrowly understood story?

Talk about what's special about your film– maybe it's a compelling central character, a nail-biting investigation or gorgeous imagery that draws attention in a new way– and how that makes it a powerful tool to engage audiences.

7. Who are your ideal partners, and what do you offer them?

It requires deep research to identify the right set of organizations, funders, activists, academics, etc. In advance of that work, avoid overwhelm and identify 2-3 to start.

Next: put yourself in the place of those ideal partners, they may be the movement leaders, funders, policy makers, or an international NGO... **how might they use your film in their work?**

8. What tools or channel activations do you need to reach and engage key audiences?

Take a look at the partnerships opportunity menu in the Mapping Audiences To Opportunity section in the Addendum. Mention one or two priorities in your pitch.

Think outside the box on reaching priority audiences. What if your key audience doesn't have access to mainstream distribution channels? See example ->

9. How do you envision success, and how will you define it?

Ultimately success would be solving the big problem, how might your film and campaign advance the arc of change on the relevant issue? While you may need to have detailed KPI's (key performance indicators) for a grant application, this question is aspirational and should lead to an invitation.

10. What three things - human resource, tools, partner and yes, money - do you need most now?

Tips, Examples & Resources

Tip: As the pandemic continues, make sure your impact distribution plan is adaptable to allow for both in-person and virtual screening events.

Resource: [The Impact Field Guide](#) provides a super useful framework about the story environment and how different types of stories function.

Tip: Get to know the key terms in the relevant field of social change: Consider using their language in the pitch. Example: educators talk about 'Social and Emotional Learning' as a means to address bullying. Many environmental leaders now talk about 'Climate Justice.'

Example: Skylight Pictures wanted to ensure priority audiences in Guatemala, many of whom did not have cable TV or broadband, had access to the film '[Granito](#).' Skylight gave it away: they not only allowed local purveyors of pirated DVDs to sell it, they provided good quality copies!

Tip: Ask your protagonists or partners how they define success. Listen first and work in partnership with the relevant community rather than provide a solution they may not want.

See 'the rule of three' in the Scripting Your Pitch section.

II. TRAILER TIPS

First, let's acknowledge that there are multiple types of trailers; there's the trailer for the completed film, there's the trailer you send out to prospects and won't have the opportunity to introduce and broadcasters, funders, festivals may all have different length requirements.

You're creating a pitching trailer, thus you get to introduce it and note essential context. We asked Kristin Feeley, Deputy Director, Sundance Documentary Film Program and a genius at working with filmmakers and editors for her thoughts. Here's her quick take:

"Length: visual material should be 3-4 minutes (or less) of a 7-8 minute pitch. It is tempting to let the sample carry the pitch but pitching is a balance of bringing the filmmaker forward along with the film. The sample provides a foundation from which the filmmaker emerges to explain what the film is and why they are the best person/team to tell it!

It's not called a "teaser" for nothing! The sample can give a sense of the film's tone and POV. It can offer a sense of cinematic language and possibility but it should leave you wanting to see more and also with questions you want to explore.

The visual sample doesn't have to tell the whole story! It should highlight the greatest strengths of the project and the aspects of the film that help it to stand out to funders (if character-based give a sense of access and a character's complexity and potential journey. If a survey, it should give a sense of scope and speak to the central question of the film. If it's a personal film it should clearly demonstrate the intimacy of the relationship with the filmmaker and POV of the film."

This may seem obvious, she added "Note that anything you include should be mindful of legal and ethical issues. You should not include any footage that your protagonists would not want to be made public or put participants at risk so the trailer should be vetted both legally and ethically."

In other words, be careful that the dramatic moments that you choose for the trailer do not inadvertently re-victimize your subjects.

THING TO DO

- Place a title card at the top but keep it up just long enough to read.
- Use multiple music cues.
- Use your best material! Don't hold back.
- If you plan to use this beyond the live pitch format:
 - Use a title card to place us in the location / time frame if it's not clear from the material.
 - Include above-the-line names (director, producer, production company) and contact information at the end.
- Consider using a lower third to identify the main character(s) if they are not identified in audio.

DON'TS

- Do not use well-known music for which you don't have rights. It may create just the right mood, but film professionals will wonder if you have the rights and that takes them out of the moment.
- Do not use too many text cards throughout the trailer (other than open / close). Lots of text on screen pulls the audience out of the story world of your story.

III. SCRIPTING YOUR PITCH

The best pitches have a natural flow to them, usually in three parts: first, the introduction and context, next the sample media, and finally your impact vision and invitation to the pitch audience.

We suggest that you limit yourself to three requests. Why? Omne Trium Perfectum" (everything that comes in threes is perfect). The **rule of three** appears in literature from its beginnings through to modern advertising, from the Latin "Veni Vidi Vici" (I came, I saw, I conquered) to the French "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite" (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity) to global marketing "Just Do It." It just works.

SUGGESTED OUTLINE FOR AN IMPACT PITCH

1. Introduction and set-up: the who and the what.
 - Introduce ourselves and respective roles in the Film Title and campaign.
* Say something about my connection to the project
 - Logline for the film, e.g. this is a story about <person or community> and they are <action verb>
 - Briefly frame the issue or opportunity for change and who benefits
 - Intro the trailer: what context does the audience need?

2. Middle - present the media

3. The close: why it matters, when and where, and what we need.
 - Optional trailer outro: what bears repeating, and what's left out?
 - What's special about our film as tool for transformative change
 - We seek to reach <priority audience> and hope to work with < ideal partners>
 - Distribution Timeline: when will it be available to partners
* If applicable, note urgency or confluence with events relevant to pitch audience
 - We envision success: <your vision here>
 - We are seeking: <the things, resources, or people that you need>
* *You don't need to say 1, 2, 3.* Just keep your close clear and concise.

Remember to say thank you!

IV. THE PRACTICE OF PRESENTING

A. Zoom Time: Your Online Presence

The ongoing pandemic has led to a lot more hybrid events, sharing a video recording of a film / project pitch is now commonplace. All the work you do to prepare your pitch used to be for just the 50 or so folks in the room, now it can reach hundreds of prospective partners and funders all over the world.

As a filmmaker, you are probably more comfortable behind the camera. This is your chance to star in a short film, so here's a checklist to consider. .

- **Test Your Tech:** double check your wifi connection for video streaming, and hardwire your internet connection if possible.
- **Camera** - frame yourself as you would an interview subject. Is your eye line aligned with the computer camera? Place the camera slightly above you so that you are looking up rather than down.
- **Lighting** - consider buying a ring light as they are designed for computer cameras.
- **Sound** - a direct input is most reliable. In-ear headphones look better rather than a bulky headset. Tip for Apple earbuds: make sure they're not set to turn off when you touch them
- **Personal Appearance** - How would you dress as if you were going to a business event at the UN? What do you tell interview subjects not to wear? Go for a collared shirt, a soft color, avoid distracting stripes, you get the idea.
- **Background** - keep it simple and free of clutter. Everyone loves a bookshelf, and a plant provides a natural touch. If you have a poster for your film, why not hang it in the background?
- **Script placement and eye line:** for a live event, we recommend using note cards so you can flip through the key points and not be shuffling sheets of paper. For an on-camera pitch, you need your script to be aligned with the camera so you are not looking down. Consider placing the key text full screen in a large font. Keep a printed copy of the key points nearby in case the tech goes awry.
- **Time yourself reading out loud.** If it is too long, cut back, don't try to rush your presentation. Speak slowly (slower than might feel right to you) and clearly. If you are a native English speaker, your natural pace and accent may be too fast for an international audience.
- **Multi-Presenter Considerations**
 - Will you be in the same room, or in multiple locations? Switching from one media feed to another affects the flow and creates opportunities for technical errors. Make sure the production team knows in what order you plan to present.
 - Do not go back and forth between each of you more than once in the pre-trailer or post-trailer section. Consider having one person intro the trailer, and another person do the outro and make the 'asks.'
 - If you are in different locations, use similar visual backgrounds
- **Practice Makes Perfect**

Why not record a practice pitch and watch it with a friend?

B. The Pitch Meeting(s)

If the one-on-one meetings take place following a public pitch, then folks know about your project. But don't assume they recall the details, ask them if they saw it and whether they want to see the trailer again and proceed accordingly.

The beauty of being selected for a pitch forum is the organizers have curated potential film and impact partners for you!

And, be prepared for hearing yourself tell the same story many times in a short period of time. You may unconsciously start to riff, thinking you should change it up. Don't.

Pay attention to the listener. Can you tell what's resonating with them? Do they look confused or even disengaged? Make a note and then go ahead and adjust your presentation.

Ideally, you start to get super-fluent with your story, framing it in an ever-more clear and concise way. Imagine a politician or activist giving their standard campaign speech, they deliver the same words with energy and passion each time.

Consider closing your pitch meeting with a question. Ask them if anything was unclear. Ask something specific about their organization based on research.

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ADDENDUM A: MAPPING AUDIENCES TO OPPORTUNITY

THE AUDIENCE FOR YOUR PITCH

What do you know about the actual group of folks who are designated to hear and respond to your pitch? Can you contact them in advance to let them know you look forward to 'meeting' them? If not, get their email contact information asap and follow up with them!

Recall the rule of three, as you prepare for individual meetings, can you tailor three things to each organization?

Your audience has access to "influencers," and each organization has its own communications strategy. Their key question is how can this film help us engage key constituents and advance our goals.

In follow-up conversations, ask the representative about their priority audiences and/ or communications challenge, your film may be a great tool for them.

AUDIENCE GROUPS

Audience Groups include the following, which groups might the organization to whom you are pitching help you get to?

- Public Opinion. But what public? Parents, registered voters, people who drive?
- Policy makers, elected officials, and political influencers
- Brands and companies that could become allies, or whom you want to change
- Press and mainstream media
- Influential non-profits who can affect change on the issue
- Foundations/funders who can support your work or campaign beneficiaries
- Online audience and affinity groups

Potential Outcomes

Film campaigns offer organizations tremendous opportunities to power-up their communications and marketing efforts. Some potential outcomes include the following:

- Energize the base
- Bring new people to their issue (new demographic, etc.)
- Help reach new geographic area
- Raise money
- Find volunteers
- Educate about complex issues
- Humanize the issues
- Connect with other partners

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIP & COLLABORATION

Forging partnerships is all about finding what you have to share with each other.

As filmmakers and impact strategists working and partner organizations and movement leaders and funders, it's helpful if we all work off the same menu. Herewith, a suggested menu of options.

A. Knowledge and Strategy

NGO's and movement leaders have deep experience on the issues and can help the film team determine and refine campaign goals.

- Lead or host a brain-trust meeting to create coalition and attract foundation support
- Review impact strategy and provide insights and suggestions
- Keep each other apprised of changes on the ground as the situation evolves.

B. The Film - Screening Opportunities

- Private In-Person Events - *Design and implement in-person events that reach the right audience in the right way.*
- Private Online Screenings
- Public Screenings
- Theatrical Release
- Broadcast & Cable Release
- Streaming Media (Netflix, Amazon, Disney+ etc.)

C. Ancillary Marketing & Informational Content

- Short Video
- Website Content
- Social Network Messaging
- Direct Email
- Mobile messaging
- Customized Viewers Guide
- Guide for Educators
- Funding for creation of the above elements

D. Networks: access and relationships

- Access to influencers: provide the imprimatur of a recognized leader in the field National leadership that can connect to grassroots audiences
- Access to funders

E. Press, Earned Media and Influence

- *Press Release*
- *Press Conference at an official event*
- *Quotes in press kit, or spokesperson for the film in certain contexts.*

ADDENDUM B EXPLORING THE LOGLINE

There are dozens of articles and guides, youtube videos and even whole [Master Class courses](#) on writing loglines. We selected one award-winning high-impact film, the 2014 documentary VIRUNGA directed by Orlando Von Einsiedel and produced by Joanna Natasegara, and pulled descriptions from across the web as examples. Which one do you think works best for an impact pitch?

- ***“An inspiring documentary about four people who demonstrate heroism while trying to protect a wildlife sanctuary in the midst of a civil war.”***
 - Be careful with the word "inspiring," it is overused. If someone demonstrates heroism, why not call them heroic? And we don't know where the war is happening.
 - ***“Virunga tells the story of four characters fighting to protect Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, home to the world's last mountain gorillas, from war, poaching, and the threat of oil exploration.”***
 - This offers a lot of geographical context. Documentaries are about real people, not characters.
 - ***“Virunga offers a heart-rending glimpse of natural wonders vulnerable to the atrocities of greed -- and the people devoting their lives to defending them.”***
 - This one is powerful and poetic, but doesn't offer much context as to where the story takes place.
 - ***“A team of brave individuals risk their lives to protect the last mountain gorillas.”***
 - Super short and effective if that's all the space available. Location is missing.
 - ***“A powerful combination of investigative journalism and nature documentary, VIRUNGA is the incredible true story of a group of courageous people risking their lives to build a better future in a part of Africa the world's forgotten, and a gripping exposé of the realities of life in the Congo.”***
 - This is from the film's website and is great. It sets up drama at the human level, and tells us why this film matters.
 - It's long at 50 words, possible to cut out 'incredible true' for a documentary pitch and condense the first part to an "investigative nature film," if word count were limited.
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TEN KEY QUESTIONS WORKSEET

**** START WITH THE LOGLINE ****

Ideally, the logline sets the context, tells us who we will meet, and it invites curiosity that captures the imagination of the audience.

1. Why are you making this movie? What's your relationship to the story? What is unique about your approach? Consider representation and voice.

2. Who benefits and how are they framed? Asset framing is a powerful and simple way to think about social change: talk about people in terms of their aspirations rather than their deficits.

3. What is the problem - or opportunity for change - that will your film and campaign address?

4. What's the distribution plan and timeline?

5. Who is the target audience for the campaign and where will it roll out?

6. How will your film function as a tool for change? What's unique about your film that makes it a powerful tool to engage audiences.

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