

High-concept pitches are not your friend

by Jason Cohen on February 23, 2009

High-concept pitches are too brief, and too ambiguous. Opt instead for clarity, and define yourself on your own terms.



It's like
"Read my lips"
meets
"I'm not talking to you."

You already know the elevator pitch is critical to your business, not just for pitching but to crystallize the goals of the company in your own mind.

You might also have developed a one-line positioning statement—a single sentence that defines the company in a simple, clear, sentence. Not one you'd use on customers, but rather something to tack on your wall, something that all marketing and communication should be working towards.

The Venture Hacks blog teaches us about something even smaller and tighter—the high-concept pitch. The idea is to boil your message down to a short phrase that references existing, successful products. Examples:

- "YouTube is Flickr for video."
- "LinkedIn is Facebook for business."
- "Twitter is Blogger for Attention Deficit Disorder."

I like brevity, but I don't like the high-concept pitch. It omits so much it becomes ambiguous, possibly with unintended consequences.

And it defines you as a copy of something else.

Let's make this concrete. Say I've invented a new compact, portable projector:

This projector weighs less than a pound and it's the size of a cell phone. It uses bright LEDs so you never blow out a \$100 bulb. Your sales people don't have to haul equipment or plug into projectors missing "yellow" that can't run at their laptop's resolution. This projector works 100% of the time and is small enough to get through airport security in your jacket pocket.

That's my product pitch—contains all the details and reasons to buy it. Now for the positioning statement:

A compact, portable, rugged projector that eliminates surprises on the road.

Short and sweet, still including the primary features and benefits.

Now it's time for the high-concept pitch.



It's like
"iPhone"
meets
"The mouth-hand girl."

Here's an idea, copied almost exactly from the Venture Hacks article:

iPhone for projectors

This sounds good at first blush. iPhones are known for being easy to use, pretty, coveted, and commercially successful. Also the analogy extends to size and portability.

Good!

But these aren't the only attributes of the iPhone. iPhones have a reputation of not working well with Microsoft Office, something particularly troubling for the traveling salesperson. Readers of this blog are likely to use Gmail and Open Office, but your typical salesperson is on a strict diet of PowerPoint and Outlook. Just yesterday I spoke with a business traveler who has avoided the iPhone specifically because of its lack of integration with Exchange (since fixed).

iPhones are notoriously inflexible and not customizable. They bucket you in a culture. With the v2.0 software debacle, I could even include “buggy.”

When you use only three words and when you invoke something well-known and complicated, it's not clear what message will be received. I'm brevity's biggest fan, but there's such a thing as “too brief.”

No, I'll stick with Eric Sink's definition of positioning statement as the fundamental particle in my marketing universe.

P.S. Another weird quote from that article is that “for investors, the product is nothing.” I get the point—that product \neq strategy, and product strategy is more interesting to investors than feature bullets. But still... “is *nothing*?” Perhaps intentionally exaggerated to make a point, but if you find an investor for whom this is literally true (and I have!), steer clear. Strategy with zero product understanding isn't strategy.

P.P.S. Healthy disagreements notwithstanding, Venture Hacks is a must-read if you're interested in funding or selling a company.

P.P.P.S. Someone should make that projector!

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