DON'T LET YOUR PITCHES DIE A PREMATURE DEATH

KEEP AT IT AND YOU'LL GET ONE OVER THE PLATE.

BY **TOM BENTLEY**

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We've all been there as freelance writers: a great article idea lights up your bulb, you embroider it with some flashy, on-topic themes, you research the market, and you dispatch it into the appropriate editor's inbox.

And you wait.

And you wait some more. Sometimes your story is so hot in your veins you send a follow-up email mere days later. Sometimes two weeks of no reply sends you scrambling back to your market research, and you send out the query to editor two and editor three.

Again you wait.

The silence in your inbox echoes in your ears. At that point, most of us tenderhearted writers wilt a bit. That pitch so shiny loses a little luster. You reassess it with cold eyes, find it wanting in some way, and consign it to the "no" bin. That live pitch breathes its last.

IT AIN'T YOU, BABE

Before we get into why putting a tombstone over your pitch is putting it to premature death, let's address a few facts about why editors don't pick up on pitches, even when they sing.

1. The query doesn't arrive

Perhaps that editor has left the publication, perhaps you misaddressed the mail, perhaps your pitch smelled of pork and went into the spam pit.

2. They published something similar or are about to

Make that research count: If the publication has run something like your piece, they won't bite. Or they might be about to put out an article with a theme much like your pitch's. It happens.

3. They are swamped

These days, staffs run lean at magazines and online. Editors' inboxes might be crashing Niagara Falls of mail. There are so many cracks to slip through that your mail is torn and bloodied before it drifts into the silent ether.

4. It's a good pitch but just not for them

Maybe it's your suggested word count, maybe the person you said might be a good interview subject sued the magazine once, maybe you used a word like "proactive" that the editor loathes, maybe it's just a trace off topic. Sometimes, they start to bite, then realize they're not really hungry.

There are a lot of reasons why editors turn down story ideas, and many are the times the turndown has nothing to do with the quality of your query. That's why you have to practice patient persistence.

PITCHES THOUGHT DEAD ARE ACTUALLY SLEEPING

Case in point: I keep a running list of article queries that haven't landed a published home. Some of them are many years old, but I still like many of the ideas. I've discovered that even an old query can still shake the right editorial hand if the pitch is well-timed and properly directed. But I didn't quite realize how wobbly kneed the oldest of those queries was until I got an editorial yes on one that was several years old.

That was for a piece on the Fisher Space Pen, the gravity-defying writing instrument that's been on every manned space flight since 1968. Because I've owned a couple of Space Pens, and thought they were mighty nifty, I wanted to write about their history. So I sent that query pup out barking, more than a few times. Looking at my submission spreadsheet, I started pitching in 2015, and submitted it a couple of times a year until now.

Now being a couple of months ago, when *WIRED UK* picked it up. *WIRED* is a publication with some clout, so I was happy about that.

But how do you know which ideas are good enough to keep in the hunt, and how can you adjust them so they keep their currency?

Idea electricity

The first thing you ask yourself: Do you really want to write the article? One persistence factor would be the simple pleasure the concept gives you, thus your continued writing enthusiasm. Don't discount how much writing – and pitching – energy comes from idea infatuation.

Timing is timeless

Is there some kind of topical tie-in that presents the pitch in its best light? The Space Pen just had its 50th anniversary, with accompanying hoopla, so the pen had more eyes turned toward it than in years past. That anniversary was an article anchor.

The emperor has new clothes

Speaking of that anchor, see if your pitch needs freshening. Changing the tone and the content of the pitch for the audiences of varying publications can be enough to finally bring it home.

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Location, location, location

Obviously, you don't want to send a pitch about the best bologna to *Vegan Quarterly.* But with a little adroit keyboarding, you can drill down deeper into what editors and publications want. Look in the About and Contact sections of their sites for writer's guidelines. Be bold: *Ask* for writer's guidelines if you can't find them. See if they have an editorial calendar.

If the editor you're pitching is a writer, search for what he or she has written – therein might lie clues to a pitching angle. Or maybe you see on LinkedIn that you were both in the same sorority; schmoozing in your query isn't against the law.

I saw a pitch request from the WIRED UK editor on Pitchwhiz, a site that helps writers find editors to pitch and that records when a pitch has been sent, received, opened, and read, all to help writers "pitching into the abyss," as James Durston, the site's founder, says. Pitchwhiz lists editorial wants in a Story Market section as well as posting a running list of pitch requests from editors, often from their Twitter feeds that Durston monitors.

With this thing called the internet, you can cast a wide net to capture the perfect query fish.

KNOW WHEN TO FOLD 'EM

But there does come a time, even if your pitch was lithe and muscular, when the pitch's hair has gone gray, and it begins to smell a bit of damp dog. Some pitches must be retired, with honor. The bottom of my query file has a pitch for me reviewing some Palm OS-based exercise software. Palm hasn't produced a PDA (remember those?) since 2010, so it's clear that pitch has mummified.

Then again, I've had a few short stories that I wrote before 2005 published in literary journals in the past few years – I kept sending them out because I felt they still had something to say.

If an idea grabbed you once, grab it back, and send it out on its rounds now and then. After all its wandering, your story might find a comfy home.

NOW YOU HAVE TO WRITE THE DANG THING

Celebrate your query's acceptance – for an hour or so. Your victory is a victory, but a minor one. Write now you must. Of course, I'd researched the fundamentals of the Space Pen to bolster my query, but details are the beating heart of an article. I'd received a response on my initial mail from the company's PR person, a gracious fellow. We whirled through the dance of sourcing photos, quotes from a company principal in response to my questions, clarification on some detail murk – the usual.

Also, updating the *WIRED* editor on story progress, including getting a variant on a photo request (thus back to the PR guy), firming up any last story elements, making sure on the deadline – the usual.

Then submission, follow-up with both the PR guy and the magazine editor on any requests/changes (and there was one significant one from the Fisher people), and getting the publication date.

And then publication. And money, too. Now celebrate for real! But don't delay – get pitching again.

Tom Bentley is still trying to figure out what flavor of writer he is, but so far he's a short story writer, novelist, essayist, travel writer, journalist, and business copywriter. He edits all that stuff, too. His singing has been known to frighten the horses. See his lurid website confessions and blog at tombentley.com.