

The makings of a perfect Pitch

BY ANDREW ZACK

WHAT'S A PERFECT pitch? I've always been a fan of slightly low and inside. It makes batters really bend from the waist, cuts the power of their swing, and still can be a strike if they choose not to swing. Oh, wait, not *that* kind of pitch? A book pitch? Well, there's not a lot of difference. In my work as an agent, I still like low and inside.

By that I mean I like books with low common denominators—books that will appeal to the most readers within a category—and inside information or knowledge, such as military novels written by ex-soldiers, science thrillers written by scientists, or non-fiction works by established experts in their fields.

The most common way writers pitch a book to me is with a query letter. And few things trip up authors more than this simple document. Like other agents, I get dozens a week.

Many authors feel the secret to a good query letter is being able to “hook” an agent. And that's certainly true. But remember, there has to be a payoff, too. I've received dozens of queries for novels that exist only as a few chapters or less. In today's marketplace, editors are far less willing to buy partial fiction manuscripts than ever before. Certainly, they are not going to buy a partial *first* novel, not when there are thousands of completed novels out there. Finished manuscripts involve far less risk; we already know how they turn out. Therefore, I never take on a first novel unless it's complete.

I like query letters that show an awareness that the book will have to be sold someday to a chain or independent bookstore buyer who is really only looking at a cover and a

description of the book. Authors have to remember that books *are* judged by their covers every day, including the cover copy. So I like query letters that have that kind of spin.

Query letters should probably be a bit like the “tip” or “title information” sheets that publishers' sales representatives receive. After all, no sales rep can read every book he or she is selling to bookstores, so the tip sheet is a sort of CliffsNotes version of the book. It gives the rep some selling points.

To help you write a first-rate query letter, I've composed an example of one I consider ideal for a book I represent, *Distant Valor* (see page 32). Then, on page 33, you'll find a tip sheet for the same book. Compare query and tip sheet and you'll see both have the same points.

The letter shows me that the author knows about his subject, and he has an *insider's* viewpoint. It provides a comparison to a well-known title. It connects the novel with an event in recent history, which can be very important in selling fiction. (Increased tension between the So-

viet Union and the United States, for example, did wonderful things to help build Tom Clancy's career.) It tells me there is a built-in marketplace for the book, a *low* common denominator. It gives me a short and concise description of the book that doesn't give the entire story away but intrigues me. The author offers to send the completed manuscript (so I know it's done and not still being worked on) or chapters and synopsis, with a self-addressed, stamped envelope (so I know this author is a pro who is aware of the standard submission formats). Without a doubt, I would ask to read this manuscript.

When you write your query, incorporate the same kinds of selling points you would find on a tip sheet. Then, you'll have the *perfect pitch* for your book! #

Excerpted from “Low and Inside,” by Andrew Zack, from The Perfect Pitch, edited by Katharine Sands. Reprinted with permission of The Writer Books and Andrew Zack.

Andrew Zack heads the literary agency The Zack Co., Inc. For more information about the agency, see page 62.

Agents will pay attention to your query when you show your book has wide appeal and you have the inside track on the topic.

How to use selling points in your query letter

A well-written query letter like the one below will get an agent's attention. It includes all the book's major selling points, which can be used later in the publisher's tip sheet (right).

Dear Mr. Zack:

As a veteran of the Marine peacekeeping mission to Beirut, I have always been disappointed by the absence of a major work of fiction addressing that difficult and tragic time in our history. This led me to write *Distant Valor*, a first novel of approximately 120,000 words that captures the Marine experience in Beirut in a manner similar to the way Jim Webb's *Fields of Fire* captured the Vietnam experience.

As recent history has shown, U.S. military personnel, civilian and government facilities remain vulnerable to attack by those determined enough to either risk or sacrifice their lives in the process. Over 300 Marine and Navy personnel perished when a determined terrorist drove a truck full of explosives into the Marine barracks in Lebanon. That event continues to haunt the almost 200,000 Marines on active duty today and the millions of vets living throughout the world.

Distant Valor tells the story of the mission, and ultimately the bombing, through the eyes of two soldiers. For Sgt. David Griffin, a "peacetime" Marine, Beirut was the chance to prove himself capable to the generation of Marines that had been bloodied in the Vietnam War. For Corp. Steven Downs, Beirut was a struggle to separate the civilian from the Marine, and to meet not only the expectations of his sergeant, Griffin, but also his own.

Faced with Griffin's court martial for engaging the enemy against orders, these two young men find themselves questioning their faith in themselves, their commanders, and eventually that which above all else they *must* have faith in, the Corps.

I would be happy to send you the completed manuscript, or a synopsis and chapters. For your convenience, a SASE is enclosed.

Sincerely,

1) Shows insider's view

2) Hooks to historical event

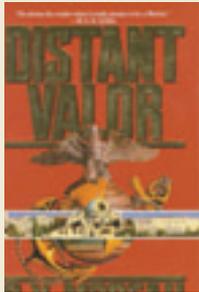
3) Compares to book in same genre

4) Connects with wide audience

5) Provides concise synopsis

6) Shows story's intrigue

Publisher's tip sheet



“With his first book, *Distant Valor*, C. X. Moreau joins the company of top-rank military novelists. He shows the reader what it really means to be a Marine.”

—W.E.B. Griffin,
New York Times
bestselling author of
The Corps series.

“Outstanding!
A classic in, yet
above and
beyond, the
war genre.”

—John M. Del
Vecchio, *New York*
Times bestselling
author of *The*
13th Valley.

Distant Valor by C.X. Moreau

Description:

In the tradition of (3) James Webb's *New York Times* bestselling novel *Fields of Fire* comes a powerful novel of the United States Marines Corps.

Out of the crucible of war has come a long list of bestselling, award-winning, and long-remembered novels: *The Red Badge of Courage*, *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Caine Mutiny*. Until now, none has captured the power and drama of the (2) U.S. Marine Corps' ill-fated 1983 mission to end the war for southern Lebanon, which culminated in the barracks bombing that killed almost 300 Marines.

(5) For Sgt. David Griffin, a “peacetime” Marine, Beirut was the chance to prove himself capable to the generation of Marines that had been bloodied in the Vietnam War. For Corp. Steven Downs, Beirut was a struggle to separate the civilian from the Marine, and to meet not only the expectations of his sergeant, Griffin, but also his own.

(6) Faced with Griffin's court martial for engaging the enemy against orders, these two young men find themselves questioning their faith in themselves, their commanders, and eventually that which above all else they must have faith in, the Corps. With the insight that only a Marine Corps veteran could have, C. X. Moreau portrays the men who fought and died in Beirut with a skill and ability that brings home to the reader the true meaning of *Semper Fi*.

Author bio:

(1) C. X. Moreau is a former Marine NCO and veteran of the Lebanon deployments of 1982-1984. A native of Virginia, he currently resides in Charlotte, N.C. *Distant Valor* is his first novel.

Selling points:

- The first major novel set during the Marines' peacekeeping mission in Lebanon.
- Over 173,000 Marines are on active duty today; millions are retired. (4)
- Recent operations by the American military remind readers of the tragic fate suffered by hundreds of Marines in Lebanon.
- Compares to titles such as David Poyer's *The Med* and *The Gulf*, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, James Webb's *Fields of Fire* and John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*.
- Special markets to consider are military bases, especially naval and Marine, and the towns surrounding them, e.g., San Diego, Norfolk, Va., Washington, D.C.
- Major marketing in *Army/Navy Times*, *Book Page* and *Baker & Taylor Forecast*.