

## MAKING AN IMPRESSION WITH YOUR RESEARCH PITCH

**Varun Grover**  
**Walton College of Business**  
**University of Arkansas**  
**Fayetteville, AR 72701**  
[vgrover@uark.edu](mailto:vgrover@uark.edu)

As doctoral students, you often hear about the importance of the 3 minute or less research pitch, also referred to as the “elevator pitch.” The objective of these pitches is to navigate short opportunistic temporal spaces in conferences or other forums by communicating and impressing busy, often important people, on what you are doing...and consequently you. Or it could even be to open a dialog with strangers in the same field as part of exploring potential shared research interests. Regardless, the pitch is something that is touted as an important skill, but rarely is there any specific guidance on how to do it well. In this column, I will try to provide pointers on giving an impactful research pitch.

Most pitches focus on dissertations often in interview settings, usually in response to a generic question like “what are you working on?” However, there are some general guidelines that can make the pitch on any research more effective. Having been on the receiving side of the pitch in hundreds of instances, I have observed a wide variance in the extent to which the pitches resonated with me (regardless of my interest in the research topic). Such resonance comes in many combinations of the ability to communicate enthusiasm, impact, and knowledge. Some pitches might reflect outstanding research, but much of that is nullified by insipid presentation.

Pitches can be divided into three parts, the preamble (your motivation, research question), the hard work (your review, theory, data/method/analysis) and take-aways (what you have/can learn).

Below, I highlight some critical considerations for your

*Varun Grover is the David D. Glass Endowed Chair and Distinguished Professor of IS at the Walton School of Business, University of Arkansas. Prior to this he was the William S. Lee (Duke Energy) Distinguished Professor of Information Systems at Clemson University. He has published extensively in the information systems field, with over 400 publications, 250 of which are in major refereed journals. Over ten recent articles have ranked him among the top four researchers globally based on number of publications in the top IS journals, as well as citation impact. Dr. Grover has an h-index of 92 and around 40,000 citations in Google Scholar.*



*Thompson Reuters recognized him as one of 100 Highly Cited Scholars globally in all Business disciplines. He is Senior Editor for MISQ Executive, Editor of the Journal of the Association for Information Systems Section on Path Breaking Research, and has served as Senior Editor for MIS Quarterly (2 terms), the Journal of the AIS (2 terms) and Database. Dr. Grover's current work focuses on the impacts of digitalization on individuals and organizations. He is recipient of numerous awards from USC, Clemson, AIS, Academy of Management, DSI, the OR Society, Anbar, PriceWaterhouse, among others for his research and teaching, and is a Fellow of the Association for Information Systems. He has had the privilege of being extensively involved with PhD students, serving as an advisor to over 45 PhD students and as Co-Chair of numerous doctoral consortia at both the International Conference on Information Systems and Americas Conference on Information Systems. He has been invited to give numerous keynote addresses and talks at various institutions and forums around the world.*

pitch. I will illustrate this by using an example of a (fictitious, but typical) research project abstracted below:

*This study examines small e-retailers who participate in single or multi-platform strategies. The research examines which strategy is advantageous for the e-retailers and under which conditions. The research draws from theories of risk diversification, network externalities, and complementarities to construct a model which is subsequently tested using secondary data compiled from web harvesting and public data on 2000 e-retailers. The results indicate that when*

*the firm has pricing power on a platform and when the consumer base of platforms have different constituencies, then, multi-platforming is beneficial.*

## PREAMBLE

**Critical Success Factor: To communicate that the topic is something to care about personally and/or societally.**

To do this, it is important to convert the research question into a practical problem or a dilemma. A poor pitch would start like this “I am studying network externalities in multi-platforming due to different risk profiles of e-retailers.” The issue here is not that the pitch is incorrect, but it does not convey any reason for studying the topic or why you (or anyone else) should care about it.

A better pitch might go something like:

“If you were a small business trying to sell a product on the Internet, it would be a challenge. How would consumers find you? Well known businesses have brand equity that allow consumers to find them...but as a small business you need to rely on big platforms like Amazon to get your product sold. Doing this has risks since you are giving control of how your product is marketed to the platform owner, and you could be subject to competition on the platform itself. Perhaps you should go multiple platforms to diversify your risk and expand your potential market. Or you can go alone with an app to develop deeper relationship with customers...but it will be tough to establish a customer base. These are critical issues for e-retailers. We study these tradeoffs and try to help resolve this dilemma.”

Too long...perhaps. But the point is to convey the problem by putting yourself (and the listener) in the shoes of the target subject of your research, in this case the small e-retailer. The pitch communicates the problem and why you want to study this. Communicating this with enthusiasm could convey that it is a real problem, you care about this, and others should too.

## THE HARD WORK

**Critical Success Factor: To communicate simply, communicating depth of your work without going into depth.**

You have put in tremendous work in your literature review, theoretical development, data collection, and analysis, and it is natural for you to want to communicate all that you have done. However, you need to be cognizant of the simple fact that your investments might have correspondingly created a tremendous information asymmetry between you and the recipient. So, in describing your work, do not assume much knowledge. If you must communicate your theoretical or methodological contributions, *spoon feed with contrasts* that accentuate your contribution. For example, you might say that most prior studies used one dominant theoretical perspective X, it fails to consider ----- . We integrate three perspectives to cover all facets of the phenomena. Similarly, highlight any key methodological innovations. Remember, your overall research model if complex does not need to be described in detail.... just a broad framing of the model and the DV. A short pitch does not permit depth... but should communicate that there is depth and due diligence behind your research

A pitch might go as follows – “I use theories risk diversification, network externalities and complementarities to study e-retailer multi-platform behavior. I scraped data on 2000 e-retailers and ran finite mixture model econometric models to study this.” Such a pitch communicates a lot of terminology and the fact that you looked at many theories and used “sophisticated” analysis...but it is not effective at contextualizing the hard work.

Alternatively, if you say:

“Most studies on multi-platforming behavior examine it from a usage behavior perspective, while we take a more holistic approach in looking at risk and benefits, drawing of theories of risk, externalities and comple-

mentarities in economics. We integrated data on 2000 e-tailers from secondary sources and web-scraping analyzed to test our hypotheses.”

In this case, the hard work on theory is positioned better (i.e., novel perspective) and the data collection communicates the effort (i.e., data integrated from different sources) without elaborating on the theory, method, or analysis in any great depth. Remember, this is a short pitch – so the essential value statements of your research are more important than the process details.

## TAKEAWAYS

### **Critical Success Factor: To communicate your return on investment in the project by cherry picking the most interesting findings.**

Like the preamble where you indicated that the topic is something to care about personally and/or societally, here you need to communicate what you learnt and how it is broadly useful. Here is where you have considerable discretion. You can cherry pick a key finding or learning experience from the project that is interesting, surprising, or exciting. By indicating that “one of the findings of my study was particularly interesting to me....” you can describe the finding and its implications. So, a poor way of doing this would be to sequentially go through each of your five (say) hypotheses and indicate if it was supported or not. A more effective way would be to highlight one or two that have strong implications for (in this case) the dilemma you raised and discuss how the findings help resolve it. So, an ineffective pitch might be: “My results indicate that externalities and risk diversification matter. Complementary market segments matter too. The dominance of the product mix in the general market offers some significant moderation effects in the relationships with multi-platform models.”

More effectively, you could say:

“I found that e-tailers who need to decide on whether

to list their products on multiple platforms, should do so, particularly if their product is unique and each platform is accessing unique markets. If these conditions do not hold then a single platform would be better for them.”

Clearly, the pitch “closes the loop” on the problem you studied.

## CONTINGENCIES

There are some cases where adjustments will need to be made. For those doing multi-essay dissertations, if the three essays are interlinked as part of a broader program, then it is very possible to do the pitch at the level of the program....highlighting the broader preamble and then the sub-questions that constitute each of the essays. The critical success factors still apply to the hard work sections...except that you might need to just overview approaches followed in each essay. Sampling the takeaways from each essay or one or two broader takeaways could be effective too. However, if the three essays are quite distinct, it might be better to focus your pitch on one of the essays (either the most developed one, or the one that is the most consequential to you)....indicating early that your pitch is on one essay of the dissertation.

Also, depending on the degree of completion of the project, just the preamble (if you are starting out), the preamble and the hard work (if you are post proposal) and all three (if you are done) are relevant.

There could also be variations for different audiences. In an interview setting, you might want to tailor the pitch to what the interviewer is looking for. For instance, connecting your research to interests of the faculty in that institution could be a brief extension of your pitch. In some cases, a shorter version of the pitch for light conversation in an informal setting may be more appropriate, focusing more on the preamble and takeaway.

