



The Trouble With Elevator Speeches

By Michael W. McLaughlin, [Contributing Editor](#)

The elevator speech is that tightly scripted, thirty-second introduction that should pack as much information about a person as possible in an engaging, persuasive, and interesting way, right?

Unfortunately, even the "best" elevator speech can be an express trip to oblivion for a consultant hoping to shine in a personal marketing moment. Your short spiel can drain the power from that all-important first impression, leaving prospects impatiently shaking their heads.

Elevator speeches do work for some people, but consultants may find that those pithy intros lead to a free fall.

Going Up?

Actor Tim Robbins popularized the elevator pitch in the 1992 movie, *The Player*. Robbins portrayed a beleaguered movie executive who listened to 125 movie pitches a day.

Those pitches had to be boiled down to the essence of the idea, without a hint of extraneous information—"Think *Gone with the Wind* meets *Star Wars*, directed by Woody Allen."

The elevator pitch has seeped into most areas of business life. One pet store owner, for example, begins his spiel with the line, "I'm a warm and fuzzy man." A school teacher's elevator speech kicks off with, "I'm changing the world, one child at a time." Even Geoffrey Moore, bestselling author of *Crossing the Chasm*, gives advice to entrepreneurs on crafting winning elevator speeches.

Granted, we all need to be armed with a short introduction about ourselves to kick-start a conversation. So what's wrong with an elevator speech that's pithy, creative, and has a "hook" to grab the listener's attention?

"You're So Vain..."

The trouble with the typical elevator speech is that it's focused on the *speaker*, not the listener. Those who coach others on preparing elevator speeches -- yes, there are people who do that -- suggest that a great outcome from an elevator speech is when the listener says something like, "Wow, that sounds interesting. Tell me more."

Once someone asks to hear more, the speaker is then supposed to feel free to launch into the next part of the canned commercial. The speaker proceeds to describe services and benefits, and suggests a "next step," *regardless* of what the client needs.

And that's the essence of the problem.

The recommended approach may be effective in some sales situations, but it's a loser for consultants. Attempting to manipulate a prospective client into asking a leading question will be seen by discerning executives for what it is--a consultant-centered act. It will be obvious that the consultant's motivation is to land a sale, instead of first understanding the client's issues.

That can turn out to be a hard impression to shake from the prospect's mind. Plus, it's not the only problem.

The standard elevator speech often begins with a "hook" to pique the interest of the listener. As an extreme example, someone might say, "I make sure the sun rises daily on hard working people across the nation." Such hooks are likely to result in a dismayed, "Right, sure you do," from most listeners.

For buyers of complex services, the pithy hook is a waste of time, and it can damage your credibility. Buyers are not looking to play word games with you, but to solve a problem. Rely on a hook to pique interest, and you'll likely be shown to, well...the elevator.

Make Your Elevator Speech Work

Okay, we all need an engaging introduction, or an elevator speech, so we don't babble incoherently when a prospect asks a simple question like, "Tell me what you do."

Here are a few ideas on how to develop and deliver an elevator speech that helps move a prospect conversation in a positive direction.

Dump the Hype

If your introduction begins with a slogan or a hook, it's likely to annoy executives, and you'll seem like you have too much time on your hands. Instead, answer the question directly, and succinctly, by telling the person who you are and describing the types of clients you serve and what you do for them.

Keep your response to less than thirty seconds. Be prepared to follow up with brief, additional details. Don't feel compelled to put that information in the initial introduction. Wait until you're asked. In short, keep your elevator pitch simple, direct, and factual.

Be Memorable For What You Don't Say

Instead of tooting your own horn, encourage the person to talk about their issues as quickly as possible. Remember, most prospects don't really care about your business. They care about their own problems--that's why you're with them.

Direct the conversation to a genuine discussion of the prospect's issues and you'll get a welcome reception. Resist the urge to tell them something. Use the time to listen, observe, and comment as needed.

The more you can learn about the prospective clients problems, the easier it will be to help them. So, get the person engaged in a dialogue, and be as memorable for what you don't say as what you do say.

Answer With Questions

A well-timed, insightful question will have a far bigger impact on a prospective client than any elevator speech. You can counterbalance the impact of even a dreadful opening spiel with a single, relevant question.

If you succeed in turning your introduction into an opportunity for the prospect to talk, questions will be your best tool for gaining immediate credibility. You should keep the conversation flowing by asking diagnostic and clarifying questions. Don't hesitate to let the prospect know how you've faced, and overcome, similar challenges.

Resist the urge to ask hackneyed questions like, "What keeps you up at night?" Such throwaways signal a lack of interest in the person's real concerns, as most executives have heard them from everyone--from copy machine salespeople to high-priced lawyers.

Substance Is The Ground Floor

The self-centered elevator speech may get a movie sold, but it can easily backfire on a consultant. When you're selling complex solutions to prospective clients, the pithy elevator speech may make you memorable for the wrong reasons.

Of course, it would be unwise to meet a prospect without a prepared introduction. But build immediate credibility with your substance, not your style. Listen, ask questions, and help the prospect frame the issues. You can do that even on a brief trip in the metaphorical elevator.

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