

The Elevator Speech

Take advantage of this essential tool for marketing yourself.

BY CHRISTINE CLAPP, DTM

The first impression we make on people is crucial. That's why introducing yourself with a strong "elevator speech" is so important. Maybe one day you'll hop on an elevator and travel up 30 floors with the CEO of a company for which you've always wanted to work, or with the key investor you've been pursuing for your new business venture.

But whether or not you ride an elevator with a leader in your industry, you undoubtedly will need to introduce yourself at meetings, conferences, social functions and job interviews. When asked "Tell me about yourself" or "What do you do?," introduce yourself confidently and effectively to make a strong first impression. If you don't have an elevator speech—a one- to two-minute pitch about yourself—you're missing opportunities to grow both professionally and personally.

Just because you're introducing yourself in a conversational or small-group setting doesn't mean you should improvise. In fact, you should prepare and rehearse your personal introduction to an audience of *one* with as much care as you would a conference keynote to an audience of a *thousand*. Your elevator speech is an essential tool for marketing yourself.

Craft your message as you would a formal speech. Prepare strategically, rehearse thoroughly, ask fellow Toastmasters for feedback and rework material if it is not achieving the results you want. This doesn't mean your elevator speech should be scripted, stiff or unchanging. On the contrary, make sure it is conversational and can be adapted to fit the situation you're in. Keep the following three guidelines in mind, and you'll be prepared to introduce yourself to any person you encounter.

1 Describe yourself as a solution to a problem. The most important part of your elevator speech is the first sentence. When you don't have much time, use this sentence as a



An elevator speech should be compelling enough to engage a stranger in conversation, whether you're in an elevator or not.

condensed version of your elevator speech. When you have a minute or two for your full-length version, the first sentence will determine whether your listeners will engage in conversation with you or search for a polite excuse to end the exchange.

For that important first sentence, make sure you describe yourself as a solution to a problem faced by your clients, customers or business associates. Listeners don't necessarily care what your job title is, how your industry describes the work you do or what degrees or technical certifications you have earned. Listeners want to know *how you can help them*.

Take, for example, Rui Sun, an accountant in New York City, whose introduction starts, “I take the dread out of April 15.” American taxpayers recognize this familiar date as the annual deadline for filing a U.S. tax return and immediately have a sense of Sun’s work and its value to clients. Video journalist and Atlanta native Kendall Payne opens with, “I bring news stories to life.” This first line has an element of intrigue that makes listeners want to learn more. And Victoria Harding, who works for Massachusetts General Hospital’s Aspire program for children with autism spectrum disorder, introduces herself by saying, “I help children with social disorders make a best friend.” With this, Harding shares a concrete benefit she provides, and avoids using formal titles or medical terminology.

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In these examples, the speakers get to the point in plain terms to ensure that listeners engage and don’t lose interest during the recitation of an official title, certifications, an alphabet soup of acronyms or other jargon. They also keep it brief. An elevator speech can’t be comprehensive, but it should be compelling enough to spur conversation. Remember, the person you are introducing yourself to won’t always be the specific type of person you can help. But he or she might know exactly the person who needs your expertise.

2 Tell an anecdote. After you describe how you solve a problem, tell a short story to explain your motivation for doing what you do. This anecdote should be a “signature story”—one that reveals the *ah-ha* moment when you first realized what you wanted to do, or an example that shows how exceptional you are at your craft.

Payne, the video journalist, tells a story about how she became interested in journalism. “When I started applying for internships, I would change my phrasing, but for the most part, I stuck to a simple anecdote about feeling lost and with no creative outlet when coming to college until I joined the school newspaper.”

The personal story you share will help establish a connection and build rapport with listeners. People don’t always remember a name, but they can usually recount an interesting narrative. Stories are entertaining and more memorable than lines from a resume.

As mentioned by Payne, your anecdote doesn’t need to be scripted; the way you tell it will be a little different each time. And depending on the situation—like whether you’re talking to a prospective employer, having a causal conversation at a neighborhood party or networking at an industry conference—you may want to keep a few signature stories in mind. Select the one to share based on the audience and context.

Just remember, your *entire* elevator speech is just one to two minutes long, so your anecdote must be brief. It should have specific details to make it interesting and should include vivid language that piques your listener’s curiosity. But it should also be told in a breezy manner. It’s not an epic tale.

3 Start a dialogue. Finally, conclude with an open-ended question—one that can’t be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” The best introductions are short and end with a question that turns the interaction into a dialogue. The ultimate goal of your elevator speech is to learn about the person you are meeting and how you might help him or her. To achieve this, your ears have to do some of the work.

Carolyn Semedo, a program manager in Virginia for Arlingtonians for a Clean Environment, says it’s important to be realistic about what will happen after you share your elevator speech. It’s not likely that you will land a job or close a sale after giving a one- to two-minute introduction. But it is feasible to make a connection that leads to further conversation and collaboration, notes Semedo. Starting a dialogue can do that. “Closing with a question draws the listener in, creating a dialogue that can serve as the foundation for a deeper conversation and, eventually, a relationship,” she says.

The question you ask at the end of your introduction can be as simple as, “And what is it that you do?” Or, depending on the occasion, you can make it more specific to your field of work or the type of person you are networking with. Above all, the question must show you are genuinely interested in learning more about the person and not just making a sale or advancing your agenda.

A memorable elevator speech will help you market yourself and capitalize on opportunities that come your way—whether you’re in an elevator or not! ■

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