



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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The Almighty Elevator Pitch— Part 3: It's Not About You

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In Part 1 of this series,¹ I pointed out the competitive advantages of having a powerful elevator pitch and the all-too-common weaknesses we hear when people introduce themselves at professional gatherings or social events. In Part 2,² I suggested ways to improve both the presentation and content of a branding or networking pitch.

This third and final article of the series focuses on the elevator pitch as it relates to career advancement. Whereas the branding pitch's purpose is reputation enhancement and long-term name recognition, the elevator pitch that you would use when a career opportunity is at stake has a more immediate focus. That is not to say that your goal is to get an offer on the spot; most often, it's simply to get to the next stage. That might mean getting someone to agree to speak with you on the telephone, to meet with you at their office, to get a face-to-face interview, to be invited back for a second round of interviews, or to induce someone to consider creating an opportunity specifically for you.

USE A WIDE-ANGLE LENS

Career-enhancing opportunities aren't necessarily full-time positions. Consider these other examples of valuable experiences that increase your professional exposure, stature and influence, contribute to your professional development, and increase your desirability as an employee or business partner:

- Speaking to an industry association
- Delivering a commencement address at your alma mater
- Giving a keynote speech at a chamber meeting
- Serving as a member of a board
- Chairing a committee of your favorite charitable organization
- Being a guest lecturer or adjunct professor.

Invitations to perform these roles don't just drop from the sky. People lobby for them, they ask, and they volunteer. Influential people understand the value of giving their personal elevator pitch to the right person at the right time. While it's true that a

few people's ideas only spread posthumously, most people of influence are great communicators who learn to get their messages out while the best part of their careers are still ahead of them.

YOU, TOO, CAN BE A GREAT COMMUNICATOR

When you hear a great elevator or sales pitch, you might be tempted to think that the speaker is a talented or "natural" salesperson. A lot of introverts believe that only extroverts can sell, and that both speaking and selling ability are genetic traits given to the lucky. That's what I used to believe when I was young. Categorically untrue. As a member of Toastmasters International,³ I see people all the time with little to no public speaking ability improve dramatically—often in a very short time. You may also be surprised to learn, as I was, how many salespeople and famous leaders were and are introverts—people like Abraham Lincoln, Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi.

People who believe they aren't good at selling themselves often give up before they start. They go into a job interview cold. They ad lib their answers. They have only a general idea of what their responses will be to commonly asked interview questions. What they don't realize is that great speakers like Mark Twain, Winston Churchill and Steve Jobs spent hours, days or weeks practicing even their "impromptu" speeches and 15-minute presentations. Talent is always a plus, but a lot of practice and the right training can make up for "natural" ability. Preparation is the key to being able to seize opportunities when they appear. If you were to find yourself in an elevator with the one person you knew could help you to advance your career, would you be hapless and tongue-tied, or would just the right ice-breaker come rolling off your tongue?

RAISE THE BAR: BE FASCINATING

Perhaps I've convinced you that if you worked hard enough you could be a great speaker, communicator or salesperson. But what about charisma? If you



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think charisma is a gift reserved for the beautiful people and that there's nothing fascinating about you or what you do, think again! Everyone is fascinating to someone—or **could** be.

If you want to up your Fascination Quotient, I encourage you to **find your passion**, because 1) “the world cannot resist a person with passion”; and 2) the hardest thing to sell is something you don't believe in. You must believe in yourself and what it is you do. If you don't, it doesn't matter how good you are at it, someone who loves their work will beat you for the job almost every time. Passion gives ordinary people like you and me **charisma**.

And passion isn't the **only** thing that gives people charisma. In her TED talk,⁴ “How to Fascinate,” keynote speaker and author Sally Hogshead talks about **seven** triggers that make people fascinating. When we're looking for a significant other, most of us do our best to impress—to be charming, to listen, and to fascinate. Interviewing should be approached in the same manner. And don't forget that you're **always** interviewing. People who turn their charisma on and off will sooner or later disappoint. Consistency is a prerequisite for trust, and trust is another of the fascination triggers talked about in the video. The others are power, prestige, mystique, vice and alarm. Intrigued? Take a look at the video.⁵

A WEAK SALES PITCH

If you believe that an elevator pitch should tell people:

- Who you are,
- What you do, and
- What makes you better than the competition,

your elevator pitch may sound like the parody I presented in Part 1 of this series. The main problem with this type of pitch is that it's all about **you**, and people don't care about who **you** are, what **you** do, or even how much smarter than someone else **you** are.

They care about themselves and want to know what you can do for **them**. This principle applies whether

you're applying for an entry-level actuarial job, a teaching position at a university, a managerial position within your own company, a seat on a board, or a job in a different industry to which you bring “transferable skills.”

Another weakness of this pitch is that talking about the competition puts you in the same ballpark with others; now you're a commodity. You want to be seen as a **unique** solution to the other person's problem. This is the key to eliminating all competition for an existing position. It's also the secret to getting someone to create a position for you, because no one else is qualified.

ANATOMY OF THE ELEVATOR PITCH

A good elevator pitch talks about:

- Who you help (people who have problems just like theirs),
- **How** you help people to eliminate those problems, and
- **How great** your solutions make people **feel**.

People often leave the last point out of their elevator pitches—perhaps because they believe that hiring decisions are made based on skills and technical expertise, and that feelings shouldn't play a part in a “fair” and “objective” decision. In fact, studies show that most people make decisions based on emotion and then find reasons to justify their decisions. Maya Angelou said that “people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Good elevator pitches invite the other person to put himself right in the picture you paint—physically and emotionally. The most important part of selling is to understand the psychology of the buyer.

PUT YOURSELF IN THE OTHER PERSON'S SHOES

Dale Carnegie is famous for saying, “you can get everything in life you want if you will just help

enough other people get what they want.” Focus on the other person’s needs, issues and concerns—not just their ostensible objectives, which may be to fill a position, but their personal goals as well:

- Which metrics are they under pressure to increase or decrease?
- Whom do they need to impress?
- Who are their constituencies, and what is it that they are on the line to deliver?
- How can you help them get what they really want?

If you’ve ever been unemployed, here’s an elevator pitch you can probably relate to:

I provide accident insurance for careers, so if you lost your job tomorrow, you could walk out the door, pick up the phone and get interviews. I show you how to get multiple job offers simultaneously, so you can pick the one that fits **you**, instead of feeling forced to accept the first offer you receive. One of my clients recently said that I actually make the job search enjoyable.

APPEAL TO EMOTIONS

Remember the old saw: “People don’t care about who you are until they know you care?”

If most people make decisions based on emotions, rather than logic, it’s critical to make them **feel good** about you. Talking about **why** you do what you do gives you a better opportunity to do this than talking about **how well** you do it. When managers list the most desirable traits that they look for in a hire, “team player” always makes the list. These are code words for making sure that **your** career objectives don’t include getting **their** job and that your career advancement strategies don’t include making **yourself** look good at **their expense**. Self-preservation is a basic instinct as applicable to an organization’s life as it is to the savannah.

APPEAL TO LOGIC

Occupants of the C-suite tend to fall further toward

the logical end of the emotional/logical continuum, so you must help them reach a high confidence level in your ability to deliver results. Don’t ignore the emotion, but provide the basis for both emotional **and** logical decisions. Aside from Mr. Spock, there are very few purely logical minds that use Benjamin Franklin T-charts to make decisions. I must admit, however, that I still have the T-chart I created while dating my husband.

The mistake most people make is to act on the belief that people make decisions the same way they do. The challenge is to do as much research in advance as possible, listen carefully, figure out who it is you’re talking to, how they make decisions, and speak to that person in his or her language.

An elevator pitch is the boat that will take you from where you are to where you want to be. Write your elevator pitches down, practice them 10 times as many times as you think you need to, and revise them every time you find room for improvement. Most of all, remember that they’re not about you.

Someone once said, “Success is being in the right place, at the right time, with the right attitude”—to which I would add—“with the right elevator pitch.” May all your pitches be in the strike zone. ●

END NOTES

- ¹ Published in the November 2012 issue of *The Stepping Stone*.
- ² Published in the February 2013 issue of *The Stepping Stone*.
- ³ Toastmasters is a self-improvement club focused on communication and leadership skills.
- ⁴ **TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design)** is a global set of conferences owned by the private non-profit Sapling Foundation, formed to disseminate “ideas worth spreading.”
- ⁵ Available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nG0WiP5ux1Q>.