

Going up: Elevator speeches open doors for business
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“You have two sentences to tell me who you are and why I should care,” the U.S. Army representative told the roomful of technology entrepreneurs hoping to attract research funding. To the officer’s amazement, the entrepreneurs smoothly complied.

According to consultant Randy Dipner, they were able to meet the request because each person had prepared an “elevator speech” about his or her company in a seminar the evening before.

Dipner owns Meeting the Challenge, a Colorado Springs firm that provides training and proposal development for the Small Business Innovation Research program. He began teaching elevator speeches when he realized that many entrepreneurs are handicapped by their inability to quickly articulate the essence of their businesses.

An elevator speech is a compelling statement that expresses the value proposition of a business. “It conveys who you are, what you do, for whom and why your product or service is superior,” Dipner said. The successful speech is about 15-30 seconds long—about the time available for a chat between floors on an elevator.

“Having an effective elevator speech will immediately set you apart, just as a great abstract gets a proposal off to a good start,” he said. Ranging from critical to convenient, there are as many occasions to use the elevator speech as there are business situations. Opportunities include introductions, proposals, interviews, meetings, equity capital requests, networking, airport lines, even elevators.

Elevator speaking is not instinctive, especially for experts accustomed to engineering drawings and detailed reports. “When asked what they do, techies usually focus on themselves and the details of their product,” Dipner said. “The response ought to be about the customer and product benefits.”

Getting started

Dipner bases his instruction on the paradigm presented in Geoffrey Moore’s Crossing the Chasm. The system differs from many others because it targets the user and the market. “With this method, you can craft a reasonable speech in just a few minutes,” Dipner said.

To build an elevator speech, complete the following statements.

For: List target customers. Group them and define the primary customer.

Who: Define the need or opportunity. That is, what critical issue does the customer face?

The: Name the product (or service or concept).

Is a: Place the product into a generally understood category.

That: List the benefits—not the features—the customer receives from the product. Group or prioritize the benefits to identify the single benefit that is the most compelling reason for the customer to buy the product. Quantify the benefit as much as possible.

Unlike: List the competitors and competitive alternatives. What is the state of the art?

Our: Develop a statement of the product's primary differentiation. The differentiation is the single most important thing that sets your product apart from the competition or state of the art.

"When you write a speech from the formula, it's stilted," Dipner said. "Tailor it to your needs, but keep the emphasis on the customer. This lets your audience know you understand them and the problems they face."

Applying the model

Patricia Irving, president and chief executive officer of InnoVaTek in Richland, offered the company's InnoVaGen fuel processor as a test for Dipner's model.

For: developers of fuel cell technologies

Who: require a means to generate hydrogen

The: InnoVaGen

Is a: fuel processor

That: when fully developed, will reduce the cost, size and complexity of portable hydrogen generation from conventional and biomass fuels.

Unlike: other fuel processors,

Our: InnoVaGen will convert diesel and gasoline to hydrogen, and provide significant technical advantages to bring fuel cells closer to commercialization.

The speech: For developers of fuel cell technologies who require a means to generate hydrogen, the InnoVaGen is a fuel processor that, when fully developed, will reduce the cost, size and complexity of portable hydrogen

generation from conventional and biomass fuels. Unlike other fuel processors, the InnovaGen will convert diesel and gasoline to hydrogen, and provide significant technical advantages to bring fuel cells closer to commercialization.

“Although our technology is complex, a mini-speech such as this provides a simple, quick response that avoids detailed technical jargon that can be off-putting to non-techies,” Irving said.

PayPlus Benefits in Kennewick stocks a variety of elevator speeches for use on different occasions. Carol Stults, director of business development, noted that the PayPlus staff is well versed in the speeches “because we rely heavily on networking contacts for new business, and our employees are wonderful ambassadors.”

Here is a speech for a new PayPlus product: “For employers who must enroll and pay employees, our eTools provide easy online self-service systems—available how, when and where you want them.”

The elevator speech is a business development tool that belongs in everyone’s portfolio, Stults said. “Use it and neither you nor your staff will miss an opportunity to make a great first impression.”