



How to Create a Winning Impression with an “Elevator Speech”

By Catherine Kaputa

You got the appointment and spent the last week researching the company and fine-tuning your resume. But you blew it in the first five minutes. That’s because you planned everything but the most important thing—making a great first impression with an “elevator speech.”

The First Ten Seconds May Be All You Have

People make judgments about you in a matter of seconds: winner/loser, strong/weak, hire/don’t hire. Such judgments are based on first impressions: how you enter the room, what you’re wearing, your body language, your facial expressions, and the first words out of your mouth.

And these first, blink-of-an-eye impressions are powerful. Research shows that how you are viewed coming out of the gate is usually indelible and doesn’t change over time. That’s why it’s important not only to research the company but also to focus on how you look, how you walk, and how you connect with others at the meeting. It all starts, of course, with the first words you say. Most people flub the response to the most popular opening question, “Tell me about yourself.”



The Sixty-Second Elevator Speech

The words you use to introduce yourself and your accomplishments can be powerful and memorable, or instantly forgettable. Too many people waste the beginning of a pitch with a long-winded life story, while their audience is wondering why they're there and what they do. Instead, prepare an elevator speech, a pithy explanation of who you are, what you've done and what you can do for them, and why it matters.

Here are the tenets of creating and delivering a great elevator speech from my book, *You Are a Brand!*, winner of the Ben Franklin Award for Best Career Book:

1. **Grab them at hello.** An elevator speech should last about a minute and a half, the time it takes to go up a few floors in the elevator. Because it's short, begin strong with an action phrase. For example, if you're in sales, you might say, "Hello, I'm John. I am a master of building relationships" or "My name is Lila, I'm a sales person at the intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley – selling technology solutions for entertainment companies."
2. **Position yourself and your value.** Your speech should contain a value proposition: why you and your business accomplishments and abilities are relevant in the marketplace. Frame your career story to reflect your value proposition. You must answer this question, "What do you help people or businesses do?"
3. **Be memorable.** Include a memorable phrase that embodies your value proposition, like an ad slogan. Another way to add interest is through an analogy. For example, one market researcher who specializes in the women's market calls herself "the Oprah of Madison Avenue." I often define myself in my elevator speech as "a personal branding strategist – you might say I'm a



cross between a P&G brand manager and an executive coach.”

4. **Be conversational.** Your elevator speech shouldn't seem wooden or rehearsed. The key is to practice, but to avoid memorization so you don't sound like you're scripted. Keep an elevator speech as spontaneous as possible, but weave in stories and examples of your accomplishments. You may want to give an anecdote such as, “My boss couldn't believe we pulled it off in the time frame we had. In fact, he bet me \$5 that we couldn't. It was very sweet collecting that bet.”
5. **Have an impact statement.** You should always have at the ready a specific statement of one or two things that you done that demonstrate how you make a difference on the job. Try to put yourself in their shoes. What accomplishments and projects would most appeal to them. Remember, good branding always involves sacrifice. You may have to leave out things that are valuable to you but lead other people in the wrong direction.
6. **Ask for the business.** End with a call to action. “I am looking to be introduced to ___ . Do you have thoughts on other people I should talk with?” If you ask for something vague, you are likely to get a vague reply. Make it easy for the other person. Most people want to help.