



*Helping Organizations
Take the Next Step*

Three Keys to a Quick, Powerful Message

By Bill Peatman

We've all heard about the so called "elevator pitch"—a scenario in which you're in an elevator with a prospective client or donor and they ask "tell me about what you do." You have about 20 seconds to grab their attention.

Well, these days the elevator is getting faster. Busy lifestyles, multiple media, and fierce competition for dollars make it imperative that any organization be able to quickly and powerfully tell their story. Nowadays, it is more challenging than ever to get someone to ask, "Tell me more." Here are three tips on how to make sure your trip to the 14th floor is successful:

1. Know who you are.

This may sound simple, but it isn't as easy as it sounds. You have to be able to set yourself apart from competitive products or other nonprofits. Most organizations originated to address an unmet need in the community, or to improve an existing product. Over time, though, we sometimes dilute our message in a misguided attempt to appeal to more people. The opposite happens. The more vague the message, the more confused people are about what you do. No one doubts what makes Southwest Airlines different from other airlines, for example. And no one is confused about the mission of Habitat for Humanity. These organizations know who they are, and they communicate who they are through all that they do. It makes it far easier for them to connect with people who might be interested in their product or service.

2. Understand who cares about what you do.

Once you identify your core Value Proposition—what you do that no one else does—it's a lot easier to identify who might care about that problem. For example, if your organization is about getting homeless people into jobs and housing, you probably won't find much support at a Relay for Life event. More likely, businesses and agencies impacted by homelessness would be eager to

participate in programs that might address the problem. Your message should be tailored to the people who are most likely to care. For example, if you're in the elevator with a community leader and she asks you about Habitat for Humanity, which of these answers would be most compelling:

- “Habitat for Humanity has built over 200,000 homes in 3,000 countries” – interesting, but does a local leader really care?
- “Last year five families moved off government assistance into home ownership in our community, and there are hundreds more ready to make that move. Helping them helps the entire community”—much more relevant. People are most likely to care about how they can impact their own community.

3. Make the connection.

You may not be taking many elevators rides these days, but you know you need to get your message out quickly and powerfully every day. Once you know your message and have identified target audiences, how do you connect the two? A low-cost method is to make ambassadors of the people closest to your organization. One nonprofit launched a “Take 5 to Tell 5” program. They encouraged their staff and volunteers to tell five others about their organization, and to record their efforts. For every five conversations, the employee or volunteer received a Starbucks gift card. The organization reached several hundred new contacts at a fraction of the cost of an event or direct mail campaign. The reality is that your staff, your board, your clients and your customers constantly come into contact with people that don't know anything about what you do. This means that you may have an underutilized marketing machine in your own organization.

It all starts with knowing who you are—taking the time to identify what makes your organization or product uniquely valuable to customers and communities. This takes hard work. It is much more difficult to be precise than to be vague. Once that hard work is done, though, everything gets easier, whether it's sales, recruiting, fundraising, or board development. With consistent, accurate messaging over time, you will be known for what you do best. And you'll never be at a loss for words when it counts—in an elevator or anywhere else.

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