

The Elevator Talk

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“So tell me what you do.”

A common enough request from a potential colleague who missed a job talk, the leader of an interdisciplinary grant team, a new member of upper administration, a development officer. But despite our best intentions in our response, our listeners often *hear*: “I am neither able nor willing to communicate effectively about what I do and why it matters, except to people in my own narrow discipline.” Out come the jargon, acronyms, minutiae, and esoterica.

What should come out, instead, is the Elevator Talk — a 1–2 minute abstract of “what you do.” It is the quick sell, the 2-minute drill, the abstract of the abstract, the unique DNA of each scholar’s work. It typically is 100–150 words, about the length of a journal abstract — just long enough for a short elevator ride.

Brevity is only half the challenge. Accessibility is the other. The elevator talk is engaging and devoid of jargon, and recognizes the perspective of the listener. (This is *not* synonymous with “trivialized, devoid of science, and dumbed down.”) Although the delivery sounds off-the-cuff, the talk itself is written in advance and carefully practiced. Achieving brevity and accessibility is harder than it looks.

Watch Your Step!

The elevator door closes and you have a captive audience. Watch out. An inquiry about “what you do”

guarantees neither attention nor genuine interest. Grab both. Why is the work intriguing, useful, or important? Is there a current event, startling statistic, burning question, or conundrum addressed by your work? Even if educated laypeople won't find it "sexy," does it provide a technique or tool that may improve quality of life or efficiency of work? Think of this "hook" as the movie preview, newspaper title, or book cover: It glosses over details, but grabs interest and provides a schema for what comes next.

Going Up!

The elevator operator of bygone days drew attention to critical information and did not leave passengers hanging between floors. By the same token, you must do the work for your audience. No jargon. No acronyms. Think back to your first week of organic chemistry, buying your first house (points, appraisal, PMI), or other first times in unfamiliar territory. Your work is unfamiliar territory to this audience, and they will not find steady footing without you. Consider using an analogy. Understand that an analogy need not be perfect. It just needs to be *effective*. And generally speaking, the elevator talk is not the time for subtle nuance, tangents, and minute detail. Just go up, not sideways.

No Bumps

A smooth elevator talk is practiced, and not only to yourself in the mirror or to your advisor or romantic partner. Find some peers and friends in other disciplines. Practice. Wait a day, and ask if they remember anything about what you do. And remember that your elevator talk needs periodic maintenance, and that you may need alternative elevator talks for people in your own field. (Seriously. When initial encounters with your peers are in truly social settings, it's best to impart a short, memorable message about what you do. Keep the social setting social, and find another time to talk shop.)

Out of Order

An elevator sometimes unavoidably is out of order, but you *never* should be found without a working elevator talk. The complexity or "nonsexiness" of a scholar's work should not prevent him or her from having an elevator talk. I've heard effective elevator talks about fluid mechanics, the many-body problem, robot decision-making algorithms, and protein folding. Find a way to make it work. Be creative. Use analogy. Be brief.

And above all, be accessible.