

# Death to Elevator Speeches

By Carol Weisman

Is it time to throw out your elevator speech and try a new way to gain supporters?

I detest elevator speeches. I've never had an authentic conversation after someone just gave me a canned pitch.

I realize this is heresy. The elevator speech — a pre-planned synopsis that tells people, in the time it takes to ride the elevator with them, what your organization does — has become standard. Everywhere I go, I hear people urging others to create such a speech and teach it to everyone in the organization.

## What's the problem?

My problem with pre-planned speeches is that they tell what the organization wants you to know and not what the person inquiring is interested in. They assume the listener doesn't know anything about your cause or your organization.

One of the most touching meetings I ever had with a potential donor occurred when I went to visit a CEO on behalf of a child abuse organization. I was prattling on, giving my canned speech about sexual abuse when I looked at his eyes.

I finally stopped chattering and said, "You understand what I'm talking about, don't you?"

He quietly said, "Yes." He then said, "What does your organization need?"

We got down to brass tacks. On the way out the door I said, "If you want some help, we have terrific therapists who work with survivors." He said thanks and kissed me on the cheek. After that, he became a huge supporter of the organization.

I realize that the purpose of elevator speeches is to solicit interest. I find that they rarely achieve that. First of all, there's rarely any poetry to them. And even if the wording is terrific, they're delivered in such a rote manner that it turns off the listener.

“Listen, ask questions, and get off the elevator.”

## What's the alternative?

It's simple: Ask questions. Here's a sample of a different kind of conversation:

**Cocktail party guest (a little sober):** I hear you're on the board of Trailnet. Tell me about it.

**You:** What do you want to know?

**Cocktail party guest (still sober):** Why don't they maintain the trails?

**You:** Great question. We actually don't manage the trails. Our origins were in building trails, but our mission and focus have changed. What do you think we should do about this misperception about the bike trails?

**Cocktail party guest (not too sober):** Well, some signage might clear this up.

**You:** Great point. I'll bring it back to the board. I wonder how much it would cost.

**Cocktail party guest (sober enough to get out business card):** My brother-in-law loves the bike rides your organization sponsors. He owns a sign company. Do you want me to see if he might be interested in helping out?

**You:** That would be terrific. (Exchange cards, head to the bar, or continue conversation.)

## What to do?

Try a donor-centered approach. Find out what your conversational partner wants to know. Listen, ask questions, and get off the elevator. 

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