How to Create an Irresistible Elevator Speech
“So What Do You Do?”

Now that’s a million dollar question! If you answer it correctly, the thick walls protecting the inner sanctums of big companies come tumbling down and the red carpet is rolled out for you. Answer it incorrectly and you stay on the outside, envious of those who managed to get in. Everyday you meet people who could use your products or services or who know others who could benefit from what you do. But unless you tell them what you do in a clear, concise and compelling manner, these relationships go nowhere.

That’s why you need an elevator speech – a short description of your business that enables prospective buyers to know who you work with and what value you bring to the relationship. An elevator speech conveys these marketing messages in a manner that literally attracts the right customers to you.

In today’s fast-paced world, the average person is bombarded with thousands of marketing messages from multiple mediums every single day. Advertising is everywhere – television, radio, road signs, email, banner ads, direct mail, clothing, pens, newspapers and magazines. These pervasive, and often intrusive methods of capturing attention have created a backlash; most people don’t even notice them anymore.

To break through all this marketing clutter, it’s imperative to have an exquisitely crafted and enticing elevator speech that speaks directly to the needs of your customers. And, it has to roll off your tongue easily, naturally and conversationally.

Many people intuitively know this, but still struggle with how to respond. If you’re unsure about the quality of your elevator speech or want to improve it, here’s what you’ll learn in this document:

• The most common responses to “What do you do?” and why they’re ineffective.
• How to develop a compelling elevator speech that attracts prospective customers.
• How to fine-tune the delivery of your elevator speech.
• Different ways to use your elevator speech to market your product or service.

Developing a clear and compelling elevator speech helps you attract more of your ideal customers and gives you enhanced clarity about the work you do. Plus, if you repeat it often enough, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. You’ll become even more of what you want to be.

Classic Elevator Speeches

Let’s take a look at the classic elevator speeches people give to the “What do you do?” question. This will help you understand why you may not be attracting as many customers as you’d like.

The Minimizer

Most people are Minimizers. They position themselves by either their title or by their products/services. Minimizers’ elevator speeches are brief and factual. Knowing their elevator
speech needs to be short, they give the most concise response possible. They really dislike “puffery” and bragging too.

Here are some common Minimizer responses to the big question:

- “I sell software.”
- “I’m a consultant.”
- “I’m a mortgage broker.”
- “I’m self-employed.”

What’s wrong with the Minimizer’s elevator speech? When you lead with your title, most people immediately assume they know what you do. As a consequence, they’re typically not too interested in learning more. Plus, many jobs have really negative connotations. For example, you wouldn’t believe how many people DON’T like consultants. It doesn’t matter if I’m the best in the world, charge reasonable rates and consistently deliver extraordinary results.

At least 50% of people think consultants are overpaid for what they do or that they’re laid-off employees trying to earn some quick money while they look for another position. Perception is everything. It doesn’t matter if what people think is true or not – they still believe it. And if that’s the case, the last thing you want to do in your elevator speech is turn off half the people out there.

When you position yourself by the products or services you sell, you immediately put yourself into the same category as your competitors. How many other web designers are there? How about printing salespeople? Marketing communications companies? IT specialists? Placing yourself in the same category as your biggest competitors makes you a commodity. If someone needs what you do, they immediately want to know how much you charge or what your price is. No matter what you say, you’re in trouble! Buyers automatically compare your price tag to other suppliers – even though they don’t know why you may be a better value, more productive or more capable.

The Rambler

Much as I dearly love most Ramblers, they do drive me (and most everyone else) crazy. As you can imagine, Ramblers babble on-and-on, seemingly unaware of their affect on prospective buyers. Based on my observations, there are two types of Ramblers.

**Floundering-For-My-Niche Ramblers**

These Ramblers lack a clear target market and value proposition. In response to the “What do you do?” question, their elevator speech usually sounds like this:

“I do a lot of things. I’ve done lots of sales training in the past. But lately lots of my customers have been asking me to do facilitation. I’m really good at helping companies launch new products. Sometimes I write their marketing copy; sometimes I do PR. It really doesn’t matter. I think both are fun and I like doing both. I’m doing this neat project right now for a client – it’s mapping the various futures for their markets so I’m into strategy development too.”
The floundering Ramblers share everything they can do—hoping that something they say piques your interest. They don’t want to close down any opportunity to generate revenue. Unfortunately, their elevator speech has just the opposite effect. People much prefer to work with specialists. Also, what these Ramblers don’t know is that their elevator speech projects a sense of desperation and ‘lost-ness’ that’s unattractive to most all buyers.

**I-Love-My-Subject Ramblers**

Ask these Ramblers what they do and you’ll wish you never had. Typically they’re highly involved with their products or processes—and really love them. When they start talking, they don’t want to stop. Here’s how their elevator speech might sound:

“We do process re-engineering with the various department, divisions, business units and subsidiaries from organizations as well as the numerous contractors that provide products and services that go into the development of your own branded and unbranded products. We initially start by doing a comprehensive assessment of the multiple groups involved in the process, covering questions such as …”

Boring! While these Ramblers are certainly specialists, they say so much that you don’t know what’s important or relevant in their elevator speech. And the last thing you want to do is ask them another question because they may bore you to tears.

**The Impresser**

The Impresser wants to set himself apart—no, above—others. Their elevator speech sounds like this:

“I work with only the best companies in the industry. Elite Enterprises and SNOB are my biggest customers. I work closely with their CEO, Terry Gucci. “I’m sure you’ve heard of her. We handle their COQS financial systems, specifically in the re-arbitration of the microfunding from their international and intergalactic commercial markets.”

Impressed? You should be, because the Impresser goes to great lengths to ensure you understand just how important he is. High-falluting words and industry-specific acronyms fill his elevator speech. Also, you’ll hear lots of name-dropping; well-known people and top-notch companies are part of the repertoire.

The trouble with the Impresser’s elevator speech is that it’s off-putting. Most people don’t like the implications of intellectual superiority or elitism. They’re intimidated by the big words and won’t ask questions that might make them look stupid.

Again, another elevator speech that doesn’t deliver results.

**The Attractor**

The Attractor’s elevator speech is magnetic to the right listeners because it’s focused on their needs, issues and concerns. Here are several examples:
• “I work with people who are struggling to sell their products or services into large corporate accounts.”
• “I help small businesses win big contracts with large corporate customers.”
• “I help technology companies who struggle launching important new products into the market and want to improve their time-to-profitability.”

These are some of the different elevator speeches I have used. Each one of them has been successful for me. They all invite and stimulate further discussion – which is exactly what I want!
The rest of this document will help you become an Attractor with an enticing elevator speech that puts you in front of the right people who are most interested in what you offer.

Guidelines for Writing

The success of your elevator speech depends on your ability to craft a message that offers a strong promise of benefits to your target market. A really good one immediately differentiates you from your competitors.

Customer-attracting elevator speeches must convey TWO main ideas. They must specifically define your target customer. AND, they must help prospective customers understand the value they can receive from your product or service. Follow these guidelines to create your personal elevator speech:

Talk Results, Not Products or Process

Customers don’t care what you do. They don’t care how you do it. But they do care deeply about their business. They’ll be extremely interested if you can do things such as:

• Solve a pressing problem.
• Improve operational efficiency.
• Eliminate bottlenecks.
• Increase sales or cut costs.
• Enhance customer loyalty.
• Open new markets.
This is the most important thing to remember as you develop your own elevator speech. Focus on what the customer gets – the outcomes – not on what you do.

Keep it Short, Simple and Concise

1-2 sentences is the maximum you should use. If you feel you absolutely must say more, you haven’t determined the true value you provide. Or, you love your product or process so much you feel compelled to describe it in all its glorious detail. Don’t. Limit yourself to just 1 or 2 outcomes. If you say more, you dilute your message and confuse your potential customers.

Contrary to what you may think, the more narrowly you describe what you do, the broader your appeal will be. Conversely, the more broadly you describe what you do, the less attractive your proposition is. People want specialists. Short and sweet makes a winner. If you can say your elevator speech (as it’s described below) in less than 10 seconds you’re doing well.
Clearly Identify Your Target Market

Do you work with certain industries such as technology companies or professional services firms? If so, include it in your elevator speech. Do you work with certain types of people such as executives, salespeople, plant managers, or accountants? If so, spell it out.

 Whoever hears your elevator speech should know exactly what kind of businesses or people you work with. Remember, your elevator speech doesn’t have to attract everyone – just those who might be able to use your products or services.

Make Sure it’s Conversational

An elevator speech is not an ad or a slogan or a tagline, so avoid words you wouldn’t normally use if you were talking to people. You don’t need to sound “catchy.” Remember, when you’re talking to people you use lots of contractions. You don’t say “are not”, you say “aren’t” in everyday conversation.

Choose the simplest words possible for your elevator speech. “Use” is better than “utilize.” “Get” is better than “obtain.” “Turn” is better than “transform.” These are the words you use (not utilize) when you’re talking to someone.

Also, I recommend using 8th grade language to ensure your elevator speech is understandable to all. Don’t use acronyms, impressive-sounding words or complex descriptions unless your target market is people who know the meaning of everything you say.

Strive for Repeatability

If your elevator speech is easy for you to say over and over again, then you have it right. Plus, those who hear it can easily repeat it when you’re not around – spreading your message to others who may benefit from what you offer.

Developing Your Elevator Speech

Crafting your elevator speech is a challenging exercise. It may take you months to achieve the clarity and simplicity that you want in this marketing message.

The key to coming up with a great one is this – create the best elevator speech you can right away, practice it, and then use it. When you see how people respond, refine it over and over again till you are confident that it’s clear and that it will attract just the right customers to you.

Every word you use in your elevator speech is critical. Your prospective customer either understands what you do or he doesn’t. She’ll be interested in learning more about your offering or she won’t. That’s why finding the right words is so important.

Getting Started

This is probably the hardest part for many people. If you’re an entrepreneur, independent professional or small business owner, what you do is closely attached to who you are as a person.
Lots of soul-searching may be needed to clarify the true value you bring to your customers. If you work as a salesperson for an established firm, your management may have already told you what your “elevator pitch” is and they expect you to follow the company line. However, most companies have messages full of words that either convey no value to customers or are discarded as self-promoting puffery. No one in today’s market puts any credence in words like “best” or “state-of-the-art.” Your challenge is to find the real value in your offering.

How can you find out what customers think your biggest value is? There’s only one way. You have to ask. I strongly recommend interviewing:

- People who you’ve worked with before.
- Users of your products, services or solutions.
- Other consultants and independent professionals who know your strengths.

Explore with them the value you, your products or your services bring to their business. Ask questions such as:

- From your perspective, what difference did my product/service make for your business?
- In what ways could you quantify the value of my solution?
- What were the primary problems, difficulties, bottlenecks or challenges that my offering solved for you?
- Can you explain to me the business implications and ramifications of these problems?

Whatever answers you get, explore them in greater depth. Aren’t you curious about the impact of your products and services? I always am. It’s always interesting and incredibly valuable to get a perspective that’s different from your own.

Use the worksheet on pages at the end of this document to complete the exercise that follows.

**Step 1: Specify your target market**

Be clear and explicit in your target market definition. Examples of potential target markets are:

- Research labs
- Sales organizations
- Entrepreneurs
- Government institutions
- Radiologists
- High tech firms
- School districts
- Human resource departments
- Manufacturing plants

**Step 2: Write down the problems/challenges faced by your target market and solvable by your product or service.**

These are common problems and challenges faced by many organizations today. Use the list below to trigger ideas related to what you offer.

- High costs – be specific (e.g., in production, supply chain, personnel, R&D)
- Time-to-market for new products
• Inefficient processes
• Employee turnover
• Customer turnover
• Technology utilization
• Declining profitability
• Increased competition
• Inability to differentiate
• Lack of innovation
• Untrained employees
• High labor costs
• Excessive waste
• Inability to respond quickly to market changes
• Bottlenecks in workflow
• Slow response time

When you first tackle this, don’t censor your list at all. Write down anything and everything that comes to mind. Try to think of at least 20 different ideas. Refining comes later. If you’re part of a company – do this as a group exercise. The more input at this stage, the better.

Step 3: Describe how your target market “feels” about these problems or challenges.
A compelling elevator speech has an emotional component. It appeals to the heart of the prospective buyer. Here are some highly effective words you might want to use in your elevator speech.

• Struggling
• Frustrated
• Constrained
• Disappointed
• Concerned
• Having trouble
• Difficulties
• Confused

Don’t be afraid of using words like this in your elevator speech. Their inclusion will often cause prospective customers to raise their hand and say, “That’s me” or “You sound like you’re talking about our company.”

And that’s exactly what you want to happen.

Step 4: State the results or outcomes your customers get from using your product or service.
Remember, people don’t care what about your product, what you can do or how you do it. They’re only concerned about what’s in it for them. How can you help your customers improve their business? That’s what’s important. Know what they want to achieve!

Here are some results or outcomes that are highly desirable to many customers. Use them to trigger ideas for your own elevator speech.

• Increase cash flow
• Decrease cost of goods sold
• Reduce time-to-market
• Increase the number of customers
• Acquire more profitable customers
• Improve operational efficiency
• Decrease turnover
• Stimulate new business opportunities
• Eliminate bottlenecks in production
• Increase workload without adding additional staff
• Ensure compliance with new governmental regulations
• Reduce wasteful technology investments
• Maximize use of existing technology
• Improve customer loyalty
• Achieve profitability targets

Notice how each of these results starts with a word that shows movement. As an outcome of working with you, bad or costly things are reduced, eliminated or minimized. Conversely, outcomes people want are improved, enhanced or ensured. That’s what’s in it for your customer.

That’s what they want to hear.

And, the more specific you can be the better. How much can you reduce turnover? What percentage of improvement did your customers receive? Telling people a range is fine – no one expects their company to achieve exactly the same outcomes as other businesses.

**Step 5: Refine Your Lists**

Your next step is to review all the problems and challenges you identified in Step 3. As you look over all the ideas you wrote down, try to determine which are the most appropriate and relevant to what you can do for your customers. Pick out 2 or 3 to start with.

Next, look at your list of words that describe how your targeted customers feel about these problems and issues. Which 2 words are most descriptive of how your ideal prospect feels?

Finally, review your benefits. From your customer’s perspective, which are most important and compelling? Again, pick out 2-3 that you can try out in your first elevator speech.

**Choosing Your Style**

The style you choose for your elevator speech is generally based on personal preference. Some people prefer problem-centered elevator speeches, while others gravitate towards benefit-centered ones.

**The Problem-Centered Elevator Speech**

Research into sales success shows that customers respond much more to problem-centered approaches than to benefit-oriented ones. Why? Problems usually have top-of-mind awareness. No one likes to deal with aggravations, frustrations, major issues and bottlenecks. These things
can cause massive headaches and people want to get rid of their headaches as quickly as they can.

Here’s the formula to use for creating a problem-centered elevator speech:

I/we work with (insert target market)
… who are (insert feeling word)
… with (insert problem/issue you solve).

Examples

Before: I’m a sales development specialist.
After: I work with small-to-medium sized manufacturing companies who are struggling with unpredictable revenue streams and profitable growth.

Before: I do team building.
After: I help fragmented leadership teams align around a common vision and business strategies.

Before: I sell nuclear magnetic resonance imaging systems.
After: I help radiologists who are frustrated with the difficulty in making accurate diagnosis from existing technologies.

As you can see, the “After” versions clearly identify the target market, the feelings prospective customers are likely to experience, and the problems or issues that have caused them to feel this way.

The Benefit-Centered Elevator Speech

These elevator speeches are focused on what customers want to achieve. Sometimes it’s their personal dreams. Or, it could be specific business goals. But it’s out there in the future and your customers haven’t arrived at their destination yet. There’s a gap between their current reality and their desired future state.

Here’s the formula to use for creating benefit-centered elevator speeches:
I/we work with /help (target market)
… who want to (describe what your customers want).

Examples

Before: I’m a mortgage broker.
After: I help first-time homebuyers get financing for the homes of their dreams.

Before: We sell and implement fully-integrated CRM systems that are compatible with all the major data base applications utilized by the Fortune 500 companies.
After: We help large corporations effectively use their customer information to drive repeat sales and reduce customer turnover.

Before: We do web site design and provide web site hosting services.
After: We work with independent professionals to turn their web sites into moneymaking profit
centers.

As you can see from these sample elevator speeches, the focus is on the future – a highly desirable outcome their prospective customers want.

**Fine-Tuning Your Elevator Speech**

Once you've written your elevator speech, you'll want to go through it again to pare it down to its essentials. Here are some items to check for:

- Does it clearly identify your target market?
- Does it have any fluffy, descriptive words that aren't essential? Usually adjectives are the first to go. These are descriptive words such as big, long, or old. What words just plain aren't needed? (For example, you could replace “physicians, surgeons, and nurses” with “medical staff.” Trim, trim, trim. Remember, short elevator speeches are more effective.)
- Can you simplify any of the words to make them more conversational?
- Have you used contractions?
- Does your problem statement address the primary issues your customer wants to eliminate? Or, does your benefit statement speak to the future state that your customer really wants to achieve?
- Would your customers actually “say” the feeling word you’ve chosen? Make sure you use their language.
- Have you included 1 or 2 outcomes your customers receive? If you have more than 2 outcomes, you’ll dilute your message and confuse your customers.
- Is it compelling to your prospective buyers?
- Would you feel comfortable saying it? Is it “you”?
- Could other people easily repeat it?

Once you've cleaned up your elevator speech, now you need to get it ready for prime time.

**Delivering Your Elevator Speech**

You've now written out your elevator speech and are ready to start using it. Perhaps you even have several versions that you want to try out before you settle on which works best.

When you deliver your elevator speech, it must come out sounding natural and confident. You must practice it by saying it aloud. Over and over again. People write very differently from how they speak. Saying your elevator speech aloud helps you find a more conversational way to deliver your message.

As you practice your elevator speech, say it slowly. It should take about 10 seconds to deliver. You don't want to rush through it either; make sure you speak at a pace that enables prospective customers to absorb what you’re saying. Here are several ways effective ways to practice your elevator speech.

1. **Practice in front of the mirror.**

   Watch how you look as you deliver your elevator speech.
   - Do you look confident?
   - Are your gestures natural?
2. Leave yourself a voicemail.

Call your own phone number and deliver your elevator speech when it’s time to leave a message.
- How do you sound? Remember, you’re shooting for natural, confident and conversational.
- Do you have any awkward pauses and filler words like “um” or “er”. You’ll want to get rid of these.
- Do you stumble over any words? If so, perhaps you need to choose a simpler alternative instead.
- How long did it take to deliver? If it’s longer than 10 seconds, consider shortening it.

3. Video tape yourself.

As you review the tape, watch and listen from your customer’s perspective.
- Do you look/sound like you mean what you’re saying?
- Do you have any bothersome non-verbal behaviors that are caused by being nervous. If so, work to eliminate them.

By practicing your elevator speech over and over again, you develop a comfort level with it. Initially test it out with colleagues or close friends to get their reactions. Take all their input seriously. Remember, they just want you to get better. Evaluate their suggested changes and integrate the best ones into your newly revised elevator speech.

Next, try your elevator speech out in a social gathering or networking event. Watch and listen for how others respond. Note any areas where they appear to be confused or their eyes glaze over. Do they appear interested in what you do? If so, you’re on the right track.

Be gentle with yourself. If you’ve followed the steps above to write your elevator speech, you are starting with a good one. It may not be the very best you could have, but it’s certainly good enough to take out to the marketplace.

Don’t insist that it has to be perfect before you use it. You need people’s reactions to make it the best it can be. That’s why you field-test it. Revising is good. It’s what takes your elevator speech to the next level.

Winning Elevator Speeches

You’ll immediately know when you have found a winning elevator speech. After sharing it, you’ll hear comments like:
• “You must have been talking to people in our company.”
• “That is just what we need.”
• “That’s interesting. How do you do it?
• “I want you to talk to Andrew about that. He needs to hear more about what you do.”
• “We’re struggling with exactly that challenge in our business. How exactly do you handle it?”
• “Our accounting division is having those same issues.”
• “I was talking to a former colleague of mine recently. I think he would be really interested in what you do.”
These are the kinds of responses you get when you have a clear, compelling elevator speech that's clearly targeted at a specific market segment.

**Use Your Elevator Speech – Everywhere!**

Once your winning elevator speech is nailed down, you'll want to use it in as many ways as you can. Use it at trade shows, networking events, neighborhood gatherings and in the stands at your son’s Little League games. You never know who might be sitting next to you!

Incorporate your elevator speech into your marketing materials. Your message is relevant and attracting to your target market. So use it again and again. There are numerous venues available for you to deliver your message. Include it in:

- Product brochures
- Corporate overviews
- PowerPoint presentations
- Executive Summaries in proposals
- Advertising
- Fax cover sheets
- Web site
- Email SIG file
- Tagline on your business cards
- Title of your speech
- Voicemail message
- Customer give-aways such as pens, coffee cups or t-shirts.

When your elevator speech is “right on” it’s a powerful communications vehicle. You can magnify its effect by repurposing it in multiple ways. You’re constrained only by your imagination.

**Final Thoughts**

Being able to describe your product or service offering in a manner that everyone understands is one of the most important marketing skills you need to master. It takes time and effort to work through the many iterations that you’ll try before you arrive at one that works like a charm. But the challenge is worth it. Enticing is good!

Just think how you’ll feel the next time someone asks, “What do you do?” Your heart won’t beat rapidly in your chest as you stumble and bumble through your clumsy, poorly worded, nonappealing elevator pitch.

**Elevator Speech Worksheet**

1. Specify your target market

2. Write down the problems or issues your target market is facing that are solvable by your product or service.
3. Describe how your target market “feels” about these problems or issues.

4. State the results or outcomes your customers get from using your product/service.

Refining Your Lists:

Most appropriate, relevant problems/issues you solve:

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•
•
•

Words that best describe how your targeted customer feels about the problems

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Most appropriate, compelling benefits you provide:

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•
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6. Write a Problem-Centered Elevator Speech

To begin, write out a number of different versions. See which get the best reactions from colleagues and friends.

I/we work with (insert target market)
… who are (insert feeling word)
… with (insert problem/issue you solve).

7. Write a Benefit-Centered Elevator Speech

To begin, write out a number of different versions. See which get the best reactions from colleagues and friends.

I/we work with /help (target market)
… who want to (describe what your customers want).