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The power of the 'elevator speech'

In a world that moves at lightning speed, and with sensory overload and short attention spans as perpetual states of being, we must all be adept at conveying information within a compressed time frame.

Communicating in short, impactful sound bites is an essential part of everyday life, and effectively speaking about our talents and capabilities — also known as the “elevator speech” — is an important part of making a great first impression.

Successful business development in the legal profession is more of an art than a science. Some believe that working the speaking circuit leads to success, while others think that writing articles and preparing great marketing materials are key. While there is a time and place for many such strategies, as with most things, balance is important. We must all be mindful of our target audience and adapt our approaches accordingly.

We should also recognize that for each formal pitch or request for a proposal received from business prospects, there are just as many, if not more, opportunities that serendipitously cross our path on any given day and which are ours to seize. I have spoken to a number of successful rainmakers over the years who claim that business development is just as much about being a great lawyer as it is knowing an opportunity when it presents itself and being properly prepared.

Herein lies the beauty of the elevator speech. Within the

span of a few seconds, we tell others who we are, what we do, what we are passionate about, what others find interesting about us, why we are relevant and why others should take the time to get to know us. While this is a lot of information to share in a relatively short period of time, an effective elevator speech can convert a mere exchange of pleasantries into the sharing of business cards and a commitment to embark on a more in-depth, meaningful conversation over lunch or a cup of coffee.

Crafting a successful elevator speech requires great effort. Mark Twain once said, “If you want me to give you a two-hour presentation, I am ready today. If you want only a five-minute speech, it will take me two weeks to prepare.” It will take some time to distill into 30 seconds or less an insightful synopsis of who we are, what makes us tick and our goals and aspirations.

During the development process, we must be self-aware and introspective and have a clear sense of the image we wish to portray. For example, are we looking to network, are we trying to find the next piece of business or seeking a new job? We simply cannot adopt a kitchen-sink approach. There is not enough time and our audience will just tune us out after a few seconds. We should be realistic and focus on our greatest strengths and what makes us unique. If we are unclear about what we are trying to say, our message will be unfocused and confusing.

We must carefully frame our elevator speech in both an interesting and meaningful way.

PARADIGM SHIFT



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Authenticity in content and delivery is also part of the secret sauce. It is a great idea to write out catch phrases that we wish to use and to think about how to say them and whether to incorporate a quick story about ourselves to illustrate the points we are trying to make. Once we decide what we want to say, it is also important to practice saying it to ensure that we sincerely feel what we are saying and are genuine when delivering the message.

Our elevator speech cannot be just a one-way soliloquy. We must be prepared to ask questions and engage the other person to get a sense of who they are, what they do and what matters to them. At a moment's

notice, we must be able to draw from several versions of our speech to ensure what we say is tailored to our audience. The process is one of give-and-take. We should prioritize the other person and their interests and needs. We should not just talk to hear ourselves talk and push to get what we want from the exchange.

Effectively wrapping up our elevator speech is critical. The approach needs to be focused and we need to determine whether both parties are willing to continue the conversation. We need to be realistic and accept that not every elevator speech will warrant follow-up.

With those that do, the appropriate closing could be anything from exchanging business cards to saying, “Until next time.” The most important thing is for the exchange to be natural and authentic from beginning to end.

Just as our elevator speeches should be carefully tailored to our audience, we need to regularly revisit them to incorporate and eliminate strategies that have and have not worked well and to reflect our shifting approaches and experiences. These tweaks will help keep them from becoming stale and ineffective.

When done right, elevator speeches can provide a simple, memorable and impactful way to make a first impression.

We must strive to look for ways to leverage the synchronicities that present themselves in our lives to create more opportunities to meet and get to know people better, both on and off the elevator.