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By Ken Grimsley

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Tell your story. Advocate your mission. Sell your vision.

You've probably heard these mantras a million times. It may not be your core skill. No reason to worry. From Paleolithic cave paintings to epic oral storytelling in preliterate Greece, from the eloquence of Shakespeare to breaking news on CNN, human culture has depended on stories for vision, entertainment, and information. Telling your organizational story relies on skills you can learn, and, whether you're an established or new entrepreneur, the need to champion your brand with a dynamic elevator speech has never been greater than right now.

The techniques of good storytelling can help your brand resonate and rise above shrill media clutter and increasingly competitive messages. Storytelling skills are overlooked techniques for conveying a brand with convincing impact. Ad agencies wield these skills as weapons in relentless media wars, but not many executives and managers use the skills with discipline and consistency. No matter what your business, whether you're a

veteran CEO or new manager, these skills enable you to more effectively convey your organization's value with compelling elevator speeches and with dynamic talking points for casual networking or formal presentations.

The art of storytelling – in particular, the “pitch” – can provide principles to help maximize these opportunities. These principles will help you renovate a routine elevator speech and create a compelling brand story. However, even a great elevator pitch without supporting talking points to illuminate your brand can fail to generate sustained interest. An elevator speech and talking points must be developed together and mutually supportive.

In Hollywood, the term “pitch” refers to telling a captivating story in less than five minutes to penetrate the cynical veneer of a distracted executive. “High concept” pitches work best, preferably in one sentence packed with drama (Spielberg revived this tradition three decades ago – a monster shark terrorizes a popular beach resort, protected by a sheriff afraid of the water). This fierce competition has honed powerful storytelling techniques useful for telling your organizational story.

In business, we can borrow from the classic three-act drama of Ibsen and the contemporary high concepts of Tinsel Town. Here are three structural elements of an effective pitch – they may seem obvious yet they are seldom optimized:

1. Use a strong hook to capture initial interest (perhaps an intriguing fact, question or brief anecdote).
2. Describe and solve a problem or meet a need in a unique way (including how your process or approach is timely, different, or measurably better).
3. Conclude with evidence of success, growth, or visionary ambition. Perhaps an endorsement or very brief (one sentence) anecdote can work as a finish. You don't want to tell the whole story, you want to induce curiosity and prompt a question or response.

Pitching your elevator speech or brand vision is uncannily similar to pitching a two-hour film in less than five minutes. It must be brief yet far *more* specific than the sweeping goals of a codified mission statement. “Deliver world-class service” or “value-added” aren't sufficient – an elevator speech needs to say “*how*” and “*why*” in a few words to elicit a distinct response.

The art of an elevator speech is creative brevity. Both words are crucial. Unless you and your audience are both waxing eloquent about quantum physics while gulping triple lattes, *avoid* a ten minute monologue trying to explain every facet of your organization. Reserve salient details for later (we'll cover this with brand talking points).

Let's start with basic guidelines for creating effective elevator speech content. Use these tips to assess your current elevator speech (or to create a new one).

THE PITCH: ELEVATOR SPEECH

- Align your pitch with your current mission, vision and values statements (these are sometimes updated separately and don't always create a consistent theme).
- Define your value proposition *and* its target market in one or two sentences (think problem-solution scenario).
- Clearly articulate differentiation from top competitors – be specific.
- Include active language that conveys momentum, generates inquiry, avoids generalities (that

sound like any other business), and stimulates discussion.

- Edit your pitch to about 75 words (or 30 seconds, more or less). Remember that this is a distillation of your core business. You can convey more dimensions of your business during follow-up conversation. That's when concise anecdotes (case study summaries) and salient talking points become brushstrokes for your complete brand picture.

Once you're happy with your elevator speech, it's time for brand talking points. Think of it this way: if the elevator speech is your executive summary, then talking points deliver the full report, albeit with succinct bullet points. Consider the pitch as an introduction, then talking points become all of the chapters for your story.

“...an elevator speech needs to say “how” and “why” in a few words to elicit a distinct response.”

There are many applications for talking points. For example, at a business

soiree, an elevator pitch can create a receptive audience, opening the door for elaboration with talking points. Here are some tips for crafting brand talking points to inspire interest in your organization.

THE WHOLE STORY: Brand Talking Points

- Include input from your executive team, managers, board, or other relevant stakeholders – everyone should be on the same page and tell a consistent story.
- Make sure that the points reflect your mission, vision and values statements, and convey your best core competencies and most successful outcomes.
- Like a good story, edit the talking points to convey the essence (not minute detail) of how your organization meets challenges and solves problems.
- Use brief anecdotes and case studies when appropriate – specific, colorful examples always help demonstrate a point.
- Avoid statistic overload – a few exceptional numbers capture attention, while too many numbers dilute the overall impact.

- Work with your communications team to practice delivery and Q&A. If media will be present, the communications team will brief you accordingly. If you don't have a communications team, use your managers or executive team to anticipate questions and practice response scenarios.

How you deliver your pitch and talking points – how you tell your organizational story – will make the difference between appearing merely competent (and unremarkable) or making an exceptional and enduring impression. If content is king, *presentation* is the king's magic sword. Here are a few techniques for pitches and talking points (so that your sword is never stuck in the stone). These tips will slay the dragon and help you prevail over competitive sorcerers.

DELIVERY TIPS

1. Be prepared. The more you know how to articulate your content, the more confidence you'll convey. Memorizing the basic elevator speech is good, but be fluent enough to improvise based on the audience and situation. Agility is vital. Preparation includes practice! Be sure to include practice answering hypothetical and challenging questions. Don't pull

- punches. Be objective and assertive when challenging yourself.
2. The handshake is often underestimated and, like eyes and body language, it triggers a first impression. Make it a firm and brief shake (don't oversell), with direct eye contact. The handshake also signals time for you to listen carefully to the person's introduction and perhaps their elevator speech. It's your moment to get a sense of your audience.
 3. Maintain eye contact. DiVinci said it best: "The eyes are windows to the soul." Studies reveal that first impressions are formed within the seven seconds of contact, and opinions are formed within minutes. Your authenticity will project (or not) from your eyes – it's subconscious but very real. If you're bored, the best written elevator speech can fail. Unless you're a highly polished and expert salesperson, it's difficult to hide your feelings when you have solid eye contact. (Of course, eye contact etiquette and introductions vary with different cultures.)
 4. Define when to emphasize key words and phrases, and when to fluctuate your volume. When memorizing or practicing, underline what you want to emphasize. Be selective. Everything can't be emphasized. Volume can become an irritating din if the level never varies (even if it's a good level). Would you want to hear or watch a story with one energy, one pace, beginning to end?
 5. Apply the Three P's – Punctuate with Powerful Pauses. Know when you've made a point that should sink-in for a moment, or when you're building anticipation for the next sentence. The well-placed pause can have as much impact as the best information you can imagine. It's a visceral impact – personal delivery communicates on an emotional level first and an intellectual level second. Effective pauses help to sustain connection.
 6. Show your passion and personality. If you aren't inspired by your content, and if you don't deliver it with personal conviction, it simply won't work. You must generate emotional chemistry. Conversely, if your enthusiasm appears to be

affected or obligatory, you'll seem like a game show host. Be an authentic true believer.

7. Visualize successful images of your organization or its accomplishments. Specific images are best. This requires practice over time, but it will produce results – what you visualize can fuel your attitude and drive your delivery.

Practice the above with various internal stakeholders and with peers, friends, and family. Record yourself and make notes. Save and compare the recordings to identify problems and note where you want to make corrections and refinements. Listen for clarity of content, enunciation, and vigor. If you have the means, videotape yourself. Evaluate your tape. Practice again. And again. (Note: humor requires more practice, especially for timing – use it sparingly unless you're naturally adept at it.) The more you practice, experiment, and hear (or see) yourself saying the words, the more you'll feel credible and effective. You'll soon develop your personal élan.

“If you aren't inspired by your content, and if you don't deliver it with personal conviction, it simply won't work”

To prepare for the above, I often suggest practicing *first* by reading fictional stories or non-fiction articles *aloud*. Or, it can be the cryptic lyrics of Dylan or the profane dialog of Mamet. The key is to read words that tell a story and convey emotion. Read to *entertain*. Record your reading and use the recordings to assess how well you convey the emotional aesthetic. Paint a vivid picture by how you breathe words and phrases, and how you interpret the nuances of punctuation.

A lucid image helps an audience enjoy the story on an emotional level and understand it on a factual level. If they *feel* your story, they'll remember facts more readily.

Above all, be patient with your learning curve. As Mark Twain said, “It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.” When you're skilled at preparation and practice, you'll wake up one morning and feel like a “natural” presenter. You'll even like it.

With coaching and practice, these basic storytelling skills will help you to tell your organizational story in the elevator, at the soiree, and at the podium. With all due respect to Shakespeare and Spielberg, whether you're a Blue Chip heavyweight, Wall Street darling, small entrepreneur, or local non-profit, the legacy of storytelling continues to drive our culture – including business.

It's said that the object of art is to give life a shape. Your brand story is art for giving shape to your organization. Actively champion your brand with an articulate plot and colorful characters. Rise above the competition. Get prepared. Practice. Tell your story, then your elevator speech will have full impact.

Ken Grimsley is a Marketing Strategist, Communications Consultant and Executive Coach. His services also include Presentation, Speechwriting, and Media Relations for executives and managers. He is Managing Principal for Focus Consulting, FocusOnProgress.com, 800.473.1283, Ken@FocusOnProgress.com.

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