

How not to embarrass yourself doing the elevator pitch

From MARC CENEDELLA

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Good Monday morning,

It's embarrassing, isn't it?

Doing "the elevator pitch" feels so awkward, embarrassing and unnatural — like you're hawking a product on a late night infomercial. Yet it's such an important part of the job search that everybody has to have one.

You know, when I speak around the country to groups of job-seekers, it's one of the most common questions I get: "How do I do the elevator pitch without sounding goofy, or hucksterish, or like I'm babbling?"

I totally understand.

Trying to sum up your professional career in thirty seconds gives many people pause.

How do you stuff all that information into such a short time? And how do you do it effectively?

So how about this?

Let's create an elevator pitch for me, Marc Cenedella. First, I'll show you the wrong way, and then the right way, to go about it...

So, like you, I've done a lot in my career. And I'm pretty proud of a lot of my accomplishments, and I want to get across everything I've done.

I don't have a resume right now, so let's take my [profile](#) from TheLadders site and turn it into my elevator pitch.

Now in order to teach you the right way to do it, first we're going to do it the wrong way — the embarrassing, awkward, uncomfortable way.

You're not going to enjoy reading it, and I'm certainly not enjoying writing it, but in the interests of science, I need to take you through that experience of awkwardness and embarrassment in order to explain how and why to do it right.

Our first effort, which is similar to what most of us try when we make our elevator pitch, is this:

"I'm a serial entrepreneur that started a company exporting US-made pet food to Japan after college. I graduated in the top 5% of my class at Harvard Business School, and was then the lead corporate development guy on the sale of HotJobs to Yahoo in 2002 for \$436 million. I founded TheLadders.com seven years ago to focus on bringing high-level talent together with \$100K+ jobs, and the company has grown to be an international success with over 300 employees."

Ugh.

Frankly, you're probably wondering: "Why is he telling me this? What his purpose for bragging like that? What a creep!"

And I can tell you that, sitting here on a Saturday afternoon writing this, it makes me feel like a boasting, shilling, pompous stuffed shirt.

And I know that's how a lot of you feel about crafting your elevator pitch, too, so let's understand why this is not an effective pitch.

It focuses on accomplishments and achievements.

In our culture here in the US, when you say something about yourself, particularly something positive, people look askance. When somebody tells us how wonderful they are, we instinctively worry about their reasons for doing so, and question their character, truthfulness, and personality.

Sure, they might have a lot of nice accomplishments, but what if they're as much of a braggart when they actually take the job?

Ick, that's not going to be somebody fun to work with.

And it's crafted in a "professional voice."

This is not how people talk to each other, so of course, if I were to say this out loud to somebody, it will sound awkward.

When you speak in a professional, or announcer-like, or "official correspondence" voice, it dehumanizes you and puts a distance between you and the listener. They feel they have to put up their guard and be on the "watch out" for you because you must be trying to sell them something.

Well now, of course we want the elevator pitch to help us get a job, so why don't we take another crack at it? And this time, instead of trying to sound like a stuffed shirt, we're going to be human and real:

"My passion in life is jobs. I love everything about them. It combines the soft stuff — people's dreams and hopes and ambitions — with the hard stuff — where the jobs are in the economy, the numbers and algorithms and technology that make it possible. I've been doing this for over a decade and I find that I'm learning something new about making job hunts successful every day. Helping people through what is one of the most stressful experiences in their lives is tremendously rewarding and fulfilling, and I love doing it."

OK, which dude do you want to work with? The professional accomplishment elevator pitch or the conversational motivations pitch? Which guy would you invite to an interview?

I think you'll agree with me that the second one is far more effective. Why?

I'm speaking about my motivations.

As opposed to crowing about accomplishments, I'm telling you why I like doing what I'm doing.

And in our culture, we tend to trust people and believe them when they tell us what their motivations. It feels like they're being open and honest, and that they are sharing with us something about themselves. And from a tactical standpoint, it helps the recruiter, HR person, or hiring manager know a little bit more about what makes you tick, and how and why you want this particular job.

It looks to the future.

If you were hiring a Chief Job Officer, the second pitch lets you know that this is somebody who is engaged and passionate and excited about doing more job-related work in the future. The first pitch doesn't.

It sounds like a human conversation.

I call this "The Bud Test." If you can't say your elevator pitch to friends and acquaintances over a Bud, or a tasty Arnold Palmer, at the backyard barbeque, it is not an effective elevator pitch.

Speaking like a regular human being makes you more approachable, believable, and likable. It feels less like a skill and more like an open-hearted conversation. And people want to help people that they believe and that they like.

So if you agree that the second elevator pitch is better, how do you craft your own?

Try this.

Answer these questions in a "real" voice. Like you're speaking to your mother, or your college buddies, or a couple of friends on the golf course. (You know, I might even recommend that you speak into a voice recorder, or just go ahead and call your own voicemail, and answer these questions out loud. That's the best way to get a conversational tone....)

- Say, why do you like your work?
- Why have you been doing this for 10, 15, 20 years?
- What is it that you find interesting about it?
- No, seriously, don't talk to me like I'm your boss, what do you really find interesting about it?
- Why do you want to stay in this field?
- What do you like about this industry?
- When you're in the shower in the morning, what types of challenges at work make you excited to get the heck to the office as soon as possible?
- When are you having the most fun?

And then take those bits and make a conversational elevator pitch that focuses on your motivations, not your accomplishments.

So instead of rehashing your resume and job titles and greatest hits, your elevator pitch will sound real, and human, and be deadly effective.

So please forgive the embarrassing first elevator pitch, Readers. I feel awfully goofy and awkward and uncomfortable sending that obnoxiousness out to all 4 million of you on Monday, but I do hope you'll find the advice based on the comparison between the two helpful in your job hunt.