

# Pitch perfect: Take your elevator speech up a notch



By Allison Ellis / Special to NWJobs

"What do you do?" Whether you're looking for a new job or new connections, or just chatting with neighbors at a local block party, it's the one question that can leave you stumbling if you don't have a polished answer ready to go.

Career experts refer to this spiel as a personal branding statement, or "elevator speech," because that's all the time you might have — the time between floors — to introduce yourself, deliver a concise, persuasive message and capture someone's attention.

Quick — can you do it? Barney Cohen, president and CEO of Business 360 Northwest in Seattle, who teaches tune-up classes for owners of small- to medium-sized businesses, says, "If you ask 100 business owners, 'What do you sell?' Ninety percent of them can't tell me. They are good at what they do, but they can't translate that into why I should pick up the phone and do business with them."



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The old-school approach: Write a script, then recite. "Don't do that," says Cohen. It will feel canned. Say your pitch a little differently each time depending on your audience, and keep it fresh.

## Tailor made for you, the occasion

So how to create an effective elevator speech? Lorraine Howell, Seattle-based media trainer, author of the 2010 book "Give Your Elevator Speech a Lift!" and communications instructor at the University of Washington Foster School of Business, encourages students and clients to think about the following questions:

- Who is your target audience?
- What do they care about?
- What spins your jets about your business or industry?
- What's your specialty?

The approach should be framed differently depending on whether you're looking for a job or customers.

"Entrepreneurs tend to want to market to everyone. The problem with that is your message can get muddled and nobody will know what you do." As a solution, Howell suggests reframing the approach. "When people ask, 'What do you do?' what they really want to know is 'What can you do for me?'"

If you're in a tech field, don't just talk about all the bells and whistles. "People don't really care about that. Instead, tell them about results," Howell says.

Then, segue into what you do, and how you make it different —your "secret sauce," Howell calls it. "This allows the other person to ask follow up questions and say, 'Ooh, tell me more.' That's what you're after — creating that 'ooh' moment."

For job seekers, Seattle-area career coach and NWJobs blogger Lisa Quast of Career Woman, Inc., recommends using the headline feature in LinkedIn to play around with your elevator pitch. "For example, 'I'm an experienced marketing manager seeking a product management position in the pharmaceutical industry.' This way you show your expertise, background and desired industry all at the same time," she says.

## But what if you're not sure?

For recent college grads who may not know what they want to do, Quast encourages them to think about their personal lives. For example, Quast had one client who loved the outdoors.

"His elevator pitch ended up being: 'I'm an outdoor enthusiast who loves rock climbing, and I'm looking for a programming position at a Seattle-based outdoor company,'" Quast says. To get there, Quast had her client narrow down his likes and dislikes, look at companies and the types of entry-level positions he was interested in, and tailor his pitch around that.

Cohen and Howell both offer Seattle-area workshops where attendees work in teams and practice their elevator pitches. "The by-product of doing this is a whole menu of language that can be used in conversation, and also taglines for websites," says Howell.



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Last year, she worked with a group of accountants in Seattle; one of her attendees came up with this pitch: "I love taxes so you don't have to."

How do you know if your elevator speech isn't working? Eyes glaze over; the other person changes the subject. "Don't talk about yourself for very long," advises Howell. "Make sure you turn it around and ask the other person about themselves: 'What brought you here?' 'Tell me about what you do.' Express interest. If you want people to be interested in what you do, be interested in them, too."

