

MAKE IT SNAPPY

# THE ART OF THE ELEVATOR PITCH

How the perfectly distilled idea became the antidote to toxic punditry.



**G**OT A SEC? Then I've got one blockbuster of a column for you: It's about how the "elevator pitch" evolved from sweaty-palmed business ritual—a form of white-collar panhandling perpetrated by pushy salespeople and desperate screenwriters—into the quintessence of the Big Idea. At the marketplace, the multiplex, the dinner table: Everybody talks in elevator pitches, tweets in elevator pitches, *thinks* in elevator pitches. And that's fortunate, because wielded properly, the mighty Elevator Pitch could actually save us from the forces of fear, obfuscation, and delusion that savage our culture. That's the gist of it anyway. Whaddya say?

You're still reading, so I'll consider you hooked. But then, I've got a bully pulpit. The original elevator pitch was designed for an outsider schmo with nothing but gump-tion and a million-dollar idea. He corners the Big Boss in the elevator—the one place he can secure a private papal audience—lays out his entire prospectus in less than a minute, and closes the deal before the doors ding open. The notion seems to have edged its way into business-speak during the mid-1980s, when the Big Idea went aerodynamic. (You had to dream in terms that Reagan could comprehend: "A space laser shoots down Russkie nukes. We're calling it Star Wars!") The phrase quickly caught on in Hollywood, which saw an uptick in the sort of high-concept movies ("A robot is taught how to love ... by Steve Guttenberg") favored by low-patience executives. The phrase didn't truly conquer the ver-

naular, though, until Web 1.0. Before the dotcom boom, geeks weren't called upon to hawk their wares. They built stuff; other people sold it. But during the tech gold rush, as every programmer and engineer became a potential entrepreneur, the propellerheads found themselves at the mercy of fickle venture capitalists. So they learned the art of the elevator pitch, which had a built-in appeal for the right-brained: It gets to the point quickly, lucidly, and logically, with a minimum of stochastic blab. "eBay: It's a zero-inventory retail auction website where users furnish the product, other users bid on it, and algorithms wield the gavel." Sold! "Minnesodors.com: We send expatriate Minnesotans a different, comforting smell from their home

state each week—snow, hotdish, Garrison Keillor. How do we do this? With computers. Yeah, we're still working out the details, but ..." Ding. Time's up!

Today, the elevator pitch has outgrown its original industrial-age metaphor and expanded into mass culture. Terms like *biztweet*, *twit-pitch*, and *twitch* are fast replacing Otis' creaky box-lift, but the idea is unchanged. Of course, some might claim this is a bad thing, that constant elevator-pitching is just another symptom of a sick, overstimulated, hopelessly sound-bitten society in which glibness rules. But an elevator pitch isn't a sound bite. It's an idea in miniature: a full three-master built to scale in a bottle. It's got to be complete, logical, and watertight, stem to stern. A good elevator pitch is the antithesis of a sound bite—and the cure for the common cable-talking-head ramble. Bloviators and professional obscurantists can confuse the basic contours of reality by stringing daisy chains of selective facts into dark webs of bigotry and paranoia. Yet ask them to boil down their conspiracy theories, nebulous prejudices, and voodoo economics to an elevator pitch and they'll crumble.

Maybe it's time we learn what movie producers and angel investors have known for years: Glib is good. Lousy ideas often reveal their weaknesses when presented in crystallized form—if they can be crystallized at all. Gassy vagaries are something we can't put up with in an elevator—or in life. The room's too small and the ride too short for that sort of noise. Make sense, be bright, or get off. ■

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