Early Career Members

Elevating Your Elevator Talk

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An important and often overlooked item that every early career researcher needs to do is compose an elevator talk. The elevator talk, named because the talk should not last longer than an average elevator ride (30 to 60 seconds), is an effective method to present your research and yourself in a clear, concise manner. The elevator talk is a short summation of what you do, your research results, and your research impact on society. In essence, the elevator talk is a conversation starter. For some of us, preparing an elevator talk sounds cliché, but we give elevator talks without knowing it or, in some cases, not fully being prepared to give one. The elevator talk is not only important when meeting new people, but also for the interview process, building a professional network, or disseminating our research to the broader public.

The elevator talk should include what your research is about, how it solves a particular problem, and how it benefits or impacts your audience. Begin by writing a draft of your talk. Brevity is important—choose proactive words and remove nuances and scientific jargon. Aim for three to four sentences and no more than 100 words in length. Avoid using scientific acronyms unless speaking with someone with similar training and skill sets. Differentiate what you do from how you do it. Do not start your elevator talk with the title to your dissertation. Start with the big picture of your research, give it context, and then proceed to the main points you want to convey. Try to "hook" your listener early on with facts or statistics, and be prepared for likely follow-up questions. Give your statistics meaning by personalizing or by verbally illustrating the data. An effective elevator talk leads to an interested listener wanting to know more about your background and findings.

An effective *written* elevator talk is only half of it—presenting your elevator talk is just as important. First, modify the written draft to differentiate how you write versus how you speak. If you are passionate about your research, show it! If the elevator talk does not resonate with you, it won't work with your audience. Verbally practice your elevator talk and run it past friends and peers for feedback. Pay close attention to your delivery and body language, and be flexible—if the listener interrupts your talk with a question, answer the question promptly. If possible, tie your answer back in to the rest of your talk. Anticipate what potential questions you may receive, and practice possible answers beforehand. Re-evaluate your talk based on audience feedback, and try to learn from each experience.

Your Abstract's Abstract

A common complaint among scientists is that their research cannot be whittled down to a few sentences. Yes, it can—we do it all the time. As scientists, we are required and trained to condense decades of research or highly complex subject matter into a simple, brief narrative. We call it the abstract. Think of the elevator talk as the abstract's abstract. Engage the listener first, and if you're successful, you'll be able to fill in the details of your research during follow-up conversation.

Another important idea when developing your elevator talk is to know your audience. Have more than just one version of your elevator talk, and choose the best one for your audience. By knowing the needs and expectations of the audience ahead of time, you can determine key themes that you want to portray. Multiple elevator talks may also be needed if communication is with the general public, policy makers, private industry, government agencies, or fellow peers. Marketing yourself as a potential employee or collaborator within or outside an organization requires different approaches and tone. An effective elevator talk is a must when communicating your research or ideas with the media. The time or space requirement that is reported for a story is limited with a typical sound bite ranging from 8 to 15 seconds. Remember, it is our responsibility as scientists to convey how our research is important in terms that society can understand.

The elevator talk is not only beneficial early on in your career but will become more important as your career advances. Situations will arise where you will need to present your research, no matter how complex, in a succinct way without the benefit of a slideshow behind you. As a general rule of thumb, the more important the group or person is, the less time you will have in presenting your ideas or research. An effective elevator talk is a first step in connecting your research with others and understanding how your research fits in the larger scientific puzzle.