

THE ELEVATOR TEST

Through the years, marketers have invented ever-more sophisticated ways to develop organizational position statements. Lots of these methodologies work, and you can spend big money with consultants on finely crafted and focus-group-tested positioning statements. At the same time, for nonprofits, the simpler approach advocated by the marketing savant Harry Beckwith may achieve much the same result at considerably lower cost and effort.

I think of Beckwith whenever I find myself confronted with a classic “elevator test” moment. You strike up a conversation in an elevator, on the subway, in the line at Starbucks and the question soon arises: What do you do? The challenge is how to answer that question in an interesting, compelling manner that invites further questions about your organization, but that does not bog down in jargon or too much detail.

You don’t have much time — maybe two sentences at most. So what do you include? What do you leave out? What’s your answer to the elevator test?

Lest you think this exercise trivial, recall that everyone on the staff of your nonprofit gets asked the “what do you do?” question, in various forms, every day. In that sense, everyone on staff is a marketer, albeit rarely trained as such. Do you know how your staff is responding? Do you have any confidence that everyone on the team — program staff, receptionists, board members — shares a common sense of the organization’s brand position? Are they communicating a consistent message?

Many nonprofit organizations fail this test. Happily, Beckwith prescribes a very simple formula that nonprofits can adapt readily to their needs in developing an elevator test that can double as a position statement. (Note that the elevator test is not a mission statement, nor should it read like one, but instead tries to distill the essence of the organization into relevant, accessible language for the particular person with whom you are speaking.)

The Beckwith formula starts with six basic questions:

WHO?

What’s your name?

WHAT?

What kind of organization are you (scale and sector)?

FOR WHOM?

Whom do your programs serve?

WHAT NEED?

What pressing social problem does your program address?

WHAT’S DIFFERENT?

What is distinctive about your program?

SO WHAT?

Why should they care?

String the answers to these questions together for a nonprofit like Population Services International, a \$350 million organization working to improve health in the developing world, and you get something that looks like this:

PSI (Who?) is a global nonprofit (What?) that works to improve the health (What need?) of the poor and vulnerable in 60 developing nations around the world (For whom?). Combating diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria that kill millions around the world (So what?), PSI saves lives by using the power of the private sector to distribute and market health products to the neediest people. (What’s different?)

Three red flags about elevator tests. First, ruthlessly eliminate jargon. Every sector has a specialized language, but don’t use it in your elevator/positioning speech. Second, avoid laundry lists of activities. Nonprofits are wonderfully inclusive organizations, with a great sense of fairness and equity between their constituent parts, but this makes for disastrous marketing. The entire point of an elevator speech is to boil your enterprise into a message that is simple, consistent, and most of all distinctive, so make hard choices and focus on the things you do particularly well.

Second, and perhaps most important, put some real thought into answering the question: So what? It's the payoff piece of the speech, the call to action that makes the programmatic work of a nonprofit relevant. And to change policy and behavior, to raise money and build a strong institution, most organizations simply must find a way to make their mission relevant to a broader constituency. Figuring out a compelling "so what?" response is a good place to start.

Third, try to make it "sticky." Is what you have said memorable? In their book, *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath identify the common currency of memorable ideas, a good story. And, specifically, they note the importance of simple, true stories with concrete details, unexpected twists and emotion. Does your elevator speech tell a story in a way that helps the listener remember it?

For the leaders of nonprofits, the elevator test also can serve as a shrewd diagnostic tool for determining differences within the management team. Have everyone sit down and simultaneously craft an elevator speech—give them no more than five minutes—and then have people share the results. You will learn a lot about the attitudes of your senior managers and how they are portraying the organization to the outside world.

MORAL: *Marketing is the only job shared by everyone in the organization. An elevator speech makes sure your people have a compelling story, they stick to it and it sticks with their audience.*