 BY PETER J. SHERMAN

Networking in 20 Seconds

The three-step approach to mastering your elevator pitch

REMEMBER THE LAST time a friend or prospective client asked you about lean, Six Sigma or quality in general? Were you able to successfully explain what you do for a living?

It can be tough because we live in an age of sound bites, which requires our thoughts and ideas to be clear, compelling and complete. This is why the "elevator pitch" is one of the most popular networking tools in today's business world.

The name stems from the idea that you should be able to explain yourself in the time it takes to ride up a couple floors in an elevator—typically about 20 seconds.

Follow this three-step approach to master the elevator pitch and leave people eager to hear more.

Step one: Create "special cause." When we ask someone, "What kind of work do you do?" We typically expect the same boring, repetitive and predictive responses. You must break this mold to have a successful elevator pitch.

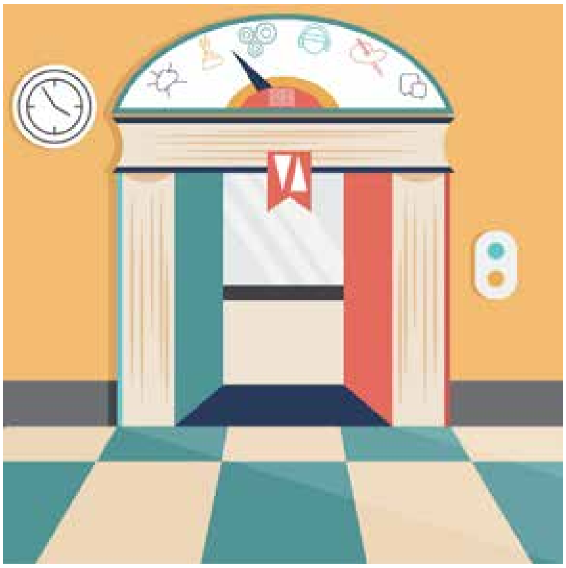
Contrary to the Six Sigma principle to strive for stable and predictable processes, this is the time to embrace special cause. It is an unexpected, unique and authentic response that makes you stand out and can be most effective.

Before I mastered this approach, when someone would ask me, "What do you do?" I would answer, "I'm a consultant," or, "We provide lean Six Sigma training." Responses such as those are flat and boring, and do not incentivize people to remember you.

Now I say, "For the past two years, we've been building armies of problem solvers across the Southeast." This type of response is thought provoking and propels the conversation forward.

Step two: Define the problem. After you have piqued a person's interest, engage him or her by posing a relatable problem that also provides context for your industry.

Personally, the problem I pose is, "You've heard about the skills gap affecting so many American businesses—large and small—right? Businesses can't find enough problem solvers, critical thinkers and good communicators."



Most people can relate to this and will nod their head in agreement. So, we've instantly built some rapport.

Step three: Scope it out. The goal of step two is to make a person curious enough to want to ask more. A follow-up question I often receive is, "How do you do it?"

Similar to scoping a process improvement project, frame your response clearly and succinctly—answer the what, who, and how. Try using this simple scope template:

"I help________ (who / customer)
to do ________ (what / feature)
so they can _________ (benefit).
[Pause slightly.] And I do it through
______ (how)."

My completed template is, "We teach people from the frontline to the C-suite how to think critically, analytically and independently so they can make the best decisions. We do this by combining two powerful process improvement methods: lean and Six Sigma."

At this point, you've probably reached the passenger's floor. Be sensitive of people's time and resist the urge to say much more. To wrap it up, briefly reintroduce yourself and present your business card.

People generally prefer not being pitched to, but if you sense there is interest, politely ask, "Would you mind if I contacted you at a convenient time to briefly discuss in more detail?"

Asking this question shows respect and courtesy while maintaining your professionalism and dignity.

With these three steps, you should be able to get your foot in the door with a new networking connection. QP

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