

InfoTech Column

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Beyond Elevator Speeches! A Process for Influence

My airplane book this month is "How To Have A Beautiful Mind" by Edward de Bono. It's a great book and I don't know how I missed it when it came out in 2004 since I love to read de Bono. Anyway, it's about how to be interesting and how to chat with nearly everyone, how to debate, listen and disagree well -- all things I can learn to do a lot better! It has made me think about how to make libraries beautiful in the mind and interesting to people who matter.

At Internet Librarian in October 2006, I had the opportunity to hear and introduce Joe Matthews, an old friend of SLA and author of a number of books on how to make the financial and value arguments for libraries and librarians. His latest book is, "The Bottom Line: Determining and Communicating the Value". He told powerful stories of the impact of libraries. One memorable one was the six figure onus awarded to a special librarian for saving the company over \$20 million. We must talk about the end result and less about the line item budgeting. Without a doubt, nearly every innovation we try to make in libraries today involves some investment of dollars and time as well as commitments to riskier technologies and pilot projects. To achieve our technology and program goals we have to get folks at all levels on our side and excited. How?

Elevator Speeches: No Magic Beans

Over the past few years we have heard a lot about the special role of elevator speeches – those sound bites when you have the ear of a key decision maker or influencer for a few floors. We're told to craft a few short stories or facts and install them in the heads of these folks. Then, magically, good things could happen. There are even many examples of where this strategy worked. I love this tactic, but let's remember that it's just a micro-skill and we can't leave our communication strategies up to chance encounters. Let's learn how to make our magical moments. What would be steps to moving into deeper conversations with our decisionmakers and key influencers? There are two simple things we need to know first.

How do ideas grow?

Sometimes new ideas look like they arrive fully blown. They don't. People follow a very specific process whereby they come to accept new ideas. It's a simple five step process. First, you need to have the *awareness* that some product,

process or concept exists. Advertising and PR helps here. Then, and don't neglect this step, they have to be *interested* in it. This isn't always the case. If you're not interested in reality TV, no amount of awareness activities will engage you in the next step, *evaluation*. This is your first major yes/no step. Will I invest any more energy in knowing more about this idea by researching or trying it? Would I even invest as little energy as typing the word into Google? Getting to *trial* moves your target audience of decisionmakers from evaluation to the point where they can make a decision about *adoption*. So, understand this short process: awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, adoption. When you ask someone with power to adopt your ideas, invest time and effort in supporting, financing or discussing them, without filling in the first four steps, you're more likely to fail.

This process can happen very fast. For example, a new chocolate bar with an exciting flavour can get from awareness through adoption in seconds. I just discovered dark chocolate M&M's. Time from awareness to stomach – minutes! Now, suppose the new ideas are a suite of complex processes and technologies like web 2.0 / library 2.0 or intranet repositories. We'll see the market taking years to absorb and integrate the solutions promise here.

Second tip: Your idea needs to have five qualities to be more easily acceptable to the people you desire to invest their enterprise's energy and money in. Overall, the idea's benefits must be visible in some way. This visibility can be tangible or intangible but it's best to make sure you can speak to all five. First, your innovation should be able to demonstrate a *relative advantage* over how things are done now. It should be compatible with current behaviors or show steps that lay a path from the old ways to the new. *Compatibility* with current modes was why bank machines started on the outside of banks instead of in more convenient places. The relative advantage was that you had 24/7 access to your account. *Complexity* is an issue for markets. How can you make something less complex than the way it's done now? Online banking is arguably less complex, but only after the target client has acquired the technology, web skills and done the account set-up. Hence, we see slower than desired adoption for the banks and new competitors who aren't anchored in legacy systems. *Trialability* is a key strategy. It was easy to try M&M's. I even paid for the privilege. The same is not necessarily true for OpenURL fulltext access or targeted federated search. Lastly, *observability* is an important aspect of the adoption process. Can you show the change through demonstration? Can you show other users having successful experiences? Is your environment so unique that you can't find another enterprise or a metaphor to show your innovation idea in action? Either way, by using these five insights, you are now empowered with some keys to convincing others about what makes your ideas for innovation interesting.

So, what are the next steps after you've baited the hook with your elevator speech – making sure you have been interesting, intriguing and included a call to

action...? I like to think about these as steps in developing a new relationship. Not quite dating but still getting to know each other better.

The Starbucks Latté Chat

Nearly everyone likes one of the ubiquitous Starbucks™ beverages. Slyly insert into casual conversations, a query about what their favorite Starbucks is. Is it different in summer? Do they change their choice from morning through evening? Do they actually prefer Seattle's Best or Tim Horton's? Then, later, call them when you know they'll be Jonesing for a fix and ask them out for 15 minutes and you'll treat them to their favorite Starbucks. What do you get? 15 minutes instead of an elevator ride. It'll be the best five bucks you ever spent. Be prepared to be social and listen and have your ideas ready too. Pick them up at their desk so you have the walking time too. And don't put all your eggs in one basket, make sure you repeat this with influencers and decision makers.

The Hot Dog

Graduate to the Hot Dog Stand. This is perhaps an urban trick where quick lunches of NY cut fries and kosher hot dogs on the street are part of the downtown and business district cultural fabric. Maybe there's something similar on campus or in your town. Anyway, this gives you half an hour to chat and plan together. You also get to know each other better too. Your goal might be transferring ideas, excitement and information or planning a future larger meeting. Either way, you now have a deeper relationship with people who matter. You might even make a friend but in any event you'll have a closer colleague. You're entering the inner circle's orbit.

The Meeting

Now you're there. You have several people who matter primed to hear your big ideas in a more fulsome manner than an elevator speech or a budget line item discussion. This is your chance to shine and bring in the big guns – formal PowerPoints and handouts and a request for more consideration and alignment with the organization's bigger strategies. You can do it. You've already worked the room!

Keeping the Energy Flowing

Lastly, here's just one last piece of advice for you. This isn't a budget strategy, it's almost always wrong to introduce new ideas in the formal financial side of the budgeting process. That's where cuts happen, not investments. New program investments happen throughout the year in thousands of small conversations and strategic planning meetings. Be political and keep your mind on the long term goal. Align yourself with the enterprise's most exciting goals.

So, read de Bono's book if you haven't already. There's a lot of wisdom there. Then read "The Springboard Story" by Steve Denning. It's also a fantastic manual on how to encourage adoption of your ideas through storytelling and narrative from someone who really understands the world of special libraries, information professionals and knowledge ecologies.

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