

Elevator Pitches 101

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What are elevator pitches? When do you use them? How do you prepare and execute an elevator pitch? We provide tips for you on elevator pitches to be used at conferences and meetings.

What is an elevator pitch?

Traditionally, an elevator pitch, also known as an elevator story or elevator speech, is used in sales to promote a product with the end goal of getting a consumer to buy the product. The elevator pitch is delivered in the same amount of time it takes to ride up an elevator. Now elevator pitches can be adapted to different environments.

So generally speaking, an elevator pitch conveys who you are, including a story about you or a summary of a topic and is no more than 30-60 seconds. It ends with a request or next step, such as a business card exchange or follow-up meeting. Sometimes, an elevator pitch can simply serve as a conversation starter.

When do I use an elevator pitch?

Elevator pitches can be used in different professional environments, such as during an interview, while networking, or attending conferences. Because these environments are different, your elevator pitches will need to address the different audiences, purposes, and end goals. Your audience can be potential employers, collaborators, exhibitors, colleagues, or non-scientists such as donors. The purpose of an elevator pitch could be to promote yourself, your skills, or the importance of your research, with the end goal of getting oneself introduced to a targeted person, creating a possibility for future communications, building a professional collaboration, or leading to a job interview. This means that you need to prepare multiple elevator pitches to be ready for these different situations.

How do I prepare an elevator pitch?

Write down your elevator pitch on paper – So what do you exactly put in an elevator pitch? Well, that depends on your ultimate goal for the pitch. However, most elevator pitches will include your name, where you work, and your current job title. Then, each pitch gets customized based on the intended audience and goal. For example, if the goal is to get a colleague to visit your research poster at ASM Microbe, your elevator pitch should include background information, the problem/gap that you are addressing in your research, and a short conclusion of what you found. Most importantly, summarize why your research is important – how has/will your work further science and address the “real world” application. At scientific conferences, include your mentor’s name in the elevator pitch, – this will put your work into context for those who are in the field and if the person knows your mentor, this may increase your chances for an opportunity to have a follow up discussion or get-together. Keep in mind that you think about your research a lot and know detailed information about the topic. However, the person receiving your elevator pitch may not, so you will need two different elevator pitches, one for scientists and the other for non-scientists/non-specialists. For this latter version, provide more simplified context and background without the use of jargon.

Your elevator pitch doesn’t always have to focus on your research - it depends again on your audience and goal. For example, if you know that science outreach specialist, Dr. Louis will be at the conference and you want to learn more about her career, your elevator pitch should include why you are interested in her career, how this relates to your own career interests and accomplishments, and specifically what you would like to learn from Dr. Louis.

If you are having trouble writing your elevator pitch, write down a single sentence that identifies what your goal is: “I would like to invite you to see my poster at this conference.” “I would love a chance to spend time in your lab to refine my technique with ABC procedure.” “I’m interested in learning if you plan on taking any new postdocs next year, as I would enjoy a chance to work with you and your department.” By forcing yourself to distill your goal to one clear sentence, you can quickly determine what’s important for that audience and whether you are addressing the major points you want them to know about you or your research. That will help you eliminate any extraneous information because again, you only have 30-60 seconds.

Practice your elevator pitch – After you have written your elevator pitches, the next step is to practice them with your friends and colleagues so that you can

practice smiling and maintaining eye contact. As you practice, try to include more of your personality and changes in tone so you don't sound too rehearsed. Say and do what feels natural to you, because the elevator pitch should come off as conversational but also professional, so avoid saying phrases such as "it was, like, a...", "umm", etc.

How do I deliver an elevator pitch?

Now that you are ready with your elevator pitches, you can start using them! At conferences and meetings, you will meet people who will ask you "What do you work on?" or you'll run into a well-known scientist and want to introduce yourself. Make sure you determine what the outcome will be for the elevator pitch you are delivering. Is it to get someone to visit your poster so they can learn about your research? Or is it to set up a follow-up meeting with someone who has an interesting career? Or is it a conversation starter? Once you figure out the outcome, you can decide which elevator pitch to go with. Also, if you are using your research elevator pitch, assess what their background is by asking them questions like "How familiar are you with XYZ technique?" or "Do you know about X disease?" The answer will let you know whether to use the elevator pitch for a scientist or non-scientist/non-specialist.

Regardless of the particular elevator pitch, before you start talking, take a deep breath, make eye contact, and smile. Give them your elevator pitch and end it by asking them to stop by your poster or for a follow-up meeting. Then hand them your business card – it's a good way to increase the odds of that person remembering you, and it provides your contact information. If you want them to come to your poster, put the date, time, and number of your poster presentation on the back of your business card. If you don't have business cards, print your own and have them ready prior to the meeting.

If you are feeling nervous about delivering your elevator pitches, remember that the person you are talking to is a person too, and they get nervous as well. Breathe and remind yourself that you have something special to say or offer to this person, and this person wants to hear it. If you forgot something in your elevator pitch, you can bring it back at a later point or say "Let me go a few steps back." Most importantly, the reason why you are both at the conference is because you have a passion for science, and your inquisitive nature will keep both parties engaged and asking questions even if you forget to say something. So relax, start meeting people, and happy pitching!