

Play to Win

What Do You Do? Crafting Your Elevator Speech

The next time someone asks, be ready to respond.

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Class reunions. Bar association events. Neighborhood parties. Inevitably, someone is going to ask you what you do. In fact, it probably happens a lot. Yet even when they know it's coming, many lawyers are not ready to answer the question.

People who are unprepared will say things like:

- “I’m a lawyer.”
- “I’m an associate at XYZ law firm.”
- “I’m a securities litigator.”

Giving a minimal or impromptu response is a missed opportunity.

What Do You Want People to Know About Your Practice?

A good elevator speech has the following characteristics:

- Is meaningful and memorable — and provokes follow-up questions.
- Can be delivered in less than 30 seconds.
- Is tailored to the audience or the person.
- Conveys a benefit — how do you help people?
- Distinguishes you from other lawyers.
- Sounds spontaneous.
- Is delivered with enthusiasm!

Four Steps to a Solid Introduction

What should be in your elevator speech? I suggest you cover these four things.

1. Describe your clients

It could be your typical client or your ideal client. For example:

- “I work with private companies of all sizes but really enjoy helping family-owned businesses.”
- “I handle a wide range of lending transactions for financial institutions but I have a particular expertise in helping community banks.”

2. Explain how you help clients and the value you bring

Focus on the benefits you provide clients. That means things like getting or keeping them out of trouble, helping them buy, grow or sell businesses, and the like. For example:

- “I help startup companies secure funding for expansion.”
- “I represent private equity companies when deals go bad.”
- “I help technology companies protect their intellectual property jewels — patents, trademarks and copyrights.”

3. Explain what makes you different or distinctive from other lawyers in your field

Points of differentiation can range from personal interests to past experiences to special credentials. Examples include:

- “I grew up on a farm so I’ve always been interested in agribusiness.”
- “I am one of only four lawyers in the state with an OSHA certification.”
- “My dad owned a fast-food franchise and I grew up flipping burgers. That gave me tremendous insights into the industry and the pressures involved.”
- “I really enjoy getting to know clients’ businesses. One of the first things I do with a new client is to visit and take a tour.”
- “One of my clients calls me the ‘conductor’ because I like organizing cases with a lot of moving parts and driving them to a successful result.”
- “I have a particular expertise helping owners of family cabins transfer the property to other family members.”

If you have trouble identifying something distinctive about you, you can mention something about your firm, such as, “My firm has represented more than 20 of the top 50 local general contractors in their disputes with subs.”

4. State a “for example”

End with an example to bring your practice to life and make your introduction more memorable. This could be something you’re working on or have handled in the past (without breaching client confidentiality, of course) or even a public scenario that people will recognize.

If you’re a trusts and estates litigator, for example, you could say something like: “I’m sure you read that Prince died without a will. I get involved in a lot of matters where the person who passed away either didn’t have a plan or it wasn’t clear so others are disputing the result.”

If you’re a trademark lawyer, you could use an example like: “I don’t know if you saw this but, a few years back, Adidas filed a lawsuit against Forever 21 for using a ‘three stripe’ design. I’m working on a similar issue now, where my client claims a competitor’s products are similar enough to cause confusion among consumers.”

A Few Final Tips for Your Elevator Speech

As you put together your elevator speech, here are some additional suggestions.

- **Tailor to your audience.** If you are talking to someone who isn't familiar with legal terms, saying you are a "products liability litigator" may not register. Instead, say something like, "I help manufacturers when they have problems with their products."
- **If you have a unique credential, be sure to tie it to a benefit.** For example, you might say, "With an MBA in logistics, I speak the language of the transportation industry."
- **Use humor, if it's natural for you.** One traditional labor lawyer I know says she "works for The Man." A client who is a creditors' rights attorney says he gets called in "when people are fighting over money."

Now, the next time someone asks, "What do you do?" be ready to respond!