

The Big Mistake That's Hurting Your Nonprofit (and How to Fix It)

There's a simple question you get asked all the time. It comes up nearly every time you meet somebody new. At cocktail parties. Restaurants. Fundraisers. Everywhere.

If you handle it the right way, it can be enormously valuable to you and your nonprofit. More volunteers. More donations. More engagement, awareness, and interest. You know... all those things you desire and worry about and pay money for. Money that could be going to your programs instead.

But you're blowing it.

And you're not alone. If what I see at the many board and staff retreats I run is true, it turns out most nonprofit people are messing this up.

So what exactly am I talking about? And if this is so valuable, how can I fix it?

Don't worry. It's easy to fix. Read on to find out how.

WHAT DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION DO?

I'm at a fundraising dinner and begin chatting with the woman to my right. "So what do you do?" Turns out she runs a nonprofit. The mission isn't obvious from the title of the organization. "Tell me what your organization is about."

15 minutes later. Yes, 15 minutes later. And I still had no answer to my question.

Be forewarned. I can be a pretty blunt dinner companion. I gently stopped her.

"Would you mind answering the question again? And this time, would you pretend that I am ten years old?" (Since there's a ten year old trapped inside me, this question comes naturally.)

Every single solitary time a board member or staff member is asked the question, "Tell me a little bit about your organization," there is a big fat opportunity. So why do I rarely get a simple, direct answer?

"So tell me a little about your organization."

A simple enough question. You'd think this would be a lay up for any executive director or board member.

I wish.

WHAT YOU'RE DOING WRONG

Here are a few ways you're messing up your nonprofit elevator pitch.

1. Assume

I teach a nonprofit communications class at the University of Pennsylvania and I have my students read a book called *Made to Stick* (highly recommend it – quick read). In it the authors talk about what they call the “curse of knowledge” — a presumption that your listener is inside your head, your sector, your organization.

2. Provide a List

An example would be nice, but really what I want is one or two sentences I can hold onto so that when I get home and tell my wife that I was at an event and met this really interesting woman who worked at the ABC Organization, I can tell her something that makes her say, “Wow. That sounds like a great organization.”

Lists don't get that kind of reaction. Just sayin.

3. Lead With Your Vision

Let's assume your organization has a vision (sometimes not a great assumption, I am sad to say.) If you start way too broadly, you can either emotionally paralyze your dinner companion or cause a shut down. “Our organization is working to end slavery.”

I'm not sure what question to ask as a follow up. And by the way, as a relatively intelligent individual (with a tendency for snappy retorts), I'm keeping myself from saying “Good luck with that.”

So you can't get too specific and you can't go too broad. And you have to assume I'm ten.

So what DO you do?

THE RECIPE FOR A STRONG ELEVATOR PITCH

1. Change the Question

What an ‘aha moment’ during my media training before a national television interview. “You do not have to answer the question you are asked,” I was told. “Just figure out a way to answer the question you think SHOULD be asked.” OK, so I might ask you: “What does your organization do?” This question leads to a list. Or it leads to the paralyzing vision. So pretend that what I actually say is, “Tell me about your organization.” This gives you the opportunity to tell me what you want to tell me. And besides, that is the question I really want to know the answer to.

2. Take Your Mission and Bring it To Life

If you start your answer with, “Our mission is...,” while I may not actually get up and head to the bar, in my head I’m thinkin’ cosmo. Instead, how about a sentence that starts with “We work to ...” Take my friends (and clients) at The Somaly Mam Foundation. If you are lucky enough to meet one of their talented staff members at an event, you might hear them say: “We are working to end human sex trafficking in Cambodia. We help victims to escape, we help these young girls rebuild their lives and achieve economic independence. And we engage with the government and corporations to fix the root cause. Because we know if we can do that in Cambodia, we’ll be on the road to ending sex slavery for good.”

3. Ask Your Own Question

Once you’ve brought your mission to life, let me take it in for a second and then turn it on me. Ask me a question. I’m a fan of “Did you know...” questions. For the Somaly Mam Foundation, it may be a question to make a point about the scope and magnitude of sex trafficking worldwide. If you work for an organization that advocates for kids, maybe you ask me something about MY kids. This question and exchange engages me and provides implicit permission from me for you to keep talking. You have changed this from a monologue to a discussion. You’ve just bought yourself time to tell me more.

4. Give Me One Example

Clear, quick and simple. Here are two examples:

We just opened a beauty salon in Cambodia in partnership with Estee Lauder. Our girls are learning marketable skills and learning to run a business. Estee Lauder has been an amazing partner. (www.somaly.org)

We lobbied the New York Times to include same sex couples on its wedding pages. (www.glaad.org)

5. Let Your Passion Come Through

This is critical. If by any chance you have engaged me in a deeper way, I want to hear that you love what you do, that the work is hard and rewarding, that while there is never enough time or resources, it’s a privilege to do the work. You just might get me to ask if I can help.

6. Practice Makes Perfect

Practice kid, practice. Practice with your board at board meetings, with your staff at staff meetings. This is not a luxury item. Each of you is an ambassador and you have to get this right.

You have to get me at hello.

SO, WHAT DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION DO?

I have a question for you. Tell me about your organization. What does it do?

Go ahead, give me your elevator pitch in the comments (below.) Give some feedback to others who have already commented.

Let's start a really great conversation so we can all help each other get better at this and grow our nonprofits.

WANT TO DISCUSS YOUR ELEVATOR PITCH WITH ME DIRECTLY?

If you want direct one-on-one help with your elevator pitch, you can schedule time with me [here](#).