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Learn to tell story about yourself—but be quick

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YOUR SPACE

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Quick, tell me who you are and what you do in less than a minute.

What experiences do you bring to your work and how do you do your job better or differently than anybody else? In short, why should I hire or promote you, invest in you, buy from you or listen to your advice?

This drill produces an "elevator pitch," a message short enough to be delivered in the time it takes to ride from the ground floor to the executive suite. And we aren't talking Sears Tower here.

Crafting a 30- or 60-second message is a useful exercise because it forces you to take stock of what you offer and where you want to go. Writing it down and rehearsing it makes the spiel yours.

"Polishing your pitch is the cheapest and most effective way to get or keep a good job in a tough market," says communications coach Mary Civiello, a former television newscaster and author of "Communication Counts, Business Presentations for Busy People."

Meaningful minute. Civiello advises clients preparing lengthy presentations to start by distilling their messages into 60 seconds. Her basic formula goes like this: "Say who you are, what you do, and why you do it better."

When clients stumble over the third part she asks, "What do you contribute? Why is the world a better place because of what you do?" If that's a little too grandiose, consider what sets your performance apart. How is your contribution different from others?

Provide a quick anecdote, fact or analogy to illustrate your message.

For example, a woman who worked at a big hospital told Civiello she likes "helping people." That's the type of generic statement that flies by unheard. When Civiello pressed for an example, the woman recounted tracking down someone who spoke Urdu to translate for a patient whom no one could understand. That story brought her message alive.

"It makes you memorable when you tell those granular, detailed stories," she says. "If you nail that little

A promotional advertisement for Proactiv skin care products. The background is a vibrant green. On the left, a white-bordered box contains three Proactiv bottles: a white tube, a teal tube, and a white tube. To the right of the box, the text "SPECIAL OFFER" is written in yellow, followed by "Get Clear Skin Guaranteed with Proactiv!" in white. Below the box, the text "SAVE 50%" is displayed in large white letters. At the bottom right, there is a red button with white text that says "Get 2 FREE Gifts!" and a right-pointing arrow, with "CLICK HERE" written in smaller white text below it.

example it creates a picture. If you combine a picture with your words, it doubles the amount of time people remember it, and you. Little stories sell good points."

Me in 30 Seconds. Sherri Moss, a volunteer workshop leader at LDS Employment Resource Services in Naperville, recommends a similar tack when crafting "Me in 30 Seconds" statements.

"Mention something unique about yourself," Moss says. "It makes you memorable."

The 30-second statement is especially useful when an interviewer says, "Tell me a little about yourself."

The Naperville career center suggests a five-part structure: Give yourself a title that says what you do; refer to your experience; mention your education; offer something unique about yourself; tie it in with what you can do for the company or organization.

Keep it simple and conversational. "It's just 30 seconds," Moss says. "Don't try to fit your whole resume in."

Here are some samples from last week's workshop: PJ Fisher said she's a "versatile customer service and operations professional" whose travels through 48 of the 50 United States gave her valuable experiences with diverse people that she would bring to an employer.

Information technology manager Dave Rahn mentioned he goes annually with 100 kids on relief missions to regions such as the Gulf Coast, then linked his quick story with his ability to communicate and understand an enterprise to make good technology decisions.

Financial controller Bill Bergin, who loves golf, linked his diligence and follow through in his golf swing with the qualities he brings to his corporate work.

Ken Howdeshell was vacationing at a dude ranch with his family in Colorado when he realized he didn't need to talk about his layoff when people asked what he does. Instead, he used a 30-second statement: "I'm a wireless telecommunications manager. ... I've led teams in both start-ups and existing environments."

"It's great to have something like that to fall back on, and then you can segue into your job search," he says.

Rehearse, rehearse. Getting the words down on paper is only a start. Practice your delivery, preferably with a friend or family member who will videotape you.

"Be honest," Civiello says. "Think about your real qualities. If you don't believe it yourself you're not going to be able to sell it."

Lighten up. If you're having trouble staying loose, Civiello suggests, "Plan a story that gives you a reason to smile, to be warm, to be likeable."

And don't forget to be specific when you close: "How about lunch next week?" "May I call you on Wednesday or Thursday?" "Is there someone else you suggest I contact?"

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