

Encapsulating your service message

Did my title tell you what this article is about? If it did, then it is an illustration of the challenge of writing an elevator statement.

Imagine that you get in the lift with me, and ask, “What are you writing about at the moment?”

“Encapsulating a consultant’s service message” is all I have time to reply, as you get out at the first floor. I judge the success of this by your response. A smile of recognition and a “Very useful. Send me a copy!” shows it has worked. A polite, “How interesting” tells me it probably has not.

People rarely bother to seek clarification, so if your elevator statement is “I’m in the business of change management”, most people will glaze over, either because they do not have a clue what that means, and don’t want to look stupid by asking, or because it sounds threatening and difficult, and is therefore to be avoided.

So why this obsession with lifts, you may be wondering, because lifts are not where you conduct your business development activities. Indeed not, lifts just happen to be a vivid example of how critical it is to be able to sum up your business offering in a few words, not just for fleeting meetings with key prospects, but also because a good elevator statement demonstrates a clear business focus. If you can sum up clearly what you do in one sentence, then the chances are that clarity of focus will translate into business results.

I know consultants who do a variety of things, and will tell you about them all, but for the purposes of our natural human filing system, we like to hang a simple label round their necks. “He does finance training; she’s a coach in the public sector, etc.” Once we’ve put the label there, it takes some effort to shift it. That public sector coach may do wonderful finance training too, but unless we are given that message clearly, and repeatedly, we will not hear it.

First impressions are everything here, which is why it is so important to get that single sentence right. If you do not already have a tried and tested service description that immediately makes sense to your prospects, then now is a good time to start. Here’s one of mine:

“I help consulting companies get the best from their consultants.” I have a different message for the self-employed consultant, and I do not worry about confusion, because I rarely address the two groups together.

If we look at this message more closely, we can see that it contains no abstract concepts, and is focused on a clearly understandable result, without being at all specific about how the helping is done. “the best” neatly encompasses the best for the company and for the individual, and it implies a very positive process. This is also contained in the word “help”, which does not suggest miracles, or arrogance, and is therefore more credible.

A prospect, who would of course be a consulting company, sees someone who specialises in their field, and who can deliver a desirable business result. If you can achieve this with your elevator statement, then it has worked hard for you.

Some golden rules

1. Avoid abstract words – they tend to be slippery in two ways:
First, they allow the listener to slide over them without fully registering their meaning.
Worse, they are hard to pin down, and people will rarely ask for clarification
2. Include a clear business benefit relevant to the prospect
“I provide tax advice to small businesses.”
“We install rental gymnasium equipment into companies who care about staff fitness.”
3. Be clear about your specialism, if you have one.
Someone who “provides tax advice to small businesses” will be more appealing to a small business prospect than someone who generally “provides business tax advice”
4. Keep it personal - “I” or “we”
5. Keep it active, not passive.
Not “Our service is designed to deliver...”, but “We deliver..”

Take a look at this statement, from Fixit & Partners, in relation to the rules above.
“Our goal is organisational transformation.”

- It is completely abstract
- It does not offer a benefit, except perhaps in meeting Fixit’s goal. There is nothing here for the client.
- There is no indication of where Fixit operates, and whether that matches the client’s field.
- “Our goal” is indeed personal to Fixit, but the statement tells us nothing about their service to the client.
- This may read actively from Fixit’s perspective, but it is totally passive for the client.

To transform this into a useful elevator statement, we will need to make some assumptions. We will begin by assuming that organisational transformation comes from the introduction of a new system into a company, and let us say that is IT governance. Let us also say Fixit specialise in the telecoms sector,

We work with telecoms companies in installing IT governance software to deliver measurable benefits to the bottom line.

Or a different service would be:

We work with IT companies when they install new software systems, to ensure that staff accept them and utilise them to the full.

If you do not have a good elevator statement, now is a good time to write one. Test it out on friends or colleagues, and look for the light of understanding in their eyes as you say it. Give it some careful thought, because it is not really an exercise in choosing your words carefully, it is about the fundamental purpose of your business. When you have real clarity of business focus, that clarity will contribute to the delivery of a corresponding improvement in business results.