

Elevator pitches: Sex appeal and more

By **Charles Boisseau**, LocalBusiness.com

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DEVELOPMENT STAGE

Kim Marinucci is a professional pitching coach.

No, she can't show you how to throw a 90 mph fastball, or a knee-buckling curve.

Marinucci runs **Winning Pitch**, a Palo Alto, Calif.-based firm that helps entrepreneurs perfect their "elevator pitches."

Elevator pitches are the short, pithy talks entrepreneurs use to win over potential investors, employees, alliance partners -- anybody who can help him or her advance their company.

The term is thought to harken back to when struggling salespeople had to talk fast and lucidly to sell the boss on an idea or a new product on a short elevator ride. If the salesman hadn't captured the boss' attention by the time the elevator doors opened, the idea was toast.

But if you thought elevator pitches were supposed to be impromptu, think again. These days, with so many entrepreneurs chasing dreams and venture capital becoming dicier, nothing is left to chance.

Suddenly, everyone has to have a polished pitch. In Silicon Valley and elsewhere elevator-pitch contests are the latest rage. Entrepreneurs give their one- to two-minute spiels before a group of investors and business people.

A Brooklyn business writer turned entrepreneur, **Bill Tucker**, last year launched **TheElevator.com**, a Web site where entrepreneurs can post 150-word "elevator pitches" for perusal by potential investors, who pay a \$150 registration fee.

Some entrepreneurs pay experts such as Marinucci thousands of dollars to perfect their pitches.

Need is great

"I found that entrepreneurs were spending up to 70 percent of their time in the early stages of a start-up company pitching for VC," said Marinucci, an ex-corporate communications specialist who started her company four years ago.

"I started focusing on this because the need is so great."

At a time when venture capitalists receive dozens of business plans a week, an elevator pitch is way to stand out from the crowd.

"I see it as an icebreaker," said **Chris Melching**, who holds the title of "storyteller" at **Garage.com**, a Palo Alto, Calif., investment bank that provides funding services for high-tech start-ups. Her job is to coach entrepreneurs to build and deliver presentations to investors.

"I think the purpose of an elevator pitch is to get an appointment, to pique someone's interest so they want to learn about you," she said.

Three pitches

Marinucci said there are actually three types of pitches an entrepreneur typically makes:

- **Quick pitches**, which can come in numerous shades, including even in voice mail or e-mail, where your goal is to just get someone to return your call.

One of the most common is when you bump into someone at a networking event and they ask what you do.

"It's not time to do one- or two-minute pitch. You say one or two sentences," Marinucci said. The goal here is to get them to ask questions and engage them in a conversation.

- **Roundtable pitches** are where you sit down, typically in a venture capitalist's office, and make a presentation, often using presentation software such as PowerPoint. This is less formal, and comes after you've sent the business plan or at least the executive summary.
- **The VC conference pitch** is a formal delivery in front of hundreds of investors and media. It's important to tailor this pitch to your audience depending whether it's general interest or to VCs who specialize in your field, Marinucci said.

Marinucci also said it is important for entrepreneurs to understand that they are not there to entertain the audience, or to act as a motivational speaker, which can turnoff skeptical investors.

All the same, a good elevator pitch has what she calls a "sex appeal factor."

This means the business has to be appealing, perhaps by virtue of how big it can be or the kind of impact it can have, she said.

Practice makes perfect

Melching and Marinucci both said it was important for entrepreneurs to memorize their pitches to make them as crisp and refined as possible.

Otherwise, entrepreneurs can be consumed by their passion and get carried away.

"What makes some drag on more than others would be when an entrepreneur opens his mouth and out comes all their stuff," Melching said. She advises keeping pitches very short -- 45 seconds or less. Otherwise, "there is a tendency to just blab."

Some entrepreneurs have the opposite problem.

Matt Noah, who owns **NetSuds**, a business development and networking group in Minneapolis and co-organizer of the **National Entrepreneur's Conference** last month in Silicon Valley, recalled the worst pitch he heard.

"I don't even remember the name of the company. It was a one-minute elevator pitch that the guy stumbled over for 20 seconds and said 'that was all I can think of' and sat down," Noah recalled. "The poor guy was nervous. You don't know if he didn't practice, but it was nerves."

The most entertaining?

It was delivered by **Steven Friswold**, who launched a Minneapolis-based health and beauty site that focuses on cosmetic surgery.

"Hi, I'm Steven Friswold, chief executive of **eBody.com**, and my wife wants new breasts," is how he began his pitch.

Dot dot-com

Kim Rubin, chief executive of Oakland, Calif.-based **FindTheDot.com**, last month placed first out of 29 San Francisco Bay Area companies participating in an elevator pitch contest sponsored by Silicon Valley Bank. A panel of angel investors and venture capitalists judged.

Rubin said he ended up totally revamping his pitch after he attended a workshop conducted by Marinucci prior to the conference. He eliminated overly technical explanations and focused more on the compelling reason why he thinks his company is different.

The first line of his pitch (which he memorized for days beforehand): "We have the largest chicken and egg problem of anyone here tonight."

Rubin's nine-employee company has developed a specialized digital "dot" for the printed page that allows consumers using a wireless device -- a "personal information assistant" the size of a pack of chewing gum -- to tap the dot and later receive an e-mail when they are within 30 feet of their personal computer. The idea is to link printed page with the Internet, and allow advertisers to provide customers with customized information.

Winning the contest has already paid dividends, said Rubin, whose company plans a formal launch on Nov. 6. He ran out of business cards before he got back to his seat, and has received quite a bit of interest from potential investors as he seeks \$5 million. Also, a high-level sales executive, who heard about the company's win, contacted Rubin and has been hired as vice president of sales and marketing.

Rubin said refining his pitch has helped him to more succinctly communicate why he thinks his company is cool. He says this could help not only when he is trying to land venture capital, but when he is trying to get past a secretary to get an appointment with a potential customer or to motivate his employees.

"This is real important. If you don't know in your own mind what the value is, and can't explain it to your own employees, you have a problem," he said.

Charles Boisseau writes about entrepreneurs and emerging businesses. E-mail him with column ideas or comments.

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