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Does your personal 30-second synopsis convey the right message?

By **Jo Hawkins Donovan**, for *Small Business Times*

“What do I say to someone on a chair lift ride, when he asks me what I do for work?”

“What do I say to someone at a cocktail party who asks me what kind of a job I want?”

“I bought a telephone deal so that my sales staff can call in each morning for a one- or two-minute message from me. What should I say in that message?”

“What do I say to the staff to encourage them to get excited about our strategic plan and see that it’s for the common good?”

“How do I keep hope alive among my managers during this tough time?”

Coaching clients asked me these questions — and all in the past two weeks! So when I was ruminating about ideas for this issue, it hit me that I better write about sound bytes.

We’re used to 30-second sound bytes these days, so in all the instances above, and similar ones, we need to sculpt out a message that we can deliver in one minute at the most. Whew!

It has always taken more time to prepare a short speech than a long one, as we all know.

At the Maui Writers’ Conference, we spent quite a lot of time developing a short, compelling “hook” about our books or plays, a message that we could deliver in less than one minute.

It was tough to capture the essence of a complex work and communicate it with clarity, audacity, passion and simplicity — in a capsule. I had to go back to the drawing board more than once and ask myself: OK, what is my book about? I hadn’t discovered the marketable, compelling sentence that would most likely get the outcome I wanted — the interest of an agent or publisher.

And that is where you start, with the end in mind. What outcome do you want from your message? If you aren’t clear on what you want, it’s a good time to keep your mouth shut (well, except for talking with your coach) and to do that deep soul-searching until you can picture what you want and imagine yourself getting it. The first step is to be crystal clear on that.

Then accept that you will spend hours refining your message until it conveys what you really think, it’s unambiguous and clear enough that an 8-year-old can “get” it. (I always recommend trying your key messages out on someone about that age. If you don’t have one in the house you probably do in the neighborhood.)

Can people visualize your message? They won’t be able to see it or

feel it or smell it if it’s filled with abstractions and big fluffy words meaning nothing. Will it motivate the listener toward that outcome you want? Is it original?

If you are satisfied with all that, and you get the go-ahead from the 8-year-old, then you practice, refine, practice, refine — until you can deliver your message sounding present, spontaneous and inspiring — under any conditions.

Great leaders work hard to sound spontaneous in capturing the purpose and mission of their organizations. Great sales people work and work at delivering the words that will pique the interest of prospective customers quickly, still not sounding memorized or rote. Great networkers prepare and prepare so that they can equip people in their networks with a clear picture of how they can help.

In *Leadership A to Z*, James O’Toole refers to John Gardner’s account of Winston Churchill spending hours in his habitual bath — with his brandy and cigar — polishing his priceless words. Churchill lived in a different age and rarely was limited to a one-minute message. Nevertheless, he was a master of studied spontaneity and spent lots of time refining those bon mots that “seemed to drop effortlessly from his lips.”

Gardner describes the time Churchill’s valet, having drawn his master’s bath shortly before, heard his voice booming out from the bathroom. When the valet stuck his head in to find out if anything was needed, Churchill, wallowing in the bathtub, said, “I was not speaking to you, Norman, I was addressing the House of Commons.” If Churchill believed he needed this much practice, it seems a little crazy to think we don’t.

I guess the proof of the message is when you hear it coming back to you, perhaps not in your exact words but with the spirit of the message intact. When you hear the evidence that people in your organization, or your network truly are “on message” with you and committed to your vision - that’s the reward for all of your hard work polishing words.

If you’re on the chair lift and the stranger next to you slides out of the lift and wants to talk more about how your business might help his business, you’ll have extra wind beneath your skis on your next run down that hill.

Being remembered for your message that comes from your heart and is delivered with elegance — that’s hard to beat.



Jo Hawkins Donovan has a coaching and psychotherapy firm in Whitefish Bay, and can be reached at 414-332-0300, or jo@hawkinsdonovan.com. The firm’s Web site is www.hawkinsdonovan.com.