

The Birth of the Elevator Speech

By Tom Bender

I believe that I—or a man named Tony Schwartz* and I—or Tony alone, working with me—invented the elevator speech, around 1965 or so. Perhaps somebody else invented the concept earlier, but if that is so I've never heard about it. It's not a difficult idea to come up with, so maybe I'm mistaken in my belief, but I doubt it.

Here's what was going on, and you can judge for yourself the possibility that I'm right.

From the middle Sixties until about 1990 I was a speechwriter at GE, mostly for a GE business then called the Aircraft Engine Group (AEG). My first client was AEG boss Gerhard Neumann. He had fled pre-war Germany and ended up working as a mechanic for Claire Chennault, head of the Flying Tigers. Neumann got the first Zero out of occupied China, and Chennault's people were able to find out how it worked. After the war, Neumann got U.S. citizenship by act of Congress, and led the development of the J-79 engine that powered F-4 Phantom fighters. My next client of any duration was Brian Rowe, a British ex-pat, who led the business in ushering in two commercial engines, the CFC and the CFM56, which years later are still powering jetliners. (Rowe was offered a knighthood and declined. He had emigrated to the U.S. from the Midlands. His allegiance to the U.S. was strong.)

I mention these men and engines because before you build a military aircraft or a commercial airliner you have to have an engine, so their contributions to aviation were huge.

The engineers who worked for them—mechanical engineers, all—were brilliant men. (There were virtually no women.) To cite just one example of what they were like, I recall sitting in the office of the vice president of engineering one day, watching the TV set in his office as a

capsule carrying an astronaut was floating on a parachute toward the sea. Splashing down, he would be rescued by a crew from a carrier. “About six miles,” the announcer said. “That can’t be right,” the VP said. “Three miles, four.” The capsule landed 3.8 miles from the ship. The VP had a scratch pad, but the calculation came from his remarkable knowledge of math and his listening skills.

I was in awe of these men.

One day, Brian Rowe said to me that he was hiring Dr. W. Edwards Deming to lead for the Group (at that time about 13,000 people) his process of Continuous Improvement. The idea had to be taught to everyone, and everyone was encouraged to contribute ideas. (GE CEO Jack Welch later superseded Deming’s idea with another idea, but that’s not relevant here.)

We hired other consultants to help as well. Among the people we hired was Tony Schwartz. (Tony created brilliant ads that got into your head and heart. Among the political ads he created was “the daisy ad” featuring a child pulling petals one by one off a flower until the world explodes. The ad was credited with sinking Barry Goldwater’s presidential bid.)

I worked with Tony on getting all our brilliant engineers, left-brained, quiet men, to offer their ideas for improvement. How to do that? We imagined these guys, shy but wanting acceptance of their ideas, needing help in coming forward. (One of them had met our head of personnel in a hallway and said another guy was exhibiting “flash and dash” and getting all the credit on a project.” The personnel guy said, “We’ll have to get you some of that.”)

“How about this,” either Tony or I said. “We bring all the engineers together (in several meetings in our auditorium) and teach them to come forward with ideas—that is, break through their reticence. “How?” We settled on teaching quick delivery of a concept—which, I must say, we did not think of as an elevator speech. “Let’s teach them to prepare to deliver like lightning

an idea that they have. They run into Brian Rowe or whoever and he says, as bosses do, ‘What’s going on?’ They look him in the eye and deliver the brief nutshell of their idea. Thirty seconds. Max.” Tony said that? I said that? I simply don’t remember.

We arranged to spread that idea to several hundred design engineers. They began carrying notebooks that caused bosses to say, “What’s that?” Then they spouted their ideas. We knew it worked, because we got involved in promoting some of their concepts. Deming’s “Continuous Improvement” got off the ground. It truly helped us, and lightning-speech was a key ingredient.

Schwartz was a genius in getting to the point. Among the people I encountered with him in New York was Marshall McLuhan, the man who claimed “the medium is the message.”

Here’s a story about Tony’s impact on McLuhan. I wasn’t there.

One day, McLuhan came to Schwartz’s office, which looked like an airplane cockpit, and said he needed help with a talk he had to give. Schwartz said, “Why don’t you give me the speech?” He clicked some switches in his cockpit, and McLuhan tried out the speech to him. Schwartz popped a tape out of one of his machines. “Copy this,” he said. “Send it to everyone who’s going to be there. Walk up on stage, look them in the eye, and ask them if there are any questions.” As far as I know, McLuhan did just that.

The Aircraft Engine Group survived and prospered. Matter of fact, it’s at the heart of what GE is now trying to rebuild.

Elevator speech? I think Tony and I invented it. It served GE Aircraft Engines very well.

*Tony Schwartz, a legend in the American advertising world, was author of books including *Media The Second God* (1981) and *The Responsive Chord: How Radio and TV Manipulate you, who you vote for, what you buy, and how you think* (1974). McLuhan called Schwartz “the communications guru of the electronic age.”

(Tom Bender has been a journalist, a speech writer, and a college professor. In retirement he writes novels and edits other people's books. He has written three novels, "Run For It!", "Cemetery Plot," and "Avenging Allison." The first of these is YA, the other two are mysteries. All have won prizes. "Avenging Allison" took a first in the 2018 Royal Palm Awards competition of the Florida Writers Association. Visit Tom's website: www.tombenderbooks.)