

On The Media: How I Became the World's Authority on Elevator Etiquette

***"THERE ARE ONLY THREE TIMES IN OUR LIVES THAT WE ENTER A SMALL, WINDOWLESS, ENCLOSED SPACE THAT HAS NO READY EXIT: THE WOMB, THE TOMB, AND THE ELEVATOR. THE ELEVATOR IS THE ONLY ONE WE SHARE WITH STRANGERS."
-LAYNELONGFELLOW, NEW YORK MAGAZINE, 1977***

I have tried to do meaningful work for people and the world, and tried to say things that were interesting and important. But the only words that I have ever uttered that brought me widespread media attention were those having to do with "Elevator Etiquette."

It's the mid-1970s, and I am in my office, Director of Executive Seminars at The Menninger Foundation. My phone rings, and my friend Ralph Keyes, the writer, says, "I'm doing an article for *New York* magazine on how to behave in an elevator. I'd like to interview you."

"Ralph, I know nothing about it and have never given it a second thought."

"I know, but you have a prestigious position as a psychologist and you're funny, so make something up."

I leaned back in my swivel chair, tossed my feet up on my desk, gazed unfixedly into the trees outside my window, and said some things that I thought were, in fact, funny - but also true. Ralph published the article, and then my phone REALLY began to ring - I had entered the world's media archives as an expert on elevator behavior.

For years after, some new media source would track me down and I would give the authoritative word on the subject.

The apotheosis came in the 1980s, in my home in Phoenix. The voice on the line this time said, "I'm doing an article on elevator behavior for the LA Times. It will be on the front page, lefthand column." [That's the most significant placement available.]

Okay, I thought, it's time to 'fess up. So I told her the entire story that you've just read above, all about how I had done no research but obliged my writer friend.

She laughed in all the right places, noted how interesting that was, and proceeded to interview me just as she had intended to do when she called - completely ignoring the information I had just provided - a "scoop exclusive to the Times" if ever there were one. That LA Times article, "No Talking - No Looking," preserved my expert stature in the face of all reality, truth, and accuracy. So here's the article, preserving my stature.

Now fast forward to the 1990s. A friend called to tell me how much he enjoyed my comments in the new book "Do It." I expressed bewilderment, ran to the Boulder Bookstore, and there I was, finally immortalized in book form, my elevator principles now distilled to their essence and numbered, presented as a list, just like "The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People."

-Layne Longfellow