



## Does Anybody Have Any Questions for My Answers? The 411 on Q&A

Day in and day out, smart, business-savvy corporate executives answer questions from reporters, public officials, and audiences of various stripes and sizes.

Amazingly, however, few have given thought to what they can do to properly manage their responses.

We are taught from an early age to reply literally. Does the phrase, "Honesty is the best policy" ring a bell? After all, there must be one single, correct, literal answer to every question, right? Well...no.

Certainly, you never want to tell falsehoods. Beyond the ethical considerations, lying means that you will lose your credibility forever. Still, most of us go through life serving up unembellished responses. Straightforward is fine in most casual conversations. But in a professional, public setting, this can lead to disaster and damage to your personal or organizational reputation.

Fear not. Hope exists in the form of techniques you can use to prepare and protect yourself, manage your responses to keep things from spinning out of control, and get your story out in a positive light.

The fact is most people in positions of authority dislike fielding questions. They may even appear defensive, for it makes them feel less in control. When executives learn that there are ways to deal with questions on a message-driven basis, it is often like introducing them to a whole new world. This is evidenced by some of the reactions I hear during communications training workshops and during speeches where we discuss effective Q&A management:

- That technique to ensure I stay on message when answering questions from the audience will really help settle my nerves.
- I can see why your approach really works when fielding questions from colleagues, clients...in just about every type of business meeting.
- I never realized I had so much control over how I responded to questions.
- I can't wait to use your system the next time I talk to a reporter.

## How Often Do We Deal with Q&A?

When you stop to think about it, much of our day-to-day conversations revolve around questions and answers. Our days begin with, "What do you want for breakfast?" and end with "What time should we set the alarm for tomorrow morning?" Questions like these have very literal, often mundane answers.

This paper examines what we do after we leave the house and don our professional façades, with the focus on exchanges with reporters, audiences, lawmakers, and regulators.



It is important to realize that Q&A with peers, clients, co-workers, and business prospects is much the same as handling questions from reporters. Managing responses should add to clarity and consistency of message, providing an added opportunity to convey your story.

When addressing assorted audiences, most speakers at some point engage in Q&A. Yet how many times have you witnessed a presenter deliver a top-notch speech, only to fall apart when dealing with questions because he had no idea how to direct the proceedings?

This happens not only during formal presentations. The same shortfall is also found in smaller, less structured groups, such as chalk talks to a small group of co-workers in your conference room and one-on one meetings with your direct reports and other colleagues.

Of course, skill in answering questions is crucial during media opportunities, be they live television interviews, telephone Q&As with print reporters, or e-mail exchanges with reputable bloggers.

## What Tools Help You Deal with Tough Questions?

It is essential that you manage the direction of the conversation when interacting with reporters, audiences, and public officials—in fact, in any professional exchange. Otherwise, you run the risk of wandering aimlessly or, worse yet, revealing confidential or damaging information. Additionally, when you manage the conversation, it ensures that you stay on track and keeps you on your desired message path.

I should emphasize that you must treat each question with respect. We are not talking about “spin,” a tactic for losers who simply ignore questions and try to bully their way through. Skilled spokespeople strike a balance between meeting their organization’s needs and those of the questioner.

You will be more successful when you strive to internalize and implement strategies such as “bridging,” whereby you build a verbal bridge to your response by acknowledging the query, using a bridging phrase like, “What’s important to recognize is…” then moving straight to your message.

Let me give you an example. If, during a speech, an audience member told me they prefer to answer questions literally, I might respond as follows:

- **The acknowledgment:** “I understand that some people might want to answer questions literally.”
- **The bridging phrase:** “Let’s look at the big picture.”
- **The message:** “My goal is to respect my audience at every turn. If this fine organization wanted me to simply have a conversation with a few high level executives, they would have invited me to a private dinner instead of addressing of a roomful of people. We all came here today to hear about how to deliver winning presentations. Responding with the highlight of my message keeps me on track to fulfilling my end of that bargain by giving you what you came here expecting to learn.”

Bridging takes some practice since it is a new style of communication for many people, so be sure to practice the technique before your next Q&A encounter (for more information on bridging, see [\*The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations\*](#) and the media relations guide *Face the Press with Confidence: The Media Interview Companion*).

Another useful technique is known as “deflection,” in which you essentially put up a verbal stop sign to questions that are overtly hostile. Another device, the “sneak peek,” allows you to give your questioner a glimpse around the corner, guiding him down the

road you want to travel (for full treatment of these two tactics, see the position paper [“Sneak Peeks and Deflections: Two Often Ignored Media Interview Techniques Every Executive Needs to Know”](#)).

We all have been faced at one time or another with a question we cannot answer. Perhaps it does not involve your area of expertise, you haven't committed a certain detail to memory, or you simply suffer from temporary brain lock. You cannot be expected to have every factoid at the tip of your tongue. In instances like this, explain that you do not have that bit of information readily at hand and that you will get the specifics to your questioner soon. Then, segue right into the portion of your message that best addresses that general topic. This latter move helps you keep the conversation moving in your direction as much as possible.

## **What Benefits Do You Earn When Managing Responses?**

It is important to recognize that your audience or conversation partner benefit when you manage your responses. It keeps them engaged and interested in the subject at hand when you work to keep things on track. This is an important factor, for it gives your audience the information they bargained for when they decided to attend your presentation, or gives the reporter the information she seeks from you.

Yes, you enter into an agreement when you engage in a public forum—an agreement that you will stick to the agreed-upon topic. Fail to do that and your remarks will sink into oblivion. Think back to the times you have been in the audience when a renegade questioner succeeded in pushing the speaker into a meaningless exchange. You probably were not thrilled. Rest assured, neither were your fellow audience members (to say nothing of the speaker).

Of course, dealing skillfully with questions also benefits you. It demonstrates you have what it takes to handle the heat in the hottest kitchen. It serves to raise your professional profile, enhance your reputation, and help your organization attain the goals you are working to achieve. Here, we are not talking solely about your communications goals, but speaking more broadly about how effective communications helps you achieve your overall goals.

Successful management of Q&A also helps you avoid that deer in the headlights look that we all have witnessed when unskilled spokespeople are hit with tough questions from audience members or reporters.

## **How Can You Maintain Control and Stick to Your Message?**

Your job in any professional conversation is to respond to every question with the portion of your message that best applies.

This is not a poolside chat. You are working to advance an agenda. It is up to you to keep the conversation gliding along your desired track. Others may try to pull you off track either intentionally or unintentionally. You must be prepared to play that game of tug-of-war, diplomatically guiding the conversation back to where you want it.

Part of your advance preparation prior to any presentation should involve anticipating questions that might crop up. Addressing those issues in your remarks precludes the need for someone to ask about them, giving you greater control over the session and taking the wind out of the questioner's sails.

Anticipating potential questions helps in another way, too. Some executives begin to feel overwhelmed by Q&A, nervously trying to think of precise answers for all the questions they might confront. Try this method instead: As you prepare for your Q&A exchange, begin to sort each question into the proper "issue basket."

Let me explain the issue basket. No matter how complex your area of expertise, there are probably a maximum of four to five central issues you deal with in any given Q&A situation (if you find yourself unable to narrow it down to that number, consult with a communications expert skilled in message development to help you refine your approach). Then decide which portion of your message best addresses each issue basket.

This frees your mind from trying to instantly recall answers to dozens of highly nuanced questions. After all, it is far easier to hold on to just four or five thoughts. As you are listening to the question, mentally toss it into the appropriate issue basket and respond with the portion of your message that, during your preparations, you deemed most suitable.

An approach like this gives you the wherewithal to address questions directly while not trying to fit what you have to say into canned responses. These techniques are designed to make you sound more engaging (and human), not like an automaton.

## **How Can You Anticipate Tough Questions?**

The number one strategy for effectively managing your responses is to prepare and practice, as is the case generally with public speaking, media interviews, testimony on Capitol Hill or before a regulatory agency, and in one-on-one dealings with policymakers.

Make a list of all questions that might arise, then sort them into your issue baskets. From a strategic viewpoint, it is also useful to divide the questions into three types:

1. Questions you expect to hear in nearly every encounter. You should have ready responses for these.
2. Positive questions that you want to hear. Find a way to suggest these questions to reporters, lawmakers, or an audience member in advance.
3. Questions you never want to hear pass your questioner's lips. This is where you earn your stripes by bridging and deflecting.

It is also wise to anticipate the various techniques reporters and others might use to distract you or throw you off balance—techniques such as interruptions, rapid fire questions, hypotheticals, and planting words in your mouth.

## How Does Managing Q&A Lead to Success?

The success of your career, your organization's long-range goals, and the causes you hold dear depend on your ability to persuade and inform.

The reality is you will rarely get an unfiltered chance to deliver your message. Q&A is a fact of life, so you had best be prepared to respond in a way that advances your chosen message.



In every business deal from this point forward—whether it's a media interview, presentation, internal meeting, client conference, or legislative testimony appearance—plan in advance how you want to manage your responses. Next, commit to using the strategies we've

covered here to muster the discipline to stick to your message when faced with even the toughest questions:

- Recognize that professional exchanges call for you to manage your responses effectively
- Practice bridging, deflection, and sneak peeks
- Anticipate potential questions
- Sort those questions into your issue baskets
- Rehearse Q&A with your advisors

Leave behind the tired, ineffective way of answering questions. Assert control and steer the conversation more in your direction. Managing your responses is vital to good health for your career and for your organization.

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