Chapter 12

Question and Answer Techniques

Turn Question & Answer into Question & Message.

Many engagements include a question-and-answer session. Whenever this is the case, it is essential that you view the Q&A as part of your presentation. There's nothing worse than giving a great speech only to have everything go south during the Q&A because you flub a question you're not ready for, stray from your message, or lose control in the face of hostile or aggressive questioning. You must prepare for the Q&A every bit as hard as you do for the body of your presentation.

The point is not to try to anticipate every possible question or steel yourself to fend off the barbarians. Think positively about the Q&A: after all, it's a wonderful opportunity to drive your message home.

Every question is an opportunity.

When helping them prepare for Q&A, I like to start by reminding my clients that for every question, there are many answers. How you answer a question is your choice. In fact, you also have the right not to answer any question you don't want to answer. It is quite possible that you will decide to address (but not answer) a question and instead redirect to your message.

In any case, it's not your responsibility to answer questions the way we all did as schoolchildren – that is, in order to please the questioner. Instead, your mission is to use every question as an occasion for saying what you want to say. As you approach Q&A, turn the tables on the audience by keeping this question in mind: “What questions do you have for my message?”

Every answer reinforces your message.

You'll find that you can answer many if not most questions by repeating something you’ve already said in your presentation – taking the opportunity to repeat a key message. When a question requires you to give more information about a topic you addressed in your presentation, go ahead – but be careful not to overelaborate or wander off on a tangent. Instead, quickly transition from the “new” information to the message it clarifies or supports.
Keep your message mantra front and center in your awareness during Q&A, and reinforce it at every opportunity.

**Prepare your own questions.**

And what if no one is ready to ask a question or if you don’t get the questions you want? Make sure you have your own questions at the ready, such as –

“You may be wondering …” or

“One question I’m often asked is …”

Chances are, this will prime the pump and the audience will soon join in the dialogue.

**Friendly, Challenging and Hostile Questions**

There are many techniques for handling Q&A not just successfully but gracefully. We’ll begin with baseline tips and then proceed to ways of handling difficult and hostile questions.

**Tone and Attitude**

You need the same tone and attitude during Q&A as during a presentation: confident, passionate, informative, and interactive. Q&A is a time for you to shine; take advantage of it. Remember, you are the expert.

You are also building relationships; Q&A is a great time to come out from behind the podium or table, move toward your audience, and engage them as a group and as individuals. Use people’s names if you know them. Start each answer by responding directly to the questioner, but as you transition to a more general point (ideally, one of your key messages from the body of the presentation), take in the whole audience.

**Active Listening**

Remember that your listening will be judged as much as your answers. Listen to the questioner, not just the question, with an open body posture, good eye contact, and a display of genuine interest.

Listen carefully. Take time to hear the question and make sure you understand it before responding. Ask the questioner to clarify if necessary. A tried-and-true technique for starting an answer is to repeat the question. In larger venues where the audience may not be able to hear every question from the floor, you may have to repeat the question so that everyone will understand your answer.
“Gosh, I Like You!”

While you’re listening to and answering questions, think about how much you like the audience or the person asking the questions. Thinking “Gosh, I like you!” will give you sparkle, and may even inspire you to smile. This simple technique is especially useful in on-camera interviews, because what you’re thinking and feeling is easy to read in your face close-up. It will also give you the extra energy you need in the two-dimensional realm of video.

Start With the Conclusion.

During Q&A, people don’t have the time or the patience to wait for you to build to a conclusion. Answer with your Powerbite!

Stay Within Your Area of Expertise!

If you don’t know the answer, say so. Never try to answer a question when you don’t know the answer. During friendly Q&A it’s perfectly okay to say, “Good question – I really don’t have an answer. But …” – and then you can promise the questioner to find the answer later, and/or transition the dialogue to a topic that is “solid ground” for you.

Listen for Categories of Questions.

As you become more comfortable with Q&A, you will become adept at categorizing questions presented to you. This way, you can take advantage of pre-crafted answers and Powerbites to answer types of questions.

For instance, when preparing a team for a high stakes presentation, we were able to build responses to several likely question categories:

- *Why change* questions – tell an aspirational story or cautionary tale.
- *Price* questions – answer with value Powerbite.
- *Implementation* questions – answer with winning process Powerbite.
- The *hand-holding* questions – sell our experienced team.
- The *fear of failure* questions – celebrate our track record of successes.

Every question is an opportunity to reiterate your message.
More Difficult Q & A

When questions get more challenging, they require the mastery of additional techniques.

Say it and Stop.

Especially during potentially difficult Q&A, briefly give your best answer and stop. Project confidence that you have successfully answered the question and need to say nothing more. Keep in mind as well that professional interviewers – including lawyers taking depositions, news reporters, and financial analysts – are practiced in using silence to intimidate and draw people into saying more than they need or want to. Don’t give in. Remember, the more words you use, the more rope you will extend to hang yourself.

Touch, Bridge, and Go.

While “Say it and Stop” will put the ball back in the court of your questioner, “Touch, Bridge and Go” helps you drive more aggressively to your message.

Think of the “touch” as a way of acknowledging the question without going deep into an answer. Think of the “bridge” as the language connecting to the message you wish to deliver. Having built the bridge, “Go” to the message.

Touch, Bridge and Go in action:

(Touch) “I understand how you might focus on this one example, (Bridge) but the real story here is …(Go) ”

(Touch) “That’s a great question and we’ll have to sort out those details, (Bridge) But there’s a bigger issue here …(Go)”

(Touch) “Glad you brought that up. I’m happy to send you details on how we’ll tackle that … (Bridge) More important to the success of this project is …(Go)”

(Touch) “I hear your concern about resourcing the teams – who wouldn’t love a bigger budget …” (Bridge) but my main point here has to do with the implementation of a better workflow … (Go) let me go deeper into the new …”

Define, Don’t Defend.

Questioners sometimes want to focus on the “negatives” – past mistakes or failures, opportunities missed, uncertainties, and so forth. Don’t be defensive, and don’t
be drawn into dissecting the past. When you start talking about why something’s broken, it’s easy to start assigning blame.

Instead, focus on what has been learned or what you’re doing to overcome the challenges or improve the process. Define the promise of the future rather than defending against the disappointments of the past.

**If You Don’t Have the Answer, Sell the Process.**

Often you simply won’t have good answers to tough questions. You will lack the metrics, you won’t have the program in place, or you will be in the early days of building out the solution. In cases like these you will be best served to “sell the process.”

When you share details of a process that has rationality and has integrity, you gain credibility while diffusing the urgent need to know.

**Buy Time.**

You can’t anticipate every question; audience members come up with the darndest things. There will be times when you’re surprised or caught off guard by a question or comment from the audience. Don’t panic or hurry your answer – you may live to regret it. Instead, buy time to think about your answer.

There are three ways to buy time:

**Ask the person to repeat the question.**

**Rephrase the question in a way you wish to answer it.**

This goes to a useful rule of thumb for all Q&A: “Don’t answer the question they asked; answer the question they should have asked.”

**Take time to consider your answer before speaking.**

Though least used, the third technique is actually the most powerful. Taking your time, being deliberate, gives you an air of authority. It also adds to your credibility, because the audience sees that you’re actually thinking about the question and not just spewing out some prepackaged pablum.
Don’t Break into Jail.

Avoid bringing up new issues or perspectives that might intrigue the audience and take them off your message. Use good judgment by staying away from topics that send you down a rat hole because they:

- are too complicated
- introduce an alternative point of view
- are fraught with controversy

Never Repeat Poison Words.

When they say “train wreck!” your job is to think of the antonym (“smooth sailing”). Use your imagery instead of theirs. “That’s not how I would characterize it … the way we see it is …”

Punt.

For more challenging or hostile Q&A, become expert at punting.

Be ready with the language and style of punting. Smile and stay engaged and confident while you punt. Always follow your “no” with a transition to something you prefer to discuss.

Examples of punting:

- “That’s a technical question that falls outside my area of expertise; let me put you in touch with …”
- “The development team is probably your best source for an answer to that question; let’s connect you with them …”
- “I have expertise in the disciplinary aspect of your question but for the complete answer we’d want to bring in an expert on employment agreements; let me address the disciplinary question …”

Questions You Don’t Have to Answer

People sometimes ask inappropriate questions – questions that you simply won’t have to answer. They may try to blindside you with new “information” or a “phantom” authority. For example, “According to the recent article in …” Or they may ask questions in such a way as to trick you, trap you, or box you in; for example, “Isn’t it true that …?”
You don’t have to answer these “gotcha” questions. The artistry is in turning them into opportunities. In general, all you have to do is transition from your refusal to address their question (with or without giving your reason) to something you do want to talk about. Here are several examples:

**Q: Seeks proprietary information.**

A: “That’s proprietary information that I can’t share with you, but what I can tell you is …”

**Q: Asks for a legal opinion or information.**

A: “That’s a legal issue and I’m not a lawyer. But I can say …”

**Q: Probes for information about a specific employee.**

A: “We don’t speak publicly about personnel issues. What I can tell you is …”

**Q: Probes for information about a particular individual.**

A: “Out of respect for Mr. Smith’s privacy, I’m afraid I can’t address that. Perhaps he would be willing to discuss it with you. In the meantime, what I want to emphasize is …”

**Q: “What if…?”**

A: “I wouldn’t want to speculate.”

**Q: “When will you stop strong-arming Alpha Corporation…?”**

A: “We have a very good relationship with Alpha Corporation, and …” or “We think competition is good for our industry and our customers …”

**Q: “What three mistakes…?”**

A: “What we should be talking about are our three greatest successes …”

**Q: “How would X respond?”**

A: “You’ll have to ask X.”

**Q: “What is the worst…?”**

A: “That would be speculating. Let’s focus on the real issue here …”

Do not answer “gotcha” questions.
Q: “It was recently stated that…” or “An article in last week’s news said…”
A: “I haven’t heard that …” or “I haven’t seen that article.”

Q: “… yes or no?” or “Is that true?”
A: “In fact, that’s not a yes or no question …” or “I don’t think it’s as simple as that. When we look at all the facts …”

When Challenging Morphs to Hostile

Q & A is inherently challenging. But sometimes it gets downright hostile. You never know when and where a “poison pill” or “pot-stirrer” will appear. Always anticipate hostile questions, no matter what the topic or the venue.

When you sense hostility in a question or questioner, first remind yourself to maintain your key communication techniques: an open and relaxed posture, a resonant and varied voice, concise and clear answers.

Consider your options.

Again, you don’t have to answer any question, especially one that’s off-topic, clearly intended to set you up to make a mistake, put you on the defensive, or lead to another hostile question.

Empathy Without Culpability

In business and professional life, just as everywhere else, bad things happen, mistakes get made, people are disappointed or hurt. If you’re conducting a Q&A in the wake of such difficulties, you may have to deal with the tough questions that result. In these circumstances, questioners often express anger or frustration. The best way to deal with such moments is an approach I call empathy without culpability.

First, you acknowledge the feeling that’s being expressed:

“I see this is really upsetting to you.” Take the time to let them know they’ve been heard. Sometimes they just need to know someone is listening.

Then you empathize:

“I am deeply saddened by your experience … ” or “ I think everyone here can relate to your frustration.” Be empathetic without accepting the blame.
Finally, bridge from the negative to the positive:

“Our big concern now is moving forward and building a better …” This often means moving from the past to the future.

Through empathy without culpability, you validate the feelings of those asking tough questions without agreeing to take the blame.

Avoid a One-on-One Dialogue.

Never allow Q&A to become a dialogue between you and just one questioner. Don’t let a questioner with an agenda follow up with a second question. Instead, take control by transitioning to another section of the audience: “So as you can see, we’re working hard to tackle that challenge … (turning your body away from the questioner) “… now I think I saw that you had a question over here. How can I help you?”

Triangulate.

At a certain moment in Q&A you may feel that the boundary between the problem and you is disappearing. The hostility and level of accusation is high as is the frustration. One last option, which is highly preferable to the phrase “let’s take that off line,” is to triangulate.

Triangulation is simple. Separate yourself from the problem. Write the problem on a white board or flip chart or use language to place the problem somewhere other than in your hands.

By separating yourself from the problem, then turning to face the problem alongside the questioner, you change the nature of the engagement. “And so I think I’ve put the question up on the board as you described it. Let’s take a look together and see how we can solve it.”

Facing the Media

As a media trainer for high stakes interviews, product launches and earnings calls, I implore you: Do not enter the unfair world of the media without engaging in dedicated preparation and coaching!

That said, the lines are blurring between what we think of as privileged, confidential communication and what ends up as broad distribution of your latest quotable quote. Our public presentations and panel discussions are the subject of instant digital distribution. We live in the world of tiny microphones, video cameras, Tweets, YouTube and blogs. Don’t be surprised if you learn that your presentation or communication is being instantly distributed. The general public has become a form of the “press.”
Stay on Message.

When facing questions in these scenarios, you will be best served by staying zealously on message. First apply a heavy dose of the previously mentioned strategy. Don’t answer the question they ask, answer the question they should have asked. Stated another way: What questions do you have for my Powerbite? Speak from the Powerbite by hitting the conclusion, the evidence and the “so what” to the point of redundancy. Use all the techniques referenced in the challenging and hostile question section. Then add the following strategies and tactics to the mix:

Understand the New Ground Rules.

Dealing with professional (and non-professional) journalists is a form of Q&A with its own special challenges. It is not a conversation. That means you cannot build on ideas and hope to have your statements received in context. As a rule of thumb, try to make sure that anything you say would be complete and coherent if appearing as a tweet.

Be the Editor.

They cannot print what you do not say.

When you choose to speak, know how much space your interviewer is likely to use for your message or quotable quote. (For example: national broadcast media averages 6 seconds per soundbite.) Edit your words to fit the medium. If your soundbite is too long, you will become the victim of their edit. You’ll scream that you were misquoted or taken out of context … but it will be your own fault.

Correct False Assumptions/Statements.

When an interviewer states a false assumption, stop him or her and establish the real facts before going on.

Never Lie.

Reporters don’t like to be lied to any more than anyone else – except perhaps the ones who know they can make their reputation by catching you out on a lie.

No Jargon or Acronyms

Your business or profession, like most these days, is probably rife with jargon, acronyms, and assorted “insider” language. If you want to be quoted in the press, speak in plain language that the general reader will understand.
**Never Get Drawn into a Fight.**

Mark Twain suggested one should “never fight with people who buy ink by the barrel.” Argue with a reporter or interviewer and you will lose – it’s as simple as that.

**No Sarcasm**

More than one career has been ruined by a snide remark or poisonous quip that took on a life of its own in the media.

**Be Careful About Jokes.**

Humor doesn’t always “play” in print or even on video. Besides, humor can be double-edged. What’s funny to you may be confusing or even insulting to someone else. Before using humor in front of the press (or any audience, for that matter), pre-test it with a trusted colleague.

**Lessons from Broadcast Media Training**

Recently I’ve been helping print reporters expand beyond the written word to the world of broadcast media. These folks know that the more media they master, the more impact they will have. But becoming broadcast savvy is not a simple challenge. The reporter must take the best of the written word and reshape it for the short form of television. The rules are different, the cadence more rapid, and the conversational back and forth unfamiliar. And then there is the issue of style. How you look and sound is as important as what you actually say. In the age of CNBC and You Tube, we could all use a little broadcast media savvy. Here are a few of the tips to consider.

**Be TV Savvy.**

The more that you understand television production the better you will be. Attune yourself to roles and process – the Executive Producer, Senior Producer, Technical Director, Show Producer; the “soup to nuts” of a single interview. The victor will know who is who and be familiar with the process and rhythm of show production. The victor will engage the producer early in the process, ask questions and suggest provocative questions or compelling visuals.

**Sit Up Straight.**

Stylistically, sit up straight – lead from the heart – animate to counteract the flatness of the 2D medium. Use all the gestures you would at a fun party. Use compelling
language but keep it short and sharp and give air so the follow-up question can be asked. Insist on hair and make-up assistance.

**Know your Process.**

Determine what you need to do to make success inevitable, from the moment you are contacted right up until the moment of the show. If you don’t have the gift of gab you may need to practice your spoken word messages multiple times before sitting down in front of the camera. If you do have the gift of gab you may need to spend most of your time prioritizing and refining to make sure you say what you need to say in fewer words.

**Focus on the Key Message.**

From a messaging point of view I recommend you reduce the sauce by focusing on the key message of your story. What’s the lead, the key message, the headline, the takeaway? And equally important “So what?” why should your audience care? What does it mean to the market, the consumer, or the investor? Don’t answer the question they ask, answer the question they should have asked – and the one you are prepared to answer.

**Take advantage of “Just in Time” preparation.**

The victim will sit passively while being hooked up to microphone and get more nervous as each moment passes. The victor will engage the producer and or interviewer and attempt to impact the content and quality of the interview. Try to discuss with the interviewer the key points, flow and take-away message of your upcoming interview. Point out the dead ends or questions that fall outside your expertise. Develop a relationship before the red light goes on.

**Talk to the Viewers.**

On many occasions it will be perfectly reasonable for you to go beyond strictly answering the interviewer’s questions. Broaden your answer and speak to the viewing audience. – “For those out there considering … My message to people out there is …”
Give them at least one “Gosh Moment.”

Viewers should watch you and say to themselves “Gosh – I didn’t know that … or … Gosh, I hadn’t been tracking that … or … Gosh, I’ve never thought of it that way before.”

This is, of course, just a beginning. If you do have a high-stakes opportunity, you will be well served to do as the Super Bowl Champs do – get great coaching – and practice, practice, practice before the big event.

With these strategies and tools in hand, you are ready to turn question and answer scenarios into question and message successes.