

MASTERING THE Q AND A

By Karen Friedman

Question and Answer periods should be viewed as opportunities to advance and explain your goals and ideas, which is why you should encourage questions from your audience.

Yet, so many people say a quick thank you and head for the door, relieved that their presentation is over. Others stand at the podium with clenched fists hoping they can handle whatever hardball is thrown their way.

While question and answer periods can be very unnerving if you don't know the answer or face a hostile person, it doesn't have to be that way. The following tips will help you prepare for unwanted and unexpected questions.

MAKE TWO LISTS

- Prepare two lists.
- The first list should contain all the questions you ANTICIPATE your audience will ask. Beside each question, write two short points you will make to answer the question.
- The second list should contain all the questions you hope they don't ask or that you don't know the answer. Beside those questions, jot down a short response.

SHORT ANSWERS

- Stick to the point. Keep your answer short and focused, always bridging back to your message.

REINFORCE RULES

- If you want people to hold their questions for question breaks or at the end, tell them up front.

HOSTILE QUESTIONS

- If the subject is controversial, anticipate the questions in advance and think through your answers ahead of time. That way you know what you can and can't say.
- Let the person vent and listen to what they have to say. Tell them you understand their concerns and move on, but watch your body language and tone of voice. Do not get into a battle with the questioner. You can't win!
- Try to refute their attack or help them solve their problem with solid factual information.

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RESTATE OR REPHRASE

- When you're speaking to a large group or you're asked a complicated question, always look for ways to re-state or clarify the question. For example, you might look at the group and say: "Mike was asking if our company offers an alternative product at a lower cost." This is also an effective technique if you know the answer.

DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER

- If you don't know the answer, say you don't know but offer to find out and get back to them or provide a source that can answer the question.
- If you can address their concerns, but can't provide the details, answer the question in general and get back to them with specifics or ask if anyone else can help. Most importantly, be honest!

CUTS YOU OFF

- If someone cuts in and you're not ready to take questions, say so nicely and ask them to hold questions until the break or at the end break, unless they just want you to clarify. For example, "I couldn't hear you." If it's a more informal presentation, you might want to encourage continuous dialogue and entertain questions throughout.

ASK THE EXPERT

- If you are asked a question that you can handle but an expert on the subject is in the audience, you may want to give that expert an opportunity to share information. Your job is to regain control by thanking the expert and politely taking the spotlight back.

DON'T KNOW

- If you don't know the answer, say so but offer to get back to the person with the correct information. If you're able, answer in general terms and provide specifics at a later time.

DON'T UNDERSTAND

- If you don't understand the question, ask the person to repeat it and explain what they want to know.

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OFF THE WALL

- If you think a question is ridiculous, don't react. Instead, answer it to the best of your ability and move on.

THAT'S A GOOD QUESTION

- It is not necessary to tell someone they've asked a good question. They've asked the question because they want information, don't understand, or have thoughts of their own. If you compliment one person, you really should compliment everyone who asks a question and that would sound phony.

OFF TRACK

- When a question is off the subject, move on by saying while that is an interesting or you can understand their concerns, in the interest of time, you really need to stick to the subject at hand, but perhaps they could see you when the presentation is over.

STAGE HOG

- It isn't fun to share the stage with an uninvited presenter. Usually this person simply wants to hear themselves talk. Tell the person it seems they raise some important points, but you need to make sure everyone has an opportunity to ask questions. Then look away from the hog and back to the entire audience.

Most importantly, stay positive and remember to control the question and answer period. Tell the group you have time for one or two more questions. This way, you can choose to end your question and answer period on a positive question. However, answering the final question is not the end of your presentation. It is up to you to leave your audience with a final thought. Summarize your key point and drive it home with an example, story or call to action that your audience will remember.

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