



OPINION



Icing the Hot Seat

Emerge unscathed from line-of-fire Q&A sessions with these tips for how NOT to handle tough questions.

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You've told a compelling story, you've designed dazzling PowerPoint slides, you've delivered your message confidently, and now you open the floor to questions. Unless you manage this part of your presentation effectively, all of your other efforts will go up in smoke. You must stand tall in the line of fire, and learn how to handle tough questions.

Software executives find themselves in such situations almost daily ... whether speaking to a reporter, meeting analysts, presenting at a conference or headlining an IPO road show. Fortunately, speaking consultants abound with advice about managing Q&A, ranging from media training to mock practice sessions. *Unfortunately*, a number of counterproductive practices have evolved along the way.

After coaching more than 500 IPO road shows, including those of Cisco Systems, Intuit, Yahoo! and Dolby Labs, I've developed a set of the most productive ways to deal with difficult speaking situations. Here are the most common speaking misconceptions today, coupled with the right way to survive the "hot seat."

DON'T make a list of potential tough questions and prepare an answer for each. Preparation is a good idea, but this approach is misguided. People in public don't ask questions as written in advance. Audiences take in a great deal of new information, and so their questions come out convoluted and rambling. Furthermore, this preparatory approach produces a long complex list that forces the presenter into a mental scramble to match the question as asked and the answer as written. The scramble inevitably produces misfiring, often leading to the wrong answer. **DO:** Prepare a short list of key issues, and an equally short position statement for each: Bullets rather than sentences; concepts rather than script.

DON'T refer back to a slide if someone asks a question about a subject you've already covered. This is a bad idea because it implies that your questioner is suffering from early onset Alzheimer's disease. Moreover, you will appear awkward as you search for the earlier slide. **DO:** State your answer ... without the slide ... as if you never covered it, and do it succinctly. Back references are good narrative techniques during a presentation but, because the dynamics change during the free fire of a Q&A session, never look back. Keep moving forward.

DON'T compliment your questioner by saying, "That was a good question," or "I'm glad you asked that." Will you then insult the next questioner by saying, "That was a bad question," or "I'm not at all happy you asked that"? **DO:** Make no value judgments or characterizations of any question. Simply respond to the central issue in the question.

DON'T think you don't have to answer irrelevant questions. There is no such thing as an irrelevant question. While you might think it's irrelevant, the questioner doesn't, nor does the audience, which tends to side with one of their own. Group psychology is at work in Q&A sessions: One versus many. If you disdain or duck any question, you will alienate your questioner and your entire audience. **DO:** If they ask it, you will answer it.

DON'T use every question as an opportunity to deliver your message. This is only a partial misconception. You can and should use every opportunity to deliver your own message, but only after you have earned the right to do so by first providing an answer to the question you were asked. Politicians characteristically perpetuate this myth by ignoring the question and launching into their own message.



Maurizio Ammannato

Politicians are expected to do this. You cannot get away with this in business. **DO:** Provide an answer for every question; only then can you swing for the seats.

DON'T shift to a different subject if you don't know the answer to a question. Nobody expects you to be a walking encyclopedia of minutiae. **DO:** Say you don't know, but promise to get the answer to your questioner later. Be proactive. Ask for a business card. Of course, if the question is about a subject that is central to your story, you cannot plead ignorance or you will appear evasive. In this case, your preparation for key issues is vital.

DON'T feel you must answer all the questions if you are asked a multiple question. If you try this, you might forget one question and then say, as far too many people, far too often, do, "What was your other question?" This sends the message that you are suffering from early onset Alzheimer's disease. **DO:** Pick only one question, respond, and then turn to the questioner and say, "You had another question." They will either re-state their question or say, "That's O.K., you answered it." Either way, you are off the hook. Handle one question at a time.

DON'T repeat the question so that everyone can hear it. If the question is challenging, such as "Why is your product so expensive?" and you repeat it by saying, "Why is our product so expensive?" you would then be admitting that your product is expensive. **DO:** Strip out the value judgment, "How did we arrive at the price?" If the question is "What makes you think you can survive in a crowded market dominated by larger players?" strip out the value judgment, "How do we compete?"

DON'T say, "I'm not at liberty to answer," or "If I told you, I'd have to kill you," if a question addresses a confidential matter. Both options sound evasive. **DO:** Attribute the confidentiality to a position outside your purview, e.g., legal, security, or corporate policy. For example, "Our legal counsel has advised us to withhold comment," or "Our company policy is to not make forward-looking statements."

DON'T answer the question you want to answer. This is the most pervasive of all speaking misconceptions, often attributed to Robert S. McNamara, the former head of the Ford Motor Company and Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War. This tactic did not work for him, and it will not work for you. You must answer the question asked of you. **DO:** Again, if they ask it, you will answer it, even if you are guilty as charged. However, once you have answered, you can shift gears to the positive and state your message. "You're right; we are a small player in a crowded market dominated by larger players. But because we are a pure play, we can focus all our attention on our target area and, because we are small, we are more agile and can rapidly shift to meet changes in the market. Therefore, I am confident that we can not only compete, but win."

*Jerry Weissman is the principal of [Power Presentations, Ltd.](#), a Silicon Valley consultancy. He is the author of [Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story](#) and *In the Line of Fire: How to Handle Tough Questions...When it Counts*, and its companion DVD, *In the Line of Fire: An Interactive Guide to Handling Tough Questions*.*