

Strategic Use of Q&A with the Media

A FIVE-STEP METHOD

Before you can apply this simple method, you must be clear about your “Hook” or core value proposition for this audience. Media coaches often help executives develop several “messages” that basically lead back to the same place but keep an executive from sounding either like a one-trick pony or a broken record. If you want to try to sell more than one message in your Q&A, make sure they are all congruent with your hook and the result you want for this talk. If not, you will probably get lots of follow-on questions you don’t want to answer.



Once you know the ideas you want to try to get to in your answers, the following process can help you get there.

1. Listen silently and breathe.

In conversations, most of us aren’t really listening. We are thinking – hard and fast – about what we are going to say next. When we are thinking of our response, we are not fully hearing the question. As a result, we are missing valuable insights into how to connect and how to get to our messages out there. Listening without speaking while we breathe to release tension puts us in a powerful state of readiness to answer in a way that creates value both for you and the person asking the question.

2. Pause.

Practice putting some silence between the end of the question and the beginning of your answer. A purposeful pause gives you time to think and validates the quality of the question better than the rote expressions like “great question.” You are not in a position to suggest one question is good or bad. Use a moment of silence to evaluate the question first, and then in silence, develop your response.

3. Evaluate in silence whether it is a question that can be answered as is or if it is one that:

- Needs clarification – “Let me make sure I understand what you are asking here.”
- Needs reframing because it contains a false premise – “Your question assumes the market for wireless devices has peaked and our research shows we are at the very beginning of the maturity curve. So I can’t really answer the question, but what I can say is...”
- Shouldn’t be answered for competitive or legal reasons “I can’t answer that because this really is our secret recipe, but I can tell you...”
- You don’t want to answer because you would be required to have a crystal ball to know the answer, or

- You don't know the answer - "I don't know the answer to that; I will have to find out. Give me your card and I will research it and get back with you." Once you know what kind of question you have fielded, you are comfortable that you can and should answer, and you have the answer (all in silence... with practice this will take a second or two), then it is time to compose your response and...

4. Answer directly and concisely.

"Yes, we are on schedule for a hard launch on Monday," or "325,000 so far," or "All of our developers are in Sri Lanka." Then ...

5. Bridge to your message.

"This is not something we are simply hoping to do. Our investors will see things happen quickly." Or "At that volume we are cash flow positive. In four months we will ramp to 3/4 of a million and be profitable," or "In this way we maintain better than six sigma quality at a 40% reduction in HR costs compared to our next nearest competitor and create an even bigger hurdle for new competitors jumping into this space."

With practice this process becomes absolutely second nature. Watch politicians as both masters and hacks of the trade. It is a core competency for anyone who frequently deals with the media to be able to generate a print-worthy quote or sound bite on the fly. Masters are always quoted on the issues they are trying to sell; hacks just sound like they are trying to sell.