

The Ambassador



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“The Ambassador” is a monthly communiqué designed to provide tips on best practices in effective communications. Next month, look for guidelines on *Speaking at Universities: How to Connect with Students*.

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Questions & Answers: Reward is Worth the Risk

By Jerry Doyle

Are you like many presenters who approach the Q&A portion of your talk with great trepidation? After all, this is the unscripted part where you are at the whim of the audience and their difficult and unnerving questions. Those questions may have the potential to poke holes in your expertise. Or at the very least, should a Q&A session proceed poorly, upon leaving, your audience may have long forgotten your most salient points. By the time you finish reading this piece, I hope that you change your perception of the Q&A session and think of it, rather, as your vehicle to becoming an even more effecting and dynamic speaker.

Q&A = Danger + Opportunity?

Indeed, some consider the Q&A a *crisis* they must weather. Well, even if you believe it may be a crisis, you should also consider the Q&A as an opportunity.

Some of the great leaders in business take a crisis head-on and believe each to be not just something to survive, but something that can serve as a *change agent*. Think of your anticipated tough questions and questioners as change agents. A litigator with whom we worked recently and who handles many arguments in the Court of Appeals says: “Questions are my friends. Without questions, I can’t show them that I really know my stuff.”

While the Q&A portion of your talk is a time when there is a greater chance for you to falter, it is also the time when the audience’s interest and level of listening is at its highest. This is their time, and it opens the door for you to underscore a message and really connect at a higher, more meaningful and memorable level. Think of this as the glass-is-half-full attitude. A shift to this constructive perspective is a critical step in making the best of your Q&A portion and, indeed, your entire talk.

The Soccer Analogy

Here is another positive perspective on the Q&A. Have you ever thought of fielding questions at the end of a talk as analogous to being a goal tender in soccer? Consider the main objective of the goalie. Quite simply, that objective is to keep the other team from scoring on you. But, consider that there is another almost equally important objective: And, that is to get the ball to the other side of the field. Keep yourself and your team *on the offense for more of the time than on defense*.

This analogy holds true for planning and meeting the objectives for the Q&A session. Beyond disallowing your audience to “score” by tripping you up, you want to answer questions credibly, concisely, but then *get that ball back on the other side of the field*. Your objective should always be to swing back to your agenda, when *you’re* on the offense and underscoring key points you made in your talk.

Ok, I Get It, Now, How do I See it?

Now that you are considering Q&A as an opportunity, let us take a look at a few ways to recognize opportunities and how to act on them.

Answer the Bulls-Eye Question With a Target Answer

As is often discussed in our CPA Ambassador presentation and media skills training sessions, there are many questions that are difficult because they are nitpicky, require way too much detail and take you off your desired theme. Answering it without seeing and acting on the opportunity may satisfy that one questioner, but alienate or at least bore everyone else. A Nitpicker or Detailer is defined as someone who takes personal issue with a minute segment or piece of data in your speech and homes in on it. You can spot this person with his body language, tone of voice and certainly as the content of his question is revealed. As this type of question is being asked, think of it as a dart seeking the bulls-eye and prepare to offer a “target” answer. In other words, take a metaphorical step back and think of the greater issue that has a better chance of being a concern of some or all of the rest of the audience, not just the questioner. “I believe what you’re talking about is the responsibility of all of us to consider the changing tax code...” This way, you’re not zeroing in on one person thus putting off others, but still satisfying the question by addressing the over-arching issue.

The Multi-Questioner– Pick the Good One and Run With It

Often, participants ask us for advice on what to do when an audience member raises his hand and asks a series of questions – perhaps 3 or 4 – not just one. The difficulty here is obvious and our advice for addressing this problem is simple. Avoid the temptation -- indeed the instinct -- to try and answer all of the questions and in the order in which they were asked. Pick one that is easy for you and take the appropriate time to answer. Do so clearly and turn to another so that you are not forced back into that machine-gun line of questioning. But, the evolved, advanced speaker will do more than that. He/she will see the opportunity. That opportunity is to not only choose the easy question, but one that supports one of your main thematic messages well. In your mind’s eye, while this barrage of questions are coming at you, think of your top three or four messages and make the connection. Then, take a breath, make it known which issue you are going to address and move the dialogue toward your message. This takes time and practice as it is indeed an advanced skill, but the ability to do this makes you a more dynamic speaker.

Make “Why” Your Fallback Question

Recently, a CPA Ambassador asked us what to do in a media interview situation when the reporter starts by asking an open-ended question and really leaves it to you to choose the direction in which to take the interview. You know that during the interview, you will certainly get through the “5Ws” – that is, the Who, What, Why, Where and When. But, where do you start? What is the priority? Think about what the audience cares about *most*. The answer is *why*. Whether you are speaking about Financial Literacy, the CPA profession, or taxes, the opportunistic

and erudite CPA Ambassador will always begin by addressing why this subject matter is important to the audience.

It can be daunting when a reporter asks such a wide open question as “So, what’s new in the tax law this year?” Or, “What are some tips to saving money these days?” What’s challenging about it is that there is so much to say and it’s hard to know where to start. Start by addressing the *why*. This is also a great technique when you are in that awkward situation when you have just finished a talk and you open up the floor for questions and you hear nothing but crickets. No one has a question? Have one at the ready. And, if it is *why* then you’re likely to underscore your opener and what’s of utmost concern to your audience.

Harping is for Fairy Tale Orchestras

Now, if something does go wrong in Q&A, don’t panic and perhaps more importantly, ***don’t harp on it***. For example, if you’ve mishandled a question and it seems that the questioner and even others in the audience seem dissatisfied with your answer, offer to speak with them after the meeting and move on to the next question. It is critical at this point for you to put it behind you. All is not lost because of one bad answer, unless you keep inviting the problem back. Often, after a mishandled question, presenters make the mistake of presuming their credibility has been fatally wounded. They’ll end up tainting every subsequent answer with an apologetic tone. Stay confident, keep your dignity in tact, address only the question at hand; then end strong underscoring one of your main talking points.

Yes, the Q&A is fraught with risk. You cannot always anticipate what will happen. But, there is also reward. Some of the best speakers demand a lengthy Q&A portion because they know that’s often when they win over their audience. Now you know it too.

Have a suggestion on a topic? E-mail Carmen Encarnacion at cencarnacion@aicpa.org

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