

## PRESENTER'S GUIDE

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### How to Survive the 7 Danger Zones of Q & A

Q & A is one of the most challenging aspects of public speaking. Yet it's also one of your greatest opportunities to shine as a presenter.

Would you like to field questions easily, think on your feet, and marshal compelling evidence to back up your arguments? If so, keep reading! You'll learn below about the biggest challenges of Q & A—and how to cope with each of them.

- 1. Hostile Questions:** Hostile questions often reflect pent-up anger directed at you simply because you're a convenient target. "I've been dealing with salespeople like you for 30 years, and I'm sick and tired of it!" A response like that has little to do with you personally.

The key to handling hostility is to stay in control emotionally. Listen carefully to what is behind or underneath the question. Try to grasp the emotional context or underlying problem, and address yourself to that. Always remember not to lose sight of your objective of persuading your listeners. Your purpose is still to advance the goals of your presentation, not to demonstrate your dazzling swordplay.



- 2. Loaded Questions:** Loaded questions are exactly what they sound like: explosive. And as the speaker, you are being invited to light the fuse! Since loaded questions are filled with damaging assumptions and conclusions, your job is similar to a Bomb Squad's: to defuse the charge and bring the situation under control.

You can question the assumption behind the question. And here's an important rule: The more damaging the assumption voiced by the questioner (which of course the audience hears), the quicker you must refute it. If that means interrupting the questioner in the middle of the question—that's-really-an-attack, go right ahead.

- 3. Leading Questions:** A leading question is one in which the preferred answer is embedded in the question itself. Isn't it true that...?" is a classic opening to a leading question, since the questioner obviously believes that "it" is true.

This is a sweet deal for the questioner, since it involves asking and answering the question simultaneously! But you mustn't let that happen. Again, listen carefully, so that you can hear when the questioner has slipped in his or her own assumptions. That's the time to recast any damaging assumptions or assertions.

- 4. Hypothetical Questions:** These are really "swamp" questions, since they usually lead you into a fog-enshrouded bog that's impossible to find your way out of. So why go there at all?

The standard response of, "I can't answer a hypothetical question like that" should suffice. The one exception to this advice is to go ahead and answer if the

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hypothetical situation makes a point you'd like to be heard. For instance, when Condoleezza Rice said the United States would consider it "a grave threat" if North Korea tested a nuclear device, the Bush administration obviously wanted to get that message out. As you can imagine, diplomats and negotiators use this option in responding to hypotheticals all the time.

- 5. Multifaceted Questions:** This too-many-bites-at-the-apple transgression appears frequently, particularly among audience members who enjoy showing off. The challenge here is that the many facets of the question(s), or the sheer length of the diatribe can make these interrogatories a real challenge.

Multifaceted questions can work to your advantage, however. That's because they allow you to answer as many of the facets as you like while ignoring the rest. If the question is long enough or convoluted, the audience probably won't notice what you've left out!


- 6. Fuzzy Questions:** This one is an All-Time-Greatest-Hits candidate for TV interviews and radio call-in shows. When a questioner's thinking is as sharp as the surface of a tennis ball, you should basically give thanks to your Higher Power, and take your answer in any direction you like. You could ask for a more targeted question from the person, but why give up the chance to state your message all over again?

- 7. False Choices:** A false choice is an example of a fallacy, or an error in reasoning. Here's a typical instance: "Look, we should use the foundation grant for either a new gym or a parking lot. Those are the things we need most for the school, and we can't afford both. So let's make up our minds!"

Why are those the only two choices? In reality, there are probably at least a dozen options in such a situation. (How about a performing arts space, a new baseball diamond, an annual field trip, or a scholarship?) When someone offers you a false choice, simply point out that there are in fact other alternatives, and then begin to discuss your favorites.

If you find yourself facing any one of these tough kinds of questions, proceed slowly but surely. Hesitancy can be as damaging as handling an answer awkwardly. Let your honesty and goodwill be your guide. Reasonableness will always look better, and convince an audience more surely, than sound and fury in the service of an extreme position.

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