

Chapter 13

What Did You Say? Fielding Questions

In This Chapter

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Many presenters let their guard down during the question-and-answer period. But doing so is a big mistake. Even if you gave a great presentation, a poor performance during the Q&A can totally change the audience's perceptions of you and your topic. That's the bad news. The good news is that if your presentation was mediocre, a strong performance during the Q&A can leave the audience with a very positive impression.

Reviewing the Basics of a Q&A Session

Want to give a sparkling performance during a question-and-answer session? You can stack the odds in your favor by following a few basic rules.

Anticipate questions

As any high school student can tell you, the secret to giving brilliant answers is knowing the questions in advance. In high school, this is called cheating. After you grow up, it's called anticipating the questions that you'll be asked.

How do you anticipate questions? Just use your common sense. Think about your presentation and your audience. Then generate a list of every possible question that the audience may ask. Don't pull any punches. Think of the toughest questions that may come up. Then ask your friends and colleagues to think of the toughest questions they can devise.

After you've compiled a comprehensive list of questions, prepare an answer for each one. Practice until you've got them down cold. Unfortunately, you may not anticipate every single question the audience is going to come up with, but you can think of some of them.

Answer questions at the end



Take questions *after* your presentation, rather than while you're giving it. If you take questions during your talk, it distracts both you and the audience, it makes your presentation harder to follow, and it ruins your rhythm. Tell the audience in the beginning that you plan to take questions at the end.

Don't let a few people dominate

Don't let a few people ask all the questions (unless they're the only ones with questions). Why? It frustrates everyone else who wants to ask you something.

You want to take questions from as many different audience members as time permits. And be fair. Don't favor one section of the room over another. Try to call on people in the order in which they raised their hands. (Yes, it's tough to do it, but try anyway.) Don't give in to bullies who don't wait their turn and instead shout out questions.



Establish the ground rules early. When you open the session up for questions, tell the audience that everyone is initially limited to a single question. Then, if time permits, you may take a second round of questions. If only the same few people keep raising their hands, ask if anyone else has questions.

Don't let the questioner give a speech

You just asked for questions. Despite the fact that you're standing at a podium, and you've just made a lengthy presentation, someone in the audience may want to give another speech.

You're the presenter. You opened up the session for questions — not speeches. When one of these people starts giving a speech, you must cut it off. How do you do it? Watch CNN star Larry King. Callers to his show are

supposed to ask questions. If a caller launches into a speech, King immediately asks, “Will you state your question, please?” Want to be more diplomatic? Say, “Do you have a question?”

Listen to the question

If you want to be successful in a Q&A period, you must listen. I mean *really* listen. By *really listening*, I mean going below the surface of the words used by the questioner. Read between the lines. Watch the body language. Listen to the tone of voice. What is the questioner really asking? That’s the question that you want to identify and answer.

For example, say you’re leading a meeting of your department. After your presentation, you take questions. One person nervously asks about the company’s strategy for the next quarter in light of its poor performance for the past few quarters. “Specifically, how does the company plan to become profitable?” After observing the questioner and knowing the context of the question, you respond, “I think what you’re really asking is will the company be having any layoffs?” And, of course, that’s exactly what is being asked.

Repeat the question

One of the biggest mistakes presenters make is *not* repeating the question. And it’s an enormous mistake. There’s nothing more frustrating than giving a brilliant answer to a question that wasn’t asked. You get frustrated because it’s a waste of a brilliant answer. Your audience gets frustrated because you didn’t answer the question.

There are three major reasons why you should *always* repeat the question:

- ✓ You make sure that everyone in the audience heard the question.
- ✓ You make sure that *you* heard the question correctly.
- ✓ You buy yourself some time to think about your answer. (If you want even more time, rephrase the question slightly and ask, “Is that the essence of what you’re asking?”)

Don’t guess



If you don’t know the answer to a question, never guess. *Never*. It’s a one-way ticket to zero credibility. Once in a while, you may get lucky, beat the odds, and bluff the audience. But most of the time, someone calls your bluff. Then you have a big problem. First, you’re exposed as not knowing the answer you claim to know. More important, the audience members wonder if you bluffed

about anything else. And they project their doubts backward to encompass your entire presentation.

If you don't know, admit it. Then take one, some, or all of the following actions:

- ✓ Ask if anyone in the audience can answer the question.
- ✓ Suggest a resource where the questioner can find the answer.
- ✓ Offer to find out the answer yourself and get it to the questioner.

Remember, nobody knows everything (except my grandmother).

End the Q&A strongly

The Q&A session is your last chance to influence audience opinion of your topic, your ideas, and you. So you want a strong ending. To achieve that, avoid the following:



- ✓ **Don't wait for audience questions to peter out and say, "Well, I guess that's it."** You look weak and not in control.
- ✓ **Don't say, "We only have time for one more question."** It may be a question you can't answer or handle well. Again, this makes you look weak.

How do you achieve a forceful finish? Wait till you get a question that you answer brilliantly. Then announce that time has run out. (Of course, you'll be happy to stick around and speak with anyone who still has a question.)

What if you don't get any questions that you can answer brilliantly? Don't worry. Just make the last question one that you ask yourself. "Thank you. We've run out of time. Well, actually, you're probably still wondering about [fill in your question]." Then give your brilliant answer. It works every time.



End the Q&A session on time. Some audience members come solely for your talk. They don't care about the Q&A. They just want to get back to work or go to the next seminar, but they're too polite to go before it's all over.

Coming Up with a Perfect Answer Every Time

Experts are people who know all the right answers — if they're asked the right questions. Unfortunately, your audience may not always ask the right questions. This section presents some ways to make sure your answers are expert, no matter what you're asked.

Knowing how to treat the questioner

Questioners may be rude, obnoxious, opinionated, egomaniacal, inane, obtuse, antagonistic, befuddled, illiterate, or incomprehensible. You still have to treat them nicely. Why? Because they're members of the audience, and the audience identifies with them — at least initially. Use these suggestions for dealing with someone who asks you a question:

- ✔ **Do assist a nervous questioner.** Some audience members who ask questions may suffer from stage fright. They stammer and stutter, lose their train of thought, and make the rest of the audience extremely uncomfortable. So help these people out. Finish asking their questions for them if you can. Otherwise, offer some gentle encouragement. By breaking in and speaking yourself, you give nervous questioners time to collect themselves. They'll be grateful. And so will everyone else.
- ✔ **Do recognize the questioner by name.** If you know the name of the person asking the question, use it. This has a powerful effect on the audience. It makes you seem much more knowledgeable and in control. And the people whose names you say love the recognition.
- ✔ **Do compliment the questioner, if appropriate.** If the question is particularly interesting or intelligent, it's okay to say so. But be specific and say why. Some communication gurus advise never to say, "Good question," because it implies that the other questions weren't. If you're worried about this, then say, "That's an especially interesting question because . . ." This statement implies that the other questions were also interesting — a compliment. It also eliminates all the value judgments attached to the word "good."
- ✔ **Don't make the questioner feel embarrassed or stupid.** Remember your grade school teacher saying there's no such thing as a dumb question? She was wrong. There are plenty of dumb questions, and presenters get asked them all the time. But you don't want to be the one to point them out. No matter how idiotic the query, treat the questioner with dignity. If you go into a scathing riff about the stupidity of the question, you make yourself look bad, generate sympathy for the questioner, and discourage anyone else from asking a question.
- ✔ **Don't send the questioner a negative, nonverbal message.** It can take a lot of guts to rise out of the anonymity of the audience to ask a question, so don't discourage questioners by looking bored or condescending while they're speaking. Even if you think the question is imbecilic, look fascinated. Shower each questioner with attention. Give full eye contact. Lean forward. Show that your most important priority is listening to the question. Nothing is more insulting or dispiriting than a presenter who looks around the audience for the next question while the current question is being asked. And the questioner isn't the only one who gets offended. The whole audience picks up on it.





- ✓ **Don't attack the questioner.** No matter how offensive the question or questioner, stay calm and in control. Use diplomacy and finesse to dispose of such annoyances. If the questioner is a major jerk, the audience can see it. Don't become a jerk yourself by getting defensive. The questioner wants to provoke you. Don't take the bait. (See Chapter 12 for more on handling hecklers.)

Designing your answer

You never know exactly how to answer until you hear the question, but I do have some general guidelines to help you prepare:

- ✓ **Do keep it brief.** Your answer should be a simple, succinct response to the question asked. Too many presenters use their answer as an excuse to give a second talk. Give everyone a break. If the audience wanted an encore, it would have asked for one. And remember, many members of the audience may not even be interested in the question you're answering. They're waiting to hear the next question — or to ask one.
- ✓ **Do refer back to your presentation.** Tying your answers back to your presentation reinforces the points you made earlier. This tactic also makes you seem omniscient. (You somehow foresaw these questions and planted the seeds of their answers in your presentation.)
- ✓ **Do refer to your experience.** You're not bragging when you make referrals to your personal and professional experience in your answer. That experience is one of the reasons you've been invited to give a presentation and is part of what makes you an expert. The audience *wants* to hear about your experience.
- ✓ **Don't assume that you know the question.** Unless the questioners are rambling or need help, let them finish asking their questions. Too many presenters jump in before the question is fully stated. They *think* they know what the question is and start giving an answer. They look foolish when the questioner interrupts, saying, "That's not what I was asking."
- ✓ **Don't let the questioner define your position.** An alarm should go off when you hear a questioner say something like "Well, based on your presentation, it's obvious that you think . . ." Typically, what the questioner says that you think *isn't* what you think at all. Don't let anyone put words in your mouth. If this occurs, address the problem immediately — as soon as the questioner finishes asking the question. Point out the misconception contained in the question, and then firmly state your actual position.
- ✓ **Don't get locked into the questioner's facts or premises.** If the questioner makes assumptions with which you disagree, politely say so. If you dispute the questioner's statistics, say so. Don't build a nice answer on a faulty question. Start by dismantling the question.



- ✔ **Don't make promises you won't keep.** Don't say that anyone can call you at your office to ask questions if you know you won't take their calls. Don't say you'll find out the answer to a question if you know you won't. Don't offer to send information to someone if you know you'll never get around to it.
- ✔ **Don't evade questions by acting like you're answering them.** You're not obligated to answer every question. (You're *really not* under interrogation, although it may sometimes seem that way.) But if you evade questions, you lose credibility. It looks like you're ducking the issues. If you don't want to answer a question, say so firmly and politely. State the reasons why, and move on to the next question. Reasons may include advice from a lawyer, the information is a trade secret, or the information is confidential.
- ✔ **Don't depend on being asked a particular question.** It may not get asked. And definitely don't leave important points out of your presentation because you want to save them for the Q&A session. You may never get a chance to raise them.

Delivering your answer

Having the perfect answer doesn't mean much if you can't deliver it effectively. But don't worry. The following simple rules ensure that your response will be — well, perfect:



- ✔ **Do be appropriate.** Match your demeanor to the substance of the question and your answer. If someone is confused, be understanding. If someone is blatantly offensive, be forceful and disapproving (without counterattacking). If someone is seeking information, be professorial. Never lose control of yourself. Never be discourteous.
- ✔ **Don't assume a new persona.** Many presenters undergo a transformation at the end of their talks. I call it the Cinderella effect. The presenter's brilliant, thoughtful, formal persona of the presentation is stripped away to reveal someone who is relieved to be done. It's like the clock struck 12, and the spell wore off. What happened to that confident expert who just delivered the presentation? All that's left is a glass slipper, which the presenter is rapidly putting in her mouth. The moral of this story is to stay in character. If you assume a new persona during the Q&A, you lose credibility. Which is the real you? Are you a chameleon? Was the confidence you showed during your talk fake?
- ✔ **Don't limit eye contact to the questioner.** Start by looking at the questioner, but as you give your answer, direct your eye contact to the entire audience. You're speaking to everyone — not just the questioner.

- ✓ **Don't be smug.** Smugness doesn't win any accolades from the audience, and it just creates a barrier. It can also backfire in a big way: The audience starts rooting for you to screw up. The first time you fumble an answer — even if you just misstate an insignificant detail — smugness comes back to haunt you.

Seizing Six Great Question-Handling Techniques

How do you become an expert in deftly fielding questions? Practice. Practice. Practice. Practice what? The following six basic techniques (some of which were provided by my old friend Dr. Barbara Howard, a Denver-based corporate facilitator) can help you build your question-handling skills.

Building a bridge

Watch a CEO evade a question in the following example. “Mr. Executive, are you going to increase the number of outside directors on your board’s compensation committee?” “Well, sir, you want to know if I’m going to increase the number of outside directors on the board’s compensation committee. What you’re really asking is how we can make the board more responsive to shareholders. Let me tell you about my 12-step plan for a new corporate ethics program . . .”



The CEO has built a bridge. He’s constructed a phrase that allows him to move from a question he wants to ignore to a topic he wants to address. In this case, the bridge is, “What you’re really asking is . . .” You can use lots of bridges of this sort:

“It makes much more sense to talk about . . .”

“The real issue is . . .”

“The essential question is . . .”

“What you should be asking is . . .”

“If you look at the big picture, your question becomes . . .”



A word of caution about using a bridge: Use it to move a short distance away from a question you dislike, rather than to evade it completely. You lose credibility when you evade a question. (Politicians don’t care because they have none to lose.) You have to give the appearance of at least attempting to answer.

Exposing a hidden agenda

Sometimes, a question contains a hidden (or not-so-hidden) agenda. It may be a loaded question. It may be some other type of trick question. It may be a question containing an accusation. (“How could anyone in good conscience possibly suggest cutting funds for the human resources department?”) No matter the method, the question has a “hook” in it. The questioner wants to provoke a certain answer so that he or she can argue with it. The question is just a setup for a fight.



Don't fall for this trap. Instead of launching into an answer, acknowledge your suspicions. Say something like “Wow, that one feels like it's got a hook in it. Tell me, what's your stake in this question? What's of interest to you in it?” This forces questioners to put their agenda on the table. Then you can deal with it in a straightforward manner.

Other responses that work well for this type of question include the following:

“Do you have some thoughts on that?”

“It sounds like you're expecting me to give you a certain answer. What is it you're trying to get me to say?”

The point is to expose the hidden agenda politely, and get the questioner to speak about it first.

Putting the question in context

“Isn't it true that you were in the boardroom the night the chairman was found there stabbed to death?” This is known as a loaded question. It's framed in a way that makes the audience members jump to very specific conclusions that make you look bad. Your response has to broaden their frames of reference. You have to provide the missing information that “unloads” the question. “Well, yes, as the company's chief janitor, I did go to the boardroom a few hours after the chairman died and the police were finished, so I could clean up the mess. That's why I was in the boardroom the night he was stabbed to death.” The meaning of any words or behaviors can be distorted if they're taken out of context. It's up to you to give a context to any question that needs one.

Redirecting the question

Someone asks a question. You don't have the vaguest idea how to answer it. What can you do? Get the audience involved. Redirect the question to the entire group. “That's an interesting question about the industry's long-term

direction. Does anyone have any thoughts on the subject?” or, “Does anyone have any experience with testifying in a wrongful-termination lawsuit?”



If you can't respond to a question, admit that you don't know, and encourage someone in your audience to answer it. The audience is a tremendous resource — a veritable repository of knowledge. Take advantage of it.



If you know that someone in your audience is particularly well qualified to answer a question, find out if that person is willing to weigh in on the matter. For example, you get a question about what fees are due an employment agency if you want to offer a permanent job to a temporary worker. You may say, “Well, Sheila, our HR guru, is sitting right here. Can you help us out?”

Rephrasing the question

“Last week's indictment of your chief lobbyist for bribing a senator has finally revealed how your parasitic company got federal approval for a drug that's already killed 200 people. Will you now issue a recall to remove it from the market?” Hmmm. Are you really supposed to repeat this question for the audience? I don't think so. In fact, you never want to repeat a question that presents a problem — doing so is embarrassing, difficult, hard to follow, and a bad idea. Here's the solution: Don't repeat the question word for word. Rephrase it to your advantage. “The question is about how we plan to convert our concern for public safety into action. Here are the steps we are taking to protect the public . . .”

Keep in mind that a question can be a problem just because it's too wordy. “In your opinion, will the actions of the Federal Reserve Board to control inflation through monetary policy, combined with global financial trends — particularly the devaluation of the Mexican peso — result in economic forces that validate or prove wrong the Wall Street bulls in the short term?” Huh? Rephrase the question so that the audience can understand it (assuming *you* can understand it). “The question is whether the stock market will go up or down in the next few months.”

Reversing the question

Someone in your audience may ask you a question for the express purpose of putting you on the spot. No sweat. Just reverse it. For example, the questioner makes a big show of appearing bored and asks, “What time are we going to take a break?” Don't get defensive. Just respond, “What time would you like to take a break?” It's mental judo. You use the weight of the questioner's own question against him.

Responding to Special Situations

Handling questions from the audience is a very delicate situation. You often need to take a firm hand, but you don't want to alienate your listeners. Use the following tips to handle common problem situations:

- ✓ **A questioner interrupts you while you're answering.** Stop talking, and let this boor finish what he's saying. Then say something like "Please wait until I've finished." Then complete your answer. If the person interrupts again, repeat the process. Don't get into a fight. If the interrupter continues, other members of the audience will eventually intercede on your behalf. (If they don't, then they don't deserve to hear your pearls of wisdom.)
- ✓ **Someone asks about something you covered in your presentation.** Don't say, "I already covered that in my presentation." Perhaps you did, but maybe you didn't cover it clearly. If the person asking the question missed the answer in your presentation, then others may have missed it too. And if it was important enough to include in your initial presentation, then you can spend time going over it again. So answer the question. Try explaining it a different way this time.
- ✓ **Someone asks a question that was already asked.** If your answer will take more than ten seconds, politely refuse to answer. Say something like "We've already addressed that question." This situation is completely different from getting a question about something covered in your presentation. Here, the audience member simply hasn't been paying attention. If you answer the question, you're being rude to the rest of the audience. You're wasting their time. Want to be nice? Offer to talk with the questioner individually after the Q&A session is over.
- ✓ **Someone asks a completely irrelevant question.** You can say that it's not germane to the discussion, and go on to the next questioner. You can give the questioner a chance to ask a relevant question, or you can use the question as a springboard to raise a topic you want to discuss.
- ✓ **Someone asks a completely disorganized question.** You have a couple of choices. You can ask the person to restate the question (not a good idea, because you'll probably get a question more disorganized than the first attempt). You can respond to part of the question (a part that you liked), or you can offer to talk with the person individually after the Q&A session is concluded.
- ✓ **Someone asks multiple questions.** You have a few options for handling this situation. You can tell the questioner that you can answer only one of the questions due to time constraints and fairness to other audience members. (Offer to answer the other questions later, after everyone else has had a turn to ask one.) You can answer all of the questions in the order asked, or you can answer all of them in an order you choose. (Exercise these last two options when you feel that answering the questions is to your advantage.)

- ✓ **Someone asks a long, rambling question.** If you see where the question is going, gently interrupt (citing time considerations), and pose the question concisely in your own words. Confirm that you've understood what the questioner wants to know. Then answer it. If you don't see where it's going, use the Larry King technique. Ask, "Can you state your question, please?"

Handling Tough Questions

Certain types of questions are designed to put you at a disadvantage. What follows are some tough questions you must be ready to identify and handle:

- ✓ **The yes-or-no question:** "Is your company going to form an alliance with the Okkie Corporation, yes or no?" Don't get trapped by this type of question. Unless you're under oath on a witness stand, you're not required to provide a yes-or-no answer. If the question requires a more complex answer, don't hesitate to say what needs to be said. "The formation of an alliance between our company and Okkie depends on a number of factors . . ." Does this kind of response evade the question? Not really. It evades *the form of the question* that the questioner is trying to force on you, but your answer does address the question.
- ✓ **The forced-choice question:** This is a close relative of the yes-or-no question. Here, the questioner wants to force you to choose between two alternatives, but you're not obligated to do so. Sometimes, both alternatives offered are bad. ("Does your plan omit security guards at company headquarters because they're too expensive or because you forgot to include them?" "Neither. I didn't include them because they're not needed.") Sometimes, you just don't want to choose between the alternatives. ("What is the main focus of your growth strategy — developing new products or cutting costs?" "Actually, we intend to do both of those and more. We will also be acquiring new products, expanding our sales force . . .")

The classic response to a forced-choice question is contained in an old joke. A senator is asked, "Are you for the war or against the war?" He replies, "Some of my friends are for it, and some of my friends are against it. I stand with my friends." (Of course, this response evades the question, but it was a senator answering.)

- ✓ **The hypothetical question:** What if . . . the product doesn't sell up to your expectations? . . . the board turns down your proposal? . . . pigs could fly? Don't get sucked into the morass of hypothetical questions. You've got enough real things to worry about. Just say something like "I don't anticipate that happening, so we'll cross that bridge if we come to it."

- ✓ **The top question:** Someone asks, “What are the top five challenges facing your industry?”, “Which will be the best ten fields for finding a job ten years from now?”, or “What are the three most useful features of your software?” Your answer will be “wrong” no matter what choices you make, because someone will argue about your selections. Here’s an easy fix for this problem: Any time you get this type of question, purge the number from your answer. “Well, we can debate all day about what the top five challenges are, but I can tell you that some of the major challenges facing the industry include . . . ”
- ✓ **The false-assumption question:** The classic example is “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?” The question assumes that you’ve been beating your wife. (And you may not even be married.) False assumptions can also include incorrect facts and statistics, as well as incorrect conclusions that the questioner has drawn from your talk. The solution: Point out the false assumption, and correct it immediately.
- ✓ **The implied question:** “The time frame you outlined for the product release just doesn’t seem like it will work.” This is a comment, not a question, but that’s okay. Many Q&A sessions begin with a request for questions *or comments*. In some cases — like this one — the comment will imply a question. It’s your job to flush it out. “It sounds like you really want to know how we’ll get the product fully tested in only two months. Here’s our plan . . . ”
- ✓ **The multipart question:** “Could you tell me if we’ll be receiving raises this year, and if not, why not, and if so, how big will they be?” Whoa. Slow down there, pardner. That’s what’s known as a multipart question. When you get one like this, divide it up, and answer one part at a time.

Handling Hostile Questions

One of the great fears facing many presenters is the prospect of dealing with hostile questions. Stop worrying. You can use tried-and-true techniques for handling this problem. In fact, a little planning can significantly reduce your chance of receiving these pesky questions.

Identifying hostile questions

Don’t put a chip on your shoulder and assume that anyone who disagrees with you is hostile. Even people who disagree can have legitimate questions. They don’t necessarily want to argue with you. They may just want information.



Also, don't assume that someone who asks pointed questions disagrees with you. The exact opposite may be true. Someone who agrees with you may ask a tough question, hoping that your answer can persuade others in the audience. So some of your toughest questions can come from your biggest allies. Don't assume that these audience members are hostile.

If someone asks you a trick question — that's hostile. "Have you stopped kicking back money to your customers yet?", "Do you still make your vendors pay bribes before you give them a contract?", or "Isn't this an amazing business achievement — for a woman?" It's safe to assume these questioners are out to get you.

Heading hostile questions off at the pass

The simplest way to handle hostile questions is to not get any. Unfortunately, I can't guarantee that you won't, but these techniques can help you minimize the number you do receive:

- ✓ **The inoculation:** Can you anticipate specific hostile questions that you may receive? Then raise them and answer them during your presentation. By beating your antagonists to the punch, you leave them with nothing to ask you.
- ✓ **The admission:** Admit at the outset of the Q&A session that you're not the world authority on everything. Set audience expectations properly about the extent and areas of your expertise. Tell the audience what you don't know. This helps defuse potential hostility and disappointment resulting from your inability to answer specific questions.
- ✓ **The revelation:** At the outset of the Q&A session, announce that the people who ask questions must begin by identifying themselves. They must reveal their name, company department, and anything else you want to require. Having to reveal this information is a major barrier to hostile questioners. They don't like losing the cloak of audience anonymity. Acting like a jerk, being hostile, or getting confrontational with the presenter is a lot easier if no one knows who you are.



Dealing with hostile questions

Receiving a hostile question is like being tossed a bomb. You need to know how to defuse it before it blows up in your face. Use the following tactics:

- ✓ **Empathize with the questioner.** Start by recognizing that the questioner is upset, and assert that you *understand* her point of view even if you don't agree with it. Make sure you communicate that you bear no personal animosity toward the questioner. Your disagreement is solely

about the issue in question. “I can see that you feel strongly about the new corporate logo, and I understand where you’re coming from. Let me give you a few more facts that may affect your opinion. . . .”

- ✓ **Establish common ground.** Find an area where you and the questioner can agree, and build your answer from there. “Then we agree that the budget will have to be limited to 75 percent of what we spent last year. We just differ on how to allocate the money. . . .” If you just can’t find any common ground, try this all-purpose (albeit somewhat lame) response that works for any hostile question: “Well, at least we agree that this is a controversial issue. . . .”
- ✓ **Put the question in neutral.** If you get a question loaded with emotionally charged words or phrases, rephrase the question in neutral terms. (See “Rephrasing the question,” earlier in this chapter.)
- ✓ **Be very specific.** Talk about specific facts and figures. Be concrete. The more you get into theory, speculation, and opinion, the more opportunity you provide for disagreement. You want to limit the opportunities for arguments.
- ✓ **Ask why they’re asking.** What if you’re on the receiving end of a loaded question or any other blatantly hostile query? Don’t even bother giving an answer. Just ask, “Why did you ask that?” This can go a long way toward defusing the situation. The questioner, often embarrassed that you spotted the trap, may withdraw or modify the question. (See “Exposing a hidden agenda,” earlier in this chapter.)
- ✓ **Elude the jerks.** Don’t allow continued follow-up questions from people who just want to interrogate you in a hostile manner. (Unless they’ve got a badge.) You should be giving everyone in the audience a chance to ask questions. And if you’re going to let one person dominate (which you shouldn’t), why on earth would you give this opportunity to a hostile questioner? If you want to go one-on-one with someone, do it one-on-one — after the Q&A session is concluded.

Persuading a Silent Audience to Ask Questions

Every question-and-answer session requires one item: questions. If you make a big deal of asking for questions and no one responds, it seems like you’ve somehow failed. You can use these tips to eliminate this problem:

- ✓ **Plant a question.** Arrange in advance for someone in the audience to ask you a question. (Just make sure it’s someone you can trust.) Or go all out and plant several people throughout the audience. (For maximum impact, don’t tell them about one another.)

- ✓ **Ask yourself a question.** No one wants to break the ice? Break it yourself. “When I talk about this topic, the one thing everyone usually wants to know is . . .”

- ✓ **Ask a question you were asked privately by an audience member.** If you get to the site of your presentation well in advance of your talk (as you should), you may get to speak with members of your audience — the early arrivers. And you’ll certainly touch base with the person responsible for your presentation. During these conversations, you may receive questions about your topic. Just because they’re asked before you speak doesn’t mean they can’t be used after. “When I arrived here today, I had an opportunity to meet some of you and chat a little bit. And someone asked me . . .”



- ✓ **Solicit written questions in advance.** Want to guarantee that you get questions? Arrange for the audience to submit written questions before you start giving your presentation. This arrangement has several benefits. Audience members who are uncomfortable asking a question in public have no problem submitting anonymous questions. Also, you get to pick the questions that you want to answer. And you can “submit” your own questions (and act like they came from the audience).



If you’re presenting within your own company or organization, ask potential audience members to submit advance questions by e-mail. If you’re presenting to a group from various organizations, ask audience members to write and submit advance questions while they’re waiting for your presentation to begin.

- ✓ **Ask the audience a question.** Involve the audience in the question process in a nonthreatening way. Ask a survey-type question that can be answered with a show of hands. Then use the response to generate a discussion. “By a show of hands, how many of you think the mainframe computer will become a commodity item in the next ten years?”
- ✓ **Offer to take questions privately.** Sometimes, a lack of questions stems from the nature of your topic. If you’re dealing with a sensitive issue — layoffs, personnel matters, workplace harassment, and so on — don’t expect people to discuss their questions and concerns in public.