

Question & Waffle



Should you answer the question, or fill in time with waffle?

At a networking event recently, I found myself enthralled as I listened to a renowned author and speaker talk about effective communication. The content and finesse and effortlessness of her delivery, and the ease with which she was able to intertwine her key messages with stories from her own life, gave me goose bumps.

“Finally...” I thought to myself *“I have found a compelling female role model in my field who has mastered the art of communication”*. I proceeded to listen diligently as she expounded on the basics of storytelling and the different techniques of structuring your content.

Being a communication adviser, I found myself analysing her voice and visual communication style. I noticed her hand gestures, the changes in her facial expressions and how they aligned seamlessly to add more impact to the message she was conveying.

While mentally processing all these pieces of information, I heard her announce the title of her next session: *“Handling Difficult Questions”*. *“Just what I need!”* I thought. Leaning forward in my chair and turning to a fresh page in my notebook, I was ready! I was going to learn her approach to advising her clients on dealing with that prickly topic: handling difficult questions.

She opened this next session by using politicians as a good reference group of how to handle challenging questions. She elegantly proceeded to explain how tough questions can be handled without actually answering the question. *“Discuss the question and make sure to waffle on and on. You know, just like politicians do”* she said.

“Really?! What a disappointment!” I thought. My admiration for this lady began to wear off rather quickly. This wasn't what I had expected to hear. No offence to politicians, but the 'political waffle' was a no go for me. No, Nee!¹



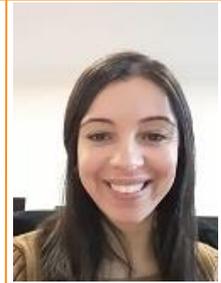
The Ostrich approach to questions!

Just imagine if we started answering questions in our day-to-day business life the way our politicians do. Imagine your frustration and disappointment while your supplier or client is dodging or evading your questions. Feel your irritation build up like a pressure cooker while they needlessly divert your attention and transform a potentially meaningful conversation into a pointless and insignificant one.

Evading questions in this manner will put your credibility and integrity on the line and pave the way for the creation of a business culture tainted by distrust and contempt. It is no wonder that British government ministers and politicians are amongst the least trusted people in our society².

I understand that dealing with difficult questions might often feel like an emotionally draining hide and seek game, especially when the questioner's intention is to test your knowledge or put you under pressure. However, as a presenter, speaker or interviewee, you have the advantage of being able to brainstorm a list of questions that might be potentially nerve-racking and prepare clear and concise answers in advance.

Continued on page 4



Hasnae Kerach

Advice squeezed straight from the experts



1. 'Nee' is the Dutch for 'no'.

2. Ipsos MORI Veracity Index November 2017

There are, however, unpredictable situations where the questions thrown at you are entirely out of the scope of your preparation. You are then confronted with challenging questions that you may or may not want to answer, or not be able to answer.

In our view, it is important to resist the temptation to jump in with unconsidered answers or aimless “political waffle”. In those agonising moments, the best thing to do is to actively listen to all parts of the question and then PAUSE. Pausing before answering a question is like a shield designed to protect you from saying something that you later wish you had not said.

This ‘thinking’ pause may be brief, but it should give you ample time to digest the question and to come up with your best possible, and most sincere answer. It also helps you recover your composure, regain control of the discussion, and be able to respond from the right mental and emotional state.

Before you move on to responding to the question, make sure you correct, clarify or paraphrase the question as needed. Answering questions shouldn’t be a guessing game. You need to make sure that you understand the question and that both you and your questioner are on the same page. Once you’ve started answering, it is best to be clear and brief, not wandering off topic. After all, one of the many functions of answering a question is to clear up misunderstandings around an issue.

You’ve probably heard the saying; *“In every challenge lies an opportunity”*. This applies to difficult questions too. When you have very clearly answered the primary question to the best of your ability, you’ve earned the right to ‘Bridge’. You now have the opportunity to expand the topic or highlight an angle that you deem relevant, helpful, informative or positive.

A question is a built-in instrument of communication. It is the initiation of an exchange of words and concepts that is

ultimately meant to clarify and reveal the truth of things. Unfortunately, you might sometimes be presented with a very hostile or impossible question. If you feel you have been asked a patently outrageous question, it is perfectly acceptable to express your dismay and block the question calmly and courteously, also informing the questioner why you’ve chosen not to respond.



It's OK to not know the answer

This article has provided you with a simple method to follow when answering a tough question and, unlike the speaker at the networking event I attended, I hope you are well aware of the negative consequences of “political waffle” on your credibility and authority as a professional.

Oftentimes, I hear clients and business owners wonder how to earn their stakeholders’ trust. I think that the question we need to pose instead is how to become so incredibly trustworthy that our clients and other relationships gravitate toward us. This might start with a well-crafted, honest answer to a difficult question.

By Hasnaê Kerach.

Advice *squeezed*
straight from the
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