

Mark

Many speakers find the unpredictability of question-and-answer sessions the most challenging part of presenting. But, properly managed, the Q&A is less of a challenge than an opportunity – an opportunity to spontaneously interact with your audience and address their needs and concerns on a more equal and personal level.

Now, the questions you are likely to be asked can be roughly divided into three categories – the good, the bad ... and the ugly. A good question is one that's worth asking and, just as importantly, one that you can answer! Make the most of this type of question and answer it fully. The more time you spend on good questions, the less time there'll be for bad ones!

A bad question is one that you can't, or would prefer not to, answer. If you genuinely don't know the answer, say so and offer to find out. Unless you really *should* know, this is a sign of confidence, not weakness. Alternatively, ask members of the audience what *they* think, or even throw the question back at the questioner. On the other hand, if you *do* know the answer, but it's confidential information, briefly explain why and move on.

Ugly questions come in many forms. Questions can sometimes be vague and unclear, so be sure to establish exactly what you're being asked before responding. Occasionally, people will ask you about things you've already answered or which seem to have no real connection with your talk. Deal with these swiftly but politely. And sometimes, you'll get several questions at once. If there's time, deal with these separately. If not, identify the most important question and just answer that.

Watch how this presenter fields questions from the audience and decide precisely what kind of questions you think she's just been asked. She's been presenting arguments in favour of a proposed initial public offering.

Presenter

Well, now, I think I may have partially answered this question earlier, but it's a good question and well worth asking again. Let me give you a bit more detail on that. Perhaps this slide will help ...

Yes, good point, good point. Well, let me say straight away that I will be explaining this later on ...

OK, I think I see what you're getting at, but could you just elaborate a little? I'm not sure if you're asking about raising capital or reducing debt here ...

Right, I think you've asked three related questions there because, in a way, they all concern the same thing, don't they, which is our plans for expansion. So let's look at those ...

Ah, yes, thanks for reminding me. I meant to say something about that earlier. Let's go back for a moment to the whole question of financing opportunities, shall we ...?

It's a great question. Unfortunately, I don't have a great answer! Perhaps you could rephrase it as something I'm able to respond to! Or maybe someone else can help me out here. Yeah, Leah ...

Interesting question. It sounds like you've already had some thoughts on this yourself. What is *your* position on convertible debt?

OK, now, I'll answer that in a moment, but can we just see how others feel about that first? Yes, Luis ...

I'm afraid we're not yet in a position to discuss an additional share issue, but I think you're right and it's certainly something we should add to the agenda for our next meeting ...

Mark

Of course, the hardest question of all to handle is the hostile question, where the questioner goes on the attack. And the secret here is to stay cool and carefully rephrase it in more neutral terms before answering. Allow a hostile questioner to come back at you with a follow-up question once, but no more. Never let them hijack your presentation.

Watch the following speaker. He has just presented some of the implications of a recent merger with a former competitor to the heads of his HR division. See how he deals with a certain amount of hostility.

Presenter

So, are there any questions you'd like to ask at this point?

Questioner 1

Erm, yes, going back for a moment to the question of profit growth post-merger, you've been quoting a figure of seventy to eighty percent! That's enormous! I'd really like to know how you justify such optimism ...

Presenter

OK, so you'd like to see a full set of figures to support that forecast?

Questioner 1

Well, yeah ...

Presenter

No problem. Have a look at this ...

Questioner 2

Yes, I have a question. You've just mentioned substantial cost savings, but earlier you were saying that there would very few redundancies during the integration phase. So where on earth are we supposed to make those savings? Surely, people *are* going to be losing their jobs?

Presenter

So you have some concerns about people whose function is going to be duplicated losing their jobs, is that right?

Questioner 2

Well, of course, I do!

Presenter

In that case, let me put your mind at rest straightaway ...

Questioner 3

Erm, I want to take you up on what you said about full integration taking six months. Do you honestly expect us to believe that the whole process is going to be completed in just two quarters?

Presenter

Uh-huh. So what you'd like to know is how we plan to accelerate our integration effort?

Questioner 3

Well, ... yes, ... I suppose so.

Presenter

That's a very good question. Let me talk you through the role of the MIT, the management integration team ...

Mark

One last thing. To be truly effective as a presenter, you must remain on-message throughout the Q&A. That means taking care not to digress too far from the key points you're trying to make. Whatever question you're asked, find a way of using your answer to reinforce what you've said in the main part of your presentation.

And unless your last answer does this job really well, make sure that after the Q&A you always have a second and memorable close.