

Feature presentation: How to prepare for Q-and-A sessions

By Sally Williamson

One of the best ways to get a sense of someone's style of communicating is to ask him about previous presentations. You'll understand the intended impact of a speaker's approach if he can tell you what he was trying to accomplish and how he reached his objective with an audience. You'll understand the result of someone's approach by asking him what questions the audience posed during and after the presentation.

While the presenter's input tells you how focused the planning was, the audience's questions tell you how effective the message was.

And it's a great coaching tool for managers. Ask for feedback after your group gives presentations and follow the format above. Balance how the presenter said he felt with what the audience asked. The two concepts together provide a fairly accurate read on the impact of the presentation.

As you can see from this scenario, the Q-and-A is critical to the success of a presentation. The Q-and-A gives the presenter a sense of the audience's reaction and take-away from the presentation. And, it gives the presenter the opportunity to respond to concerns or misconceptions that a group expresses. In fact, my firm, SW&A, coaches executives to "force" Q-and-A sessions if a group isn't forthcoming with inquiries. Often, internal politics may keep individuals quiet until the most senior person in the room has spoken.

You can jump-start a Q-and-A by asking your own questions too.

Examples:

- One question that I'm asked often is...
- Most groups want to know more about...

You can also engage the group by asking for feedback.

Examples:

- Of the ideas you've heard today, what do you think will be most effective in your organization?
- Are you concerned that any of the ideas will be ineffective?
- What concepts in the presentation best align with your objectives?
- If we move forward with these recom-

mendations, what would you like to see as the first priority?

While the Q-and-A is a critical part of a presentation, it takes practice and planning to respond to questions efficiently. Unfortunately, it's the most overlooked part of getting ready for presentations. A speaker can predict more than 75 percent of the queries from most audiences, and yet few presenters take the time to anticipate the questions and plan great responses.

Preparing and planning

Preparing for Q-and-A sessions involves two easy steps: anticipating the questions and planning the replies.

Prior to any presentation, write down 10 questions you think that the audience will ask. Consider the tough questions, not just the easy ones. Then, write out your responses to the questions using the format below.

To answer questions in the best manner, outline three parts to your response.

First, give a one-sentence answer. Be direct in answering the question up front. The first part of your answer will garner the most attention from your audience.

Second, expand the concept, if possible. Provide two to three additional sentences to support the original one-sentence answer.

Third, provide an example. Share an example of your initial point to help the audience buy into your reply.

The three-part response gives the speaker an opportunity to broaden the question and include the entire crowd in the expanded response and example. This also prevents one member of the audience from monopolizing the Q-and-A.

Planning answers in advance gives the presenter a chance to think through ideas and key messages relating to the topic. So, even if the exact question isn't asked, the presenter will have ideas and illustrations prepared that would cover a broad range of topical questions.

A Q-and-A plays an important role in the outcome of presentations. It is often the audience's last impression, and it is often a weakness for even the best orators. Before your next presentation, take the time to anticipate the questions and be prepared to handle them with confidence. **T**



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