



Mastering The Q&A Session

How to Get Off-Script & On-Target



By Frank Maselli



Running a great Q&A session is critical to your seminar success. It allows your audience to see you “thinking on your feet” and greatly enhances your credibility and professionalism.

Some advisors avoid the Q&A but that feels like cheating to me and it suggests that you are not truly an expert. I want my audience engaged and thinking. Questions are their right...not a privilege I deign to bestow. Plus it's a sign of confidence and professionalism. As an expert, there is nothing you can ask me that I can't answer intelligently. And if there is...then why am I doing the seminar in the first place?

So how do you prepare for and conduct a super Q&A? Here are a few ideas...

1. Play 20 Questions

Before the seminar, anticipate twenty (or more) questions that people might ask you. Formulate brief answers and practice them until you feel comfortable. You can even put the questions on flash cards and practice with colleagues or your spouse. This is fun and it gets multiple minds working on the answers.

Remember that live questions will not usually come in the exact form that you have practiced. For example, a questioner may combine two or three issues into one question. But having prepped in advance, you will be better prepared to handle any curve balls.

Be hard on yourself in practice. Ask yourself and answer the toughest, most probing questions you can think of. Not only will this give you extra confidence for the actual Q&A session, but it might make you re-think aspects of your presentation that could better clarify key points during the main seminar body.

2. State the Ground Rules

No law requires you to answer every question at the seminar. Suggest to the audience that there are certain types of questions that are best handled in private. For example,

- *detailed questions about a individual's specific needs or portfolio holdings*
- *a complex, detailed question that would take longer than two minutes to answer intelligently*
- *trivia questions that may have little interest to the majority of the audience*
- *argumentative questions that could draw you into a debate or a fight.*

Tell them in advance that you want to try to stay on the topic. Most of the times this will not be a problem, but by stating the rules clearly up front it allows you to sidestep the quicksand and keep control of the process.

3. Re-phrase the question

Some folks may not have heard the question, but this also gives you a few seconds to clarify your thoughts and come up with an intelligent answer. It also shows you are listening and not knee-jerk reacting to what you *think* the questioner asked.

Note that re-phrasing is different from re-stating the question. This is not a direct play-back of what the questioner asked. Instead it's a slight variation that will allow you to make alterations in the tone, focus, depth, or scope of the question as needed to answer it and still be interesting to the audience.

4. Keep your answers short

Sixty to ninety seconds is all you should need to handle a typical question. Longer than that and you are back into the body of the seminar.

The audience has a certain subliminal expectation when it comes to the Q&A session. They know that the event is almost over and they will get very anxious if they think you are going to launch into a twenty-minute rehash of the presentation.

Also, long-winded answers tend to shut down the flow of questions. People might be sitting there with a good question thinking, “Oh lord we're going to be here all night. I'd better just keep quiet.” That's not what you want.

5. Spread the love around

Try to involve as many people as you can rather than sticking to one or two individuals. Never let someone monopolize the Q&A. If someone is brimming over with a dozen questions, encourage them to come in for a private session where you can focus on their issues.

6. Watch out for snipers

A sniper does not want an answer; they want to shoot you down and make themselves look good in the process. You can't allow a sniper to take control of your audience during the Q&A session so be prepared to shut them down first with a little humor, “*Did you stop taking your medication again?*” and then with a more direct approach if needed, “*I have no idea what your agenda is...so see me after class!*”

This may seem harsh, but if you've ever been under sniper fire you know what I'm talking about. This is a dangerous adversary who could cost you tens of thousands of dollars in twenty seconds. Granted it doesn't happen too often but best to be on guard.

7. Relax and have fun

The Q&A session is a chance for you to truly shine by demonstrating the depth of your knowledge and your intense passion for the subject. A true professional welcomes questions and loves helping people...so let that enthusiasm show through.

The total length of a good Q&A session can vary but if the question flow is strong...15 minutes would be fine. That makes my overall seminar 60 minutes. And remember, you never end the seminar on the Q&A. You still have your appointment close and finally your emotional seminar close.

Best of luck!

Frank

