

# Does Anybody Have Any Questions for My Answers?

The 411 on Q&A



Ed Barks

**Does Anybody Have Any Questions for My Answers? The 411 on Q&A**  
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**It happens every hour of every day.** Smart, business-savvy executives answer questions from reporters, public officials, and audiences of various stripes and sizes.

Few, however, devote sufficient thought to what they must do to properly manage their responses.

We are taught from an early age to reply literally. After all, there must be one single, correct, precise answer to every question, right? Well...no.

It's true that most of us go through life serving up unembellished responses. Straightforward is fine in most casual conversations. But in a professional, public setting, this can lead to disaster and damage to your personal or organizational reputation.

Fear not. Hope exists in the form of techniques you can use to prepare and protect yourself, manage your responses to keep things from careening out of control, and disseminate your message in a positive light.

The fact is most people in positions of authority dislike [fielding questions](#). They may even appear defensive, for it makes them feel less in control. When executives learn that there are ways to deal with questions on a [message-driven basis](#), it is often like introducing them to a whole new world. This is evidenced by some of the reactions I hear during [communications training workshops](#) and during speeches where we discuss effective Q&A management:

- That technique to ensure I stay on message when answering questions from the audience will really help settle my nerves.
- I can see why this approach really works when fielding questions from colleagues, clients...in just about every type of business meeting.
- I never realized I had so much control over how I responded to questions.
- I can't wait to use your system the next time I talk to a reporter.

### **How Often Do We Deal with Q&A?**

When you stop to think about it, much of our day-to-day conversations revolve around questions and answers. Our days begin with, "What do you want for breakfast?" and end with "What time should we set the alarm for tomorrow morning?" Questions like these have literal, often mundane answers.

## Communications Strategy and Training

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- **Media training**
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- **Message development**
- **Q&A management**

Ed's four books can also help set you on the right path

This paper examines what we do after we leave the house — either physically or via video — and don our professional façades, with the focus on exchanges with reporters, audiences, lawmakers, and regulators.

It is important to realize that Q&A with peers, clients, co-workers, and business prospects is much the same as handling questions from reporters. Managing responses should add to clarity and consistency of message, providing an added opportunity to convey your viewpoint.

When addressing assorted audiences, most speakers at some point engage in Q&A. Yet how many times have you witnessed a presenter deliver a top-notch speech, only to fall apart when dealing with questions because they had no idea how to direct the proceedings?

This happens not only during formal presentations. The same shortfall is also found in smaller, less structured groups, such as chalk talks to a small group of co-workers in your conference room and one-on-one meetings with direct reports and other colleagues.

Of course, skill in answering questions is crucial during media opportunities, be they live television interviews, telephone Q&As with print reporters, or email exchanges with reputable bloggers.

### *What Tools Help You Deal with Tough Questions?*

It is essential that you manage the direction of the conversation when interacting with reporters, audiences, and public officials — in fact, in any professional exchange. Otherwise, you run the risk of wandering aimlessly or, worse yet, revealing confidential or damaging information. Additionally, when you manage the conversation, it ensures that you stay on track and keeps you on your desired message path.

I should emphasize that you must treat each question with respect. We are not talking about “spin”, a tactic for losers who simply ignore questions and try to bully their way through. Skilled spokespeople strike a balance between meeting their organization’s needs and those of the questioner.

Certainly, you never want to lie. Although this shameful technique has become de rigueur in some quarters, honest, principled spokespeople never fib. Beyond the ethical considerations (and, one would hope, your moral compass), lying means that you lose your credibility forever.

Success comes more readily when you strive to internalize and implement strategies such as “**bridging**,” whereby you build a verbal bridge to your response by acknowledging the query, using a bridging phrase like, “What’s important to recognize is…” then moving straight to your message.

Let me give you an example. If, during a speech, an audience member told me they prefer to answer questions literally, I might respond as follows:

- **The acknowledgement:** “I understand that is how we tend to deal with everyday conversations.”
- **The bridging phrase:** “Let’s look at the big picture.”
- **The message:** “My goal is to respect my audience at every turn. You came here today to discover how to sharpen your presentation skills. Responding with the highlight of my message keeps me on track to fulfilling my end of that bargain.”

Bridging takes some practice since it is a new style of communication for many people, so be sure to practice the technique before your next Q&A encounter (for more information on bridging, see the books [\*The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations\*](#) and [\*Reporters Don’t Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies\*](#)).

Another useful technique is known as “**deflection**,” in which you essentially put up a verbal stop sign to questions that are overtly hostile. Begin your response with a phrase like “As a matter of fact” or “The truth is.” Once you’ve issued that direction, move directly and quickly to your message. No hemming and hawing. No apologies.

Another device, the “**sneak peek**,” allows you to give your questioner a glimpse around the corner, guiding them down the road you want to travel. At the end of a reply, drop a trail of bread crumbs with a phrase such as “And there’s more to that story” or “I can offer up loads of examples.” This method raises the odds of questioners asking you to tell them more about your message.

We all have been faced at one time or another with a question we cannot answer. Perhaps it strays from your area of expertise, you haven't committed a certain detail to memory, or you simply suffer from temporary brain lock. It happens. You cannot be expected to have every factoid at the tip of your tongue. In instances like this, explain that you do not have that bit of information readily at hand and that you will get the specifics to your questioner soon. Then, segue right into the portion of your message that best addresses that general topic. This latter move helps you keep the conversation moving in your direction as much as possible.

### **How Is Q&A Different in Remote Situations?**

I've been hammering home this point since the beginning of the pandemic: The only significant difference between in person and remote exchanges is the technology. The principles remain the same —the need to emphasize your message in response to every question, the use of techniques like bridging and sneak peeks, and preparing diligently for the Q&A portion of your talk or interview.

Much like you have the power to decide whether to accept audience questions verbally or in writing when you appear in person, you also have this choice during remote presentations. Assuming you have someone managing the technical aspects when you speak on Zoom, Teams, or other such services, let them know if you prefer that attendees unmute their microphones to pose questions or submit inquiries in the chat box. There's no right or wrong here. The choice is yours, so opt for whatever best suits the occasion and your style.

If you decide to take questions through the chat window, task someone else with combing through them and asking you the most pertinent ones. Speakers should not be burdened reading from the chat stream. You've got plenty of other business on which to keep tabs.

### **What Benefits Do You Earn When Managing Responses?**

It is important to recognize that your audience or conversation partner benefits when you manage your responses. It keeps them engaged and interested in the subject at hand when you work to keep things on track. This is an important factor, for it gives your audience the information they bargained for when they decided to attend your presentation, or gives the reporter the information they seek from you.

Yes, you enter into an agreement when you engage in a public forum — an agreement that you will stick to the agreed-upon topic. Fail to do that and your remarks will sink into oblivion. Think back to the times you have been in the audience when a renegade questioner succeeded in pushing the speaker into a meaningless exchange. You



probably were not thrilled. Rest assured, neither were your fellow audience members (to say nothing of the speaker).

Of course, dealing skillfully with questions also benefits you. It demonstrates you have what it takes to handle the heat in the hottest kitchen. It serves to raise your professional profile, enhance your reputation, and help your organization attain the goals you are working to achieve. Here, we are not talking solely about your communications goals, but speaking more broadly about how effective communications helps you achieve your business and public policy goals.

Successful [management of Q&A](#) also helps you avoid that deer in the headlights look that we all have witnessed when unskilled spokespeople are hit with tough questions from audience members or reporters.

### ***How Can You Maintain Control and Stick to Your Message?***

Your job in any professional conversation is to respond to every question with the portion of your message that best applies.

This is not a poolside chat. You are working to advance an agenda. It is up to you to keep the conversation gliding along your desired track. Others may try to pull you off track either intentionally or unintentionally. You must be prepared to play that game of tug-of-war, diplomatically guiding the conversation back to where you want it.

Part of your advance preparation prior to any presentation should involve anticipating questions that might crop up. Addressing those issues in your remarks precludes the need for someone to ask about them, giving you greater control over the session and taking the wind out of the questioner's sails.

Anticipating potential questions helps in another way, too. Some executives begin to feel overwhelmed by Q&A, nervously trying to think of precise answers for all the

For a more in depth treatment of Q&A strategy and techniques,  
read Ed's book,  
[\*The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations\*](#)  
Chapter Eight, "Turning Questions into Answers"

questions they might confront. Try this method instead: As you prepare for your Q&A exchange, begin to sort each question into the proper “issue basket.”

Let me explain the issue basket. No matter how complex your area of expertise, there are probably four central issues you deal with in any given Q&A situation (if you find yourself unable to narrow it down to that number, consult with a communications expert skilled in [message development](#) to help you refine your approach). Then decide which portion of your message best addresses each issue basket.

This frees your mind from trying to instantly recall answers to potentially dozens of highly nuanced questions. After all, research shows we can hold on to four thoughts in short-term memory. As you are listening to the question, mentally toss it into the appropriate issue basket and respond with the portion of your message that, during your preparations, you deemed most suitable.

Doesn't this put Q&A in a different, more straightforward light? Sorting queries into issue baskets gives you the wherewithal to address questions directly while not trying to fit what you have to say into canned responses. These techniques are designed to make you sound more engaging (and human), not like an automaton.

### ***How Can You Anticipate Tough Questions?***

The number one strategy for effectively managing your responses is to prepare and practice, as is the case generally with public speaking, media interviews, [advocacy](#) on Capitol Hill or before a regulatory agency, and in one-on-one dealings with policymakers.

Make a list of all questions that might arise, then sort them into your issue baskets. From a strategic viewpoint, it is also useful to divide the questions into three types:

1. Questions you expect to hear in nearly every encounter. You should have ready responses for these.
2. Positive questions that you want to hear. Find a way to suggest these questions to reporters, lawmakers, or an audience member in advance.
3. Questions you never want to hear pass your questioner's lips. This is where you earn your stripes by bridging and deflecting.

It is also wise to anticipate the various devices reporters and others might use to distract you or throw you off balance — techniques such as interruptions, rapid fire questions, hypotheticals, and planting words in your mouth. You'll find more specifics on how to deal with these approaches in [Reporters Don't Hate You](#).



## *How Does Managing Q&A Lead to Success?*

The success of your career, your organization's long-range goals, and the causes you hold dear depend on your ability to persuade and inform.

The reality is you will rarely get an unfiltered chance to deliver your message. Q&A is a fact of life, so you had best be prepared to respond in a way that advances your chosen message.

In every business deal from this point forward — whether it's a [media interview](#), [presentation](#), internal meeting, client conference, or [legislative exchange](#) — plan in advance how you want to manage your responses. Next, commit to using the strategies we've covered here to muster the discipline to stick to your message when faced with even the toughest questions:

- Recognize that professional exchanges call for you to manage your responses effectively
- Practice bridging, deflection, and sneak peeks
- Anticipate potential questions
- Sort those questions into your issue baskets
- Rehearse Q&A with your advisors

Leave behind the tired, ineffective way of answering questions. Assert control and steer the conversation more in your direction. Managing your responses is vital to good health for your career and for your organization.

## About Ed Barks

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Ed Barks is a business author and communications strategy consultant. His corporate and association clients hire him to provide them with the messages and everyday communications skills their executives need.

He shows them how to gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, added opportunities for career advancement, and realization of long-term business and public policy goals.

Ed is the author of [four books for communications and government relations experts](#), and for executives who represent the public face of their companies:



- *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator: How to Master Meetings, Presentations, Interviews, and Advocacy*
- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Clients who turn to him for strategic advice say he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his counsel “two thumbs up!”

As President of Barks Communications since its founding in 1997, Ed has guided more than 5500 business leaders, association executives, thought leaders, and communications and government relations professionals toward a sharper message and enhanced communications skills.

He is also the founder and community leader of the [C-suite Blueprint blog](#).

Keep up with the latest from Ed by [joining his Communications Community](#). Join now and **get Ed's latest book with his compliments.**

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