



Tough Questions

Learning To Hear & Respond To Reporters' Most Challenging Interview Demands

A TMT
eBook



Insider knowledge from both sides of the story



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Getting Comfortable With Uncomfortable Questions

A reporter's job is to elicit newsworthy information. And sometimes, that means asking questions that will provoke a response rather than merely generate an answer.

Let's give reporters the benefit of the doubt. In most interview situations most of the questions you receive will be straightforward attempts to understand you, your organization and your story. But there can be times when the questioning becomes negative, even malicious. That's when you need both tact and skill to remain cool and unflustered while you find opportunities to reach out to your audiences with the messages important to your organization.

You may well ask why reporters have to rely on such "tough" questions at all. Can't they get the information they need to write a news or feature story without trying to trip up an interview subject? Unfortunately, the answer is no, they can't. But the reason they can't doesn't necessarily mean that any reporter posing a challenging question is attempting to be intentionally deceitful. Of course, there are deceitful reporters out there, reporters who use such tactics routinely. But, by and large, reporters see such questions simply as tools of their trade.

A reporter's job, as he or she sees it, is not to make you feel comfortable and secure. Instead, a reporter's job is to elicit newsworthy information. And sometimes, that means asking questions that will provoke a response rather than merely generate an answer.



Often, what a reporter learns about you and your organization must come directly from you, sometimes from a single interview.

There's another important reason some reporters may resort to provocative or tough questions: They simply don't know any other way to ask. They don't know enough about you or your organization to phrase the question in a way that will make you comfortable. A common myth about reporters is that they all do painstaking, detailed research on every story and interview subject they encounter. Hollywood blockbuster movies to the contrary, few reporters have the luxury of doing in-depth reporting, let alone in-depth research.

For most reporters, but particularly those in broadcast news, there is little opportunity to do detailed research. Often, what that reporter learns about you and your organization must come directly from you, sometimes from a single interview. As a result, without even realizing they're being particularly tough or tricky, reporters fall back on those really demanding, provocative questions, the ones they feel will get them the most results in the shortest possible time.

Not that we should give reporters a free pass to be irritating, abrasive, abusive and socially unacceptable. We don't have to let them off that easy. But as interview subjects, we owe it to our organizations and our audiences to understand what drives reporters, why they act the way they do.




We shouldn't expect them to fully understand us. But if we are genuinely interested in using the news media to help our company improve its image, sell products, survive a crisis, or any of a number of other goals, then making the effort to understand reporters is time and effort well spent.

***No matter what
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or level of knowledge
of the subject matter,
the real content
of the story
is in your answers***

Here's one further thought that can help keep you on track in even the toughest interview: Your answers are usually more important (to the story) than the reporter's questions.

No matter what the reporter's intention or level of knowledge of the subject matter, the real content of the story is in your answers. Reporters can't use what you don't give them. But any information you do provide is fair game. So if you simply follow a reporter's lead during an interview, you will likely be unhappy with the results. Listen intently to a reporter's questions, but know that the resulting story will be shaped more by how you answer than by how the reporter phrases questions.

If you have your own agenda, your own clear, well-defined messages, and if you are intent on delivering those messages to your audiences, you'll be much better satisfied with your performance in almost any news interview.



Your job in a news interview is to deliver messages on behalf of your organization.

Preparing for Tough Questions


It may help to think of answers to these “tricky” questions in the same way you think about your taxes. Avoiding unnecessary taxes is not only legal, but is encouraged by any realistic financial planner. Evading taxes that you legitimately owe, however, is illegal.

Never evade questions. If the answer is unpleasant, but necessary, you'll always be better off by dealing with it sooner than later. But you should always avoid answering questions that are unnecessary, outside the scope of the interview, irrelevant and pointedly negative.

Rather than “buying into” these questions or the way they are asked, you should pose your answers in a way that communicates one or more of the messages your audience needs to hear.

Remember that questions are the domain of the reporter. Your job in any interview is not to critique the questions, or even to make judgments about the way those questions are delivered. Reacting in that way serves only to engage your emotions, particularly your negative emotions toward the reporter and his or her profession.

Instead, your job in a news interview is to deliver messages on behalf of your organization - messages that will help your organization's audiences better understand you, your organization and your issues.



For any tough news interview, the most crucial skill is your ability to listen.

In any news interview, you should be more focused on reaching and being persuasive with your ultimate audiences than you are on evaluating the reporter's questions. So, preparing yourself for a news interview means focusing on your own messages, your own agenda, and refusing to react based on emotions, even if the reporter attempts to provoke such a response.

The real "trick" to answering so-called trick questions isn't about being cagey or pithy in your responses. For any tough news interview, the most crucial skill is your ability to listen. With just a little bit of practice, you can learn to hear questions differently than you now hear them.

When you are expecting tough questions from a reporter you become sensitive to the forms those questions take. Often, you can identify them by type or form even before the reporter is finished asking the question. When you've trained your ear to hear such questions as they are being formed, you gain an immeasurable amount of control over a news interview. You begin to hear tough or tricky questions, not as a challenge, but as a springboard to your own messages.

There are still other benefits. First, knowing the forms these questions take provides you more time to consider your answer. It may be only a few seconds, but frequently, that's all you need to frame an



By thinking of your messages in terms of sound bites you force yourself to reduce your messages to the most succinct, crystal-clear statements possible.

answer that really reaches your audiences rather than merely reacts to the reporter. Often, simply knowing the nature of a question allows you to select the most effective message to deliver. Secondly, you perform better in the interview by better controlling yourself, your own emotions. If you are anticipating tough or tricky questions and you're already familiar with the forms they take, you're better able to relax in the interview and dismiss any emotional reaction the question might attempt to provoke.

A Word About Sound Bites

These days it's popular to criticize the news media—and its product—over the use of sound bites. The argument against sound bites is that the news media cheapens the public discussion of important issues by attempting to reduce those issues to a few brief words or phrases that will fit on the evening news.

Maybe there is merit to the argument, but a news interview is no place to try and prove the point. Save that argument for another place and time.

Instead, think of sound bites as a discipline to help you clarify what you want to say. By thinking of your messages in terms of sound bites you force yourself to reduce your messages to the most succinct, crystal-clear statements possible.



A well-crafted and well-delivered sound bite is one of the best tools you have for influencing the flow of an interview.

These are statements that can be understood by anyone, even if they are not familiar with you, your organization, your industry or your issues. No doubt, you work very hard at making your products and services completely understandable to your customers. Apply that same discipline to the messages you need to deliver during an interview. Approach your messages that way and what you come up with are sound bites.

Further, don't trap yourself into believing that just because you are doing a news interview, you are limited to delivering sound bites. A good sound bite is just a starting point for your answer to a reporter's question. After you've delivered a sound bite, you are free to add as much detail and explanation as is needed or that the reporter will listen to (whichever comes first).

In fact, a well-crafted and well-delivered sound bite is one of the best tools you have for influencing the flow of an interview. A really good sound bite will intrigue a reporter. It will prompt the reporter to ask follow-up questions about what you've just said, giving you the opportunity to provide whatever detail and explanation are necessary.

When that happens, you are in control of the interview. You are determining the subject matter to be discussed. Your agenda is driv-



ing the interview and positively influencing the story.

Tough Questions: Eight Basic Forms

Tough questions can take many forms. Often, several forms can be combined into a single question, making the process of answering even trickier. We've identified the eight basic forms of difficult questions often posed in news media interviews. These are based on numerous interviews we have either conducted or given.

Several forms can be combined into a single question, making the process of answering even trickier.

The eight basic forms of tough questions are:

- The Built-In Premise
- The Pregnant Pause
- Multiple Questions
- The Interrupted Answer
- Negative Questions
- Third-Party Questions
- Speculative Questions
- Personal Opinion Questions



On the following pages you'll find descriptions of these difficult interview questions, along with an analysis of just what makes them difficult to answer. You'll also find clear, direct, easy-to-learn and easy-to-use guidelines for handling each of the eight categories of difficult questions.

If your organization has made mistakes that now have become public, your best course is to publicly own up to your actions.

Realistic Expectations

One final thought before we begin; Minimizing damage to your organization is a legitimate goal, but expert handling of difficult questions will not turn a bad situation into good one. So, be realistic in your expectations about the outcome of any interview.

Guidelines for handling difficult interview questions are not intended to help an organization gloss over bad behavior or whitewash a negative situation. If your organization has made mistakes that now have become public, your best course is to publicly own up to your actions.



The Built-In Premise

*For the unprepared
or untrained
interview subject,
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trickiest of all
the tough questions.*

Questions with a built-in premise are probably the most well known among the tough questions reporters may pose. It's cliché, but the time-honored "Are you still beating your spouse?" question remains the best example. For the unprepared or untrained interview subject, this can be the trickiest of all the tough questions because there appears to be no way to answer without condemning yourself. Here's an example:

REPORTER: ARE YOU GOING TO CHANGE COMPANY POLICY TO PROVIDE ADEQUATE HEALTH CARE BENEFITS FOR YOUR EMPLOYEES?

Consider how this question is constructed. Typically, the built-in premise question has two parts: the premise itself (your company is providing employees with inadequate health care benefits), which is an assumption that may be true or false, positive or negative; Second is the actual question, which usually is stated as a closed-ended interrogative (it seems to require that you answer with either "yes" or "no.")

This structure requires that you do a great deal of mental processing before responding. You must: 1) Identify the premise; 2) Determine if it is true or false, positive or negative; 3) Search your mental data banks for the key message most closely associated with this assumption; and 4) Overcome the natural inclination to blurt out a "yes" or



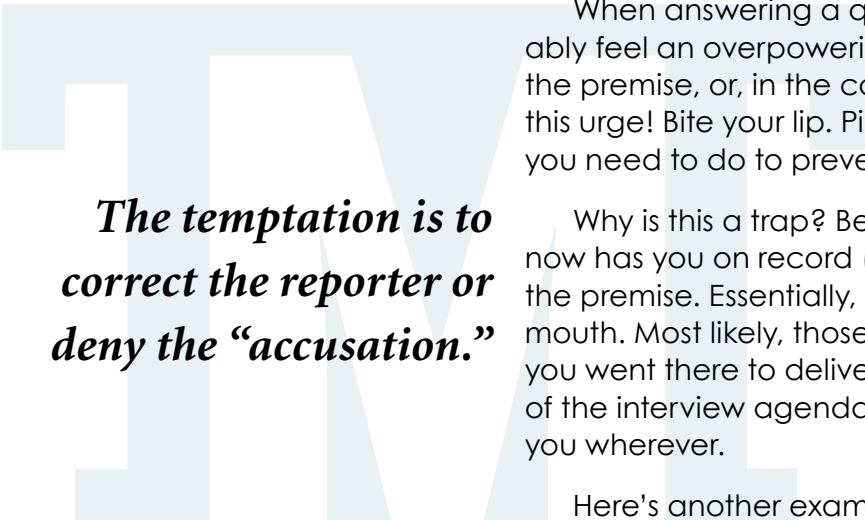
If you judge that a question has a biased premise or is unfair in some other way, then you have no obligation to respond to the question in that form.

“no” answer. And this must all happen in the few seconds before your mouth starts moving with your response.

How To Handle It

This question type may be complex, but the technique for answering it is simple. Begin with the knowledge that you are never required to accept any premise offered as part of a question, especially a question that is closed-ended. That's the reporter's agenda. You have your own agenda for the interview. Now, disregard the reporter's faulty premise and respond by stating one of your key messages.

Novice interviewees often complain that this technique makes them appear (or at least feel) evasive, especially if the premise they just avoided is true. By using this technique you are, in fact, avoiding the question as stated. However, if you judge that a question has a biased premise or is unfair in some other way, then you have no obligation to respond to the question in that form. That's not being evasive. That is simply choosing to focus on your own interview agenda rather than being drawn into the reporter's agenda. Disregarding a false premise may seem easier. But even if the premise is true, you are under no requirement to “buy into” any question as it is posed. You always have the right to answer any question in a way that will best represent you and your organization.



The temptation is to correct the reporter or deny the “accusation.”

When answering a question with a built-in premise, you will probably feel an overpowering urge to do one of two things; either deny the premise, or, in the case of a true premise, to say “Yes, but...” Resist this urge! Bite your lip. Pinch your leg. Take a deep breath. Do anything you need to do to prevent yourself from falling into this trap.

Why is this a trap? Because either way you respond, the reporter now has you on record (and maybe even on tape) acknowledging the premise. Essentially, the reporter has successfully put words in your mouth. Most likely, those words are not consistent with the messages you went there to deliver. In other words, the reporter is in full control of the interview agenda and is demonstrating that he or she can lead you wherever.

Here's another example of a built-in premise:

QUESTION : *SINCE YOUR COMPETITION HAS OUT-FLANKED YOU WITH LOWER PRICES, HOW ARE YOU COMPENSATING FOR THE LOST BUSINESS?*

In this case, the question is open ended (does not demand a “yes” or “no” answer), but the built-in premise is certainly there (that you have been outflanked by your competition). And the temptation is to correct the reporter or deny the “accusation.”

Phrases such as “No, that's not true.. .” “We never said that.. . “



***Don't find yourself
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Take a more
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your interview agenda.***


“That’s not what we want...” are all common reactions to a built-in premise. But remember, denial is a very weak position. Those watching a news broadcast on television or reading the newspaper often jump to the conclusion that if you have to deny something, then you are probably guilty of it. It’s an inaccurate conclusion, of course. But one great, unfortunate aspect of dealing with public opinion is that people rarely base their opinions on facts or accuracy. Instead, they form opinions based on their own emotional reactions to people and events. So, don’t find yourself in the position of denying or defending. Take a more positive approach to advancing your interview agenda.

Here’s the question again with a suggested response that helps you advance your agenda without addressing the reporter’s built-in assumption.

QUESTION: *SINCE YOUR COMPETITION HAS OUT-FLANKED YOU WITH LOWER PRICES, HOW ARE YOU COMPENSATING FOR THE LOST BUSINESS?*

ANSWER: *VALUE IS ALMOST ALWAYS THE HIGHEST PRIORITY FOR OUR CUSTOMERS. THAT’S WHAT THEY TELL US, AND IT IS OUR POLICY AND PRACTICE TO GIVE THEM EXACTLY WHAT THEY WANT. IT IS VALUE AND CUSTOMER SERVICE THAT BUILD LOYALTY. THAT’S THE BACKBONE OF OUR SUCCESS.*

There are several reasons why you must ignore a built-in premise. First, during the interview, you will probably have no guarantee that




Don't allow yourself to be maneuvered into denying a premise that probably isn't even germane to the interview.

the reporter really believes his or her own built-in premise. Nor do you have any assurance that the reporter actually intends to use that assumption in the final story. That is, unless you give them cause to use it by the nature of your reaction.

Just as important, if you open your response by denying the reporter's premise, you make it impossible for the reporter to use your comment without repeating the question in the story. When you start your answer with "No, that's not true..." the reporter must restate the original question (with premise) in the final story in order for your response to make sense. (This is true even for print media, but it is especially true for broadcast news media.)

Why is this important? Well, typically what follows the denial portion of your answer is a reasonable and well-stated message point. Unfortunately, that often gets overlooked, or its importance is outweighed by the denial. Though not always used intentionally by reporters, the technique is manipulative, and it is common in news interviews. It's one of the reasons interview subjects frequently claim they have been misquoted or had their comments taken out of context.



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So don't allow yourself to be maneuvered into denying a premise that probably isn't even germane to the interview. Instead of a denial, when faced with a built-in premise-type question, the first words out of your mouth should be your own messages stated in your own terms. Instead of answering with "No, that's not true..." a better response would be "Bob (reporter's name), let me explain how we view this..." Now, your answer is on your own terms, on your own agenda. No one has put words in your mouth. And, if your response is a good sound bite, the reporter can use it without having to restate his or her original objectionable question.



The Pregnant Pause


When the reporter remains silent after your answer, you are expected to begin feeling guilty about not being responsive

You may be a victim of the pregnant pause without ever being interviewed by the media. Bosses sometimes use it to get information from subordinate employees. Even family members may attempt to play on your need to fill dead space in a conversation.

Here's the scenario for the pregnant pause: You're answering questions in an interview. You finish one answer, but the interviewer remains silent. Literally within seconds you may become uncomfortable with the silence. You begin to feel that maybe you were unresponsive with your answer.

The pregnant pause attempts to play on guilt and the built-in need to be responsive. Even the most innocent person may succumb to feelings of guilt when they are in an unfamiliar, uncomfortable situation and the tension grows with prolonged silence. When the reporter remains silent after your answer, you are expected to begin feeling guilty about not being responsive, or perhaps about not giving as much information as the reporter wanted.

Depending on the interview situation (a live interview, or even a telephone conversation, for example) the tension can become unbearable, and you start talking again before any further questions are



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asked. That's when you're in the greatest danger of saying something you otherwise never would have offered. That's when you are likely to blurt out something you had specifically intended never to say.

How To Handle It

Remember that your responsibility is to provide information—in the form of clear concise messages—to your audience. The reporter is merely the conduit for your messages, a way of getting them to the audience. Accomplishing that is easiest when you lean to relax in an interview, to present a pleasant, sincere smile, and keep your mouth closed when your answer is complete to your own satisfaction.

Two things will always defeat the pregnant pause:

- 1. A firm resolve to say no more no matter how long the silence lasts; and***
- 2. A pleasant smile indicating your level of satisfaction with your answer.***

Easy to say, maybe a little tougher to do. But there are ways. First, anticipate that this might happen and resolve that you won't be baited by silence into making undisciplined statements. Second, become as familiar as possible with the interview environment before



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you begin. Learn about a TV studio beforehand, if that's where your interview will be. Accustom yourself to bright lights in your eyes if you expect to do a television interview in a setting even as familiar as your own office. Just don't allow yourself to be intimidated by unfamiliar surroundings or intrusive equipment.

Why does remaining silent always work? If your interview is live, the interviewer must maintain a certain pace or risk appearing to lose control of the interview. If the interview is taped, the pause will most likely be edited out. Even if you are alone with a reporter who is only taking handwritten notes, that person will be willing to wait only so long before moving on to a new question.

Students of news interviewing often want to know if they should restate their answer when faced with a pregnant pause, usually with an introductory phrase such as "Perhaps I didn't fully answer your question..." Whether you can effectively use that approach depends on your poise in the interview and your focus on your messages. If you are comfortable enough with the situation to use this approach without getting "off message," then it may be useful.

The problem here is that you risk moving away from your messages—your own agenda—and onto the reporter's agenda. You risk losing even more control of the interview situation.



Multiple Questions

By trying to answer all the questions at once, you don't really answer any of them well.

How many were there? Where did they come from? What did they look like? What did you do next? Shouldn't you have done this? Why didn't you do that?

Getting hit with multiple questions can feel a bit like enduring verbal machine-gun fire. A reporter may feel that he or she can rattle your question-answering discipline (and maybe get a juicy quote) by subjecting you to such a barrage. On the other hand, reporters say they sometimes just get caught up in the moment, that their inquisitive nature takes over and multiple questions just roll out unintentionally.

Whatever prompts the barrage, it can be intimidating. If you allow yourself to be intimidated, it can lead to unfortunate statements. By trying to answer all the questions at once, you don't really answer any of them well. But what's worse, your messages fly out the window, and you may hear yourself saying something really dumb.

Don't let that happen!

How To Handle It

You can never answer more than one question at a time, right? So don't try. And don't let the rapid-fire fluster you. Wait patiently while



You may hear a single word or phrase in one of the questions that provides you a natural springboard to one of your messages. Pick that path.


the reporter rattles off the list of questions. If you're really listening, most likely one of the questions will provide you an opportunity to make one of your key points. Perhaps it's not even an entire question that guides your response. You may hear a single word or phrase in one of the questions that provides you a natural springboard to one of your messages. Pick that path.

Here's an example:

QUESTION: **WHAT WILL YOU DO WHEN THE NEXT EPA REPORT COMES OUT? HOW WILL YOU JUSTIFY BEING THE BIGGEST POLLUTER? HOW ARE YOU GOING TO HANDLE ANGRY STOCKHOLDERS WHEN THEY HEAR ABOUT IT? HOW HAVE YOU MANAGED TO HIDE THESE FACTS FOR SO LONG?**

ANSWER: **WE HAVE ALWAYS WORKED CLOSELY WITH THE EPA AND HAVE EITHER MET OR EXCEEDED THEIR REQUIREMENTS. WHAT IS NEW HERE IS THAT OUR INDUSTRY IS NOW INCLUDED IN THIS ANNUAL REPORT. ONCE YOU SEE THAT REPORT YOU WILL SEE THAT OUR EMISSIONS ARE UNDER CONTROL AND PRESENT NO DANGER TO ANYONE.**

When you get hit with multiple questions, pick the one you want to



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answer, and don't feel as if you have to keep track of the other questions. There is a division of labor for any interview. You are the one being interviewed. You are responsible for answers. The reporter is responsible for questions. When you've answered the question to your satisfaction, stop and wait for the next question. If another barrage follows, just follow the steps described above.

Disciplining yourself to use this technique has many advantages. You remain focused on your key messages and the opportunities to deliver them. You maintain a level of control in the interview. Your restraint and self-control gain you important credibility points with your audience.



The Interrupted Answer

Reporters are usually more interested in getting a “good story” than with appearing polite.

You're giving what you feel is a good answer to the question just posed. But before you're finished you realize the reporter is talking over you, pushing for the answer to yet another question. Your face may begin to flush as your frustration grows. The feeling is exactly the same as when that racy little sports car cut you off on the Interstate the other day. Don't you just hate that!

Reporters may interrupt your answer for any number of reasons. Maybe your interviewer's deadline is growing near. Maybe he or she wants to change the direction of the interview. Maybe the reporter is just in a hurry to go to lunch. Often, a reporter will interrupt out of reflex when part of your answer provokes another question he or she feels must be asked immediately. Or maybe - just maybe - the goal is to get you off track, to make you say things you don't want to say.

You probably won't know why it's happening, but being rudely interrupted is irritating to most people. We're simply not accustomed to it in polite society. Reporters, however, are usually more interested in getting a “good story” than with appearing polite. So they may use this rude approach like shaking a tree to make the good apples fall. But you and the reporter may disagree about which are the “good apples.”




How To Handle It

***Your emotional self
will never perform
as well in an interview
as your rational
self, especially if the
emotions are frustration
and anger.***

Responding to the interrupted answer is much like responding to the multiple question ploy. The key is to avoid becoming flustered, frustrated or, worse yet, angry with the reporter. When any of those things happen, it means you've lost your measure of control over the interview. Your emotions have taken over, and your emotional self will never perform as well in an interview as your rational self, especially if the emotions are frustration and anger.

Attempting to compete with a reporter is always a losing battle. Even if you win the verbal battle, you lose the war. Why? Because the reporter is never the final audience. The real audience you are trying to reach consists of the reporter's viewers, listeners and/or readers. If they see you lose your temper, become angry or agitated, they may assume you are trying to be evasive or hide information. However, if you remain poised and composed in the face of an aggressive or unfair reporter, the audience will probably sympathize more with you.

If a reporter interrupts your answer to a question don't try to talk over him or her. That will merely escalate the interview into a confrontation (an especially bad technique if you are on camera). Instead of competing with the reporter, simply give up the floor until he or she is done. Then, while maintaining your composure, say: "I'll be happy to



When you've finally finished your answer don't feel responsible for remembering the question you were interrupted with.

respond to that in a moment, but you've asked me a very important question. I want to make certain that I give you a complete answer." Then state your full answer to the original question without waiting for permission from the reporter.

When you've finally finished your answer don't feel responsible for remembering the question you were interrupted with. That's not your job. If it's important to the reporter, he or she will remember it.



Negative Questions

To some extent, negativity is a reporter's stock in trade, so it's no wonder that a reporter's questions are usually phrased in the negative.

In a way, all of the above questioning techniques are negative. Each uses some form of aggressive technique to “rattle” you by either posing an unacceptable premise or by using verbal intimidation.

Beyond these examples, however, are the truly negative questions, the ones that imply something bad about you or your organization. They may not contain a premise, and they may not require a “yes” or “no” answer, but they are stated so negatively that the intent is clear. Negative questions may often be identified by their introductions: “Isn't it true that...?” “Aren't you concerned that...” “Wouldn't you rather...” You may have heard these so frequently you don't realize it, but every contraction used in these introductions is a negative statement. (Is it not true? Are you not concerned? Would not you rather...?)

Negative questions may be designed to intimidate, and, therefore, elicit an answer that is poorly thought out. That can happen, but it's not always the case. Another unfortunate fact of the modern-day news media is that news is most often negative. “News,” by its very definition, is an event or circumstance that is outside of the normal course of events. More often than not, it is something bad. Thus, to some extent, negativity is a reporter's stock in trade, so it's no wonder that a reporter's questions are usually phrased in the negative.



The problem with this is the very human tendency to respond to a question using the same phrasing as the person asking the question. We seldom stop to think about this. We do it out of reflex. So, every negatively phrased question from a reporter becomes an invitation for the person being interviewed to respond in the negative.

Train yourself to avoid beginning the answer to any question with ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’

How To Handle It

First, train yourself to recognize the typical introductions to negative questions. With just a little bit of practice, “Isn’t it true that...?” will quickly become a red flag for you. But instead of being a red flag that incites anger, it will become a warning that helps you carefully steer around a rocky spot in the road.

Next, train yourself to avoid beginning the answers to any question with “Yes” or “No.” Remember, from the reporter’s point of view, your reason for doing the interview is less about providing the answers to specific questions than it is about getting good quotes or a good sound bite on tape (audio or video). When you begin your answer with either of these words, you’re more focused on the question than on your messages. Besides, a “No” answer most often sounds like a denial. Except in rare cases, you are much better served by a clear, direct, positive statement than by a denial.



Avoid repeating the question (especially a negative question) in your answer. To do this you must break the habit of phrasing your answers using the same words as the question. Here are some examples:

Negative Question With A Weak Response:


Restating the reporter's words only restates the negative point or accepts the negative assumption.

QUESTION: *ISN'T IT TRUE THAT YOU'RE CLOSING DOWN ALL OF YOUR OPERATIONS IN THIS STATE, LEAVING 1,200 PEOPLE WITHOUT JOBS?*

ANSWER: *YES, WE ARE CLOSING DOWN ALL OF OUR OPERATIONS IN THIS STATE AND FIRING 1,200 PEOPLE.*

We tend to respond to a question using the terminology and phrasing of the questions because we've been trained by parents, teachers and other authority figures to be responsive. Without other training or practice, then, we tend to treat a reporter conducting an interview as a similar authority figure. But restating the reporter's words only restates the negative point or accepts the negative assumption that may be built into the question. It keeps you locked into the reporter's agenda.

Don't be baited into this too-easy response. Instead, be sensitive to the content of the question, but make a positive statement built on your interview objective or one of your main points, whichever is most appropriate for the situation.




Be sensitive to the content of the question, but make a positive statement built on your interview objective or one of your main points.

Negative Question With A Strong Response

QUESTION: *ISN'T IT TRUE THAT YOU'RE CLOSING DOWN ALL OF YOUR OPERATIONS IN THIS STATE, LEAVING 1,200 PEOPLE WITHOUT JOBS?*

ANSWER: *OUR CUSTOMER BASE HAS CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY IN RECENT YEARS, AND WE HAVE SEEN FIVE CONSECUTIVE QUARTERS WITHOUT PROFIT FROM THESE OPERATIONS. THAT LEAVES XYZ CORPORATION WITH NO CHOICE BUT TO CEASE OPERATIONS HERE. UNFORTUNATELY, WE WILL HAVE TO DISMISS 1,200 EMPLOYEES." (ANSWERS THE QUESTION DIRECTLY AND HONESTLY, BUT NOT WITHOUT STATING ONE OR MORE KEY MESSAGES.)*

Here's another important guideline. Avoid the temptation to use phrases such as "tell our side of the story" or "get our messages out." Using these phrases makes you appear (or sound) weak, confrontational and adversarial. Even if the situation you are dealing with is confrontational and adversarial, you don't gain anything by fanning those flames during media interviews.



***Your interview goal is to
find a way to verbally get
to an answer that you
WANT to give.***

If you can present yourself and your organization as being focused on resolving the issue at hand, solving a problem or improving a situation, then you will have presented things in a positive light and you will gain respect and credibility among your audiences.

Remember, it is always possible to support your own position without condemning or denigrating another. Your interview goal is to find a way to verbally get to an answer that you WANT to give.



Third-Party Questions


***When you receive
a third-party question,
you can never assume
the information
reported is accurate***

A recent report concludes that 75% of your products are defective and dangerous. How do you respond to that?

According to a spokesman for the union, your company has failed to provide pay increases in the last five years. Isn't that a long time to go without a raise?

Hold the phone! You've just been handed a third-party question. Third-party questions are similar to negative questions and those with a built-in premise because the basis of the question is an assumption or an accusation. It's just attributed to someone else, and you're invited to respond. What's even worse is this approach often strongly implies that not answering the question just it is stated implies you are hiding something.

Be careful here. Be VERY careful here. When you receive a third-party question, you can never assume the information reported is accurate. Information transmitted by a "middle-man" is always suspect because it can easily be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Perhaps the reporter has accurately quoted the report or the union spokesperson. But how would you know? So why risk responding to it?



It may be important to clarify why you are ignoring the third-party aspect of the reporter's question.

There's a simple reason reporters ask third-party questions. Again, it has to do with the nature of news itself. As well as being most often negative, news is usually about confrontation. It presents two or more parties in conflict. The greater the conflict, the better the story. So, a reporter will seek out opportunities to portray sides in opposition. Sometimes, that means creating opposition and conflict.

How To Handle It

Fortunately, the “third-party” element in such a question is usually obvious. Even in the tense, unfamiliar circumstances of an interview, you should be able to recognize this tactic with little difficulty. When you receive such a question, apply the same rules you learned for dealing with the negative question and the built-in premise. Disregard them and use your most closely related message.

It may be important to clarify why you are ignoring the third-party aspect of the reporter's question. Here are two examples of third-party questions with suggested answers for each. The first answer for each assumes that the third-party aspect of the question is unknown to the interviewee. The second answer assumes the person being interviewed is familiar with the third-party statement.

If you are unfamiliar with the third-party aspect of the question, you should simply say so.

QUESTION: **A RECENT REPORT CONCLUDES THAT 75% OF YOUR PRODUCTS ARE DEFECTIVE AND DANGEROUS. HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THAT?**

ANSWER: **YOU'RE QUOTING A REPORT WE HAVE YET TO SEE. WE'LL WANT TO REVIEW THAT IMMEDIATELY. MEANWHILE, HERE ARE THE STEPS WE USE AT XYZ CORPORATION TO ENSURE PRODUCT SAFETY.**

ANSWER: **WE HAVE THAT REPORT, AND OUR SAFETY ENGINEERS ARE REVIEWING EACH PRODUCT LISTED THERE. MEANWHILE, HERE ARE. . . .**

QUESTION: **ACCORDING TO A SPOKESMAN FOR THE UNION, YOUR COMPANY HAS FAILED TO PROVIDE PAY INCREASES IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS. ISN'T THAT A LONG TIME TO GO WITHOUT A RAISE?**

ANSWER: **WE WOULD HAVE TO HEAR DIRECTLY FROM THE UNION BARGAINING COMMITTEE ON THAT ISSUE. PAY INCREASES FOR MEMBERS OF THE BARGAINING UNIT ARE SPELLED OUT CLEARLY IN THE UNION CONTRACT....**

ANSWER: **OUR PLANT MANAGER AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE LOCAL UNION HAVE HAD LENGTHY DISCUSSIONS ABOUT WAGES. PAY INCREASES FOR MEMBERS. . . .**

Notice how these answers effectively handle the reporter's attempt to develop conflict and controversy. If you are unfamiliar with the third-party aspect of the question, you should simply say so. This establishes for your audiences a clear and legitimate reason for not addressing the reporter's effort to create conflict. If you are familiar with the



An accomplished interview subject will seldom miss an opportunity to turn a reporter's question, no matter how negative or confrontational, into an opportunity for delivering messages.

third-party aspect of the question, then acknowledge it, but don't feel compelled to provide a countering statement. That's the reporter's agenda, not yours.

These answers, however, take another important step. They go beyond simply diffusing the effort to build controversy. They use the reporter's question as a springboard to offer a message audiences need to hear. This is what separates the novice from the accomplished interviewee. When you hear someone responding really well in a difficult news interview, this is usually what you're paying attention to. An accomplished interview subject will seldom miss an opportunity to turn a reporter's question, no matter how negative or confrontational, into an opportunity for delivering messages.



Speculative Questions

In the event of a crisis, you can expect speculative questions to come thick and fast.


Can you predict the future? Can you make a factual statement about how some event will turn out, or would have turned out if something were different? Can you comment on what someone will do if this or that happens?

Of course you can't! And when talking with the news media, you want to be careful not to try.

These are the speculative questions. They're the favorites of many reporters. Seldom does an interviewer fail to pose some type of speculative question. And in the event of a crisis, you can expect speculative questions to come thick and fast.

Some examples: Will you win this court case? If you lose, what steps will you take next? Will the deal go through? If so, how will you handle the increased demand? What are the chances that you won't be able to attract the additional capital your company needs to survive? If not, will there be layoffs? Will you drop products from production? What other problems are likely before this product reaches the market?

Speculative questions aren't always intended to trap you into making unwanted statements. After all, human nature makes us all want




***The world has this funny
way of making things
turn out differently than
anyone expected.***

to know what's going to happen next. Often, such questions are the result of a reporter who is uninformed about the current situation, who simply doesn't have sufficient information to ask enough fact-based questions to satisfy his or her need for a fully developed story.

Whatever the origin of the speculation, however, in most cases, you don't want to go there. You don't want to start making predictions about the future, even if you have a high level of confidence about how events will turn out. You may have more information on the subject of the interview than any other person. But the world has this funny way of making things turn out differently than anyone even you - expected.

How To Handle It

Speculative questions present the most slippery slope in all news interviewing. Start answering these questions the way they are asked and you may find yourself making predictions about the future and second guessing the past in ways you had never intended. Once you start, reporters will come up with what seems like an endless stream of speculative questions, and you may realize all too late that the story that comes of your interview will bear little resemblance to the factual situation. Not to mention that you miss opportunities to deliver messages your audiences need to receive.



***The most reliable
method for answering
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a statement of fact.***

If you are uncomfortable in the interview situation, or uncertain of your messages, your chances of speculating inadvertently increase dramatically. So, a well-rehearsed set of messages is the best preparation for dealing with the speculative question.

Equally important, though, you must learn to hear the speculation inside the question. Speculative questions often ask you to give information you can not possibly have first-hand. Listen closely to questions for anything that asks you to make predictions or guesses. Key in on questions that ask you to talk about the theoretical rather than the factual or what can be demonstrated. Learning to hear these requires some practice, but you'll soon learn to recognize the phrasing that always signals: SPECULATIVE!

The most reliable method for answering speculative questions is to make a statement of fact. Train your ear to hear the speculative aspect of a question. Let that be a signal to search your mind for a fact that is relevant to the reporter's question, yet also allows you to quickly get to one of your own messages.

Also keep in mind this critical point: Unless your interview is live, your audience will probably never hear the reporter's speculative questions, only your answer. If you give in to speculative questioning, when the story is ultimately printed or broadcast it will appear that the spec-



If you give in to speculative questioning, when the story is ultimately printed or broadcast it will appear that the speculation comes entirely from you.

ulation comes entirely from you. Rather than let that happen, make sure you're trained to quickly recognize speculative questions and respond with fact-based statements rather than guesses or predictions.

Here are suggested answers to the questions we posed above.

- QUESTION:** *WILL YOU WIN THIS COURT CASE?*
ANSWER: *WE HAVE STRONG EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT OUR POSITION AND AN EXCELLENT LEGAL TEAM TO PRESENT OUR CASE.*
- QUESTION:** *IF YOU LOSE, WHAT STEPS WILL YOU TAKE NEXT?*
ANSWER: *IT'S MUCH TOO EARLY TO SPECULATE ABOUT THE OUTCOME. RIGHT NOW WE ARE FOCUSED EXCLUSIVELY ON PRESENTING THE MOST CONVINCING CASE POSSIBLE.*
- QUESTION:** *WILL THE MERGER GO THROUGH?*
ANSWER: *OUR COMPANY IS MAKING EVERY EFFORT TO FINALIZE THIS ACQUISITION. WE HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF CONFIDENCE IN THE WAY THE DEAL IS STRUCTURED, AND WE KNOW THAT ALL THE PARTIES WANT TO SEE THESE COMPANIES COME TOGETHER.*
- QUESTION :** *WHAT ARE THE CHANCES YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO ATTRACT THE ADDITIONAL CAPITAL YOUR COMPANY NEEDS TO SURVIVE?*
ANSWER: *OUR QUARTERLY EARNINGS REPORTS SHOW THAT WE HAVE CONSISTENTLY PERFORMED BEYOND THE MARKET'S EXPECTATIONS. WE HAVE SOUND BUSINESS FUNDAMENTALS AND A STRONG DEMAND...*




***Maintain your resolve
NOT to speculate even
if the reporter asks
the same question
repeatedly.***

QUESTION: *IF YOU CAN'T ATTRACT THAT CAPITAL, WILL THERE BE LAYOFFS?*
ANSWER: *THAT'S ENTIRELY SPECULATIVE. WHAT I CAN TELL YOU IS THAT WE ANTICIPATE CONTINUED STRONG FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE BASED ON CURRENT AND PROJECTED DEMAND.*

QUESTION: *WHAT OTHER PROBLEMS ARE LIKELY BEFORE THIS NEW PRODUCT REACHES THE MARKET?*
ANSWER: *OUR PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AND MARKETING TEAMS HAVE A LOT OF EXPERIENCE IN ANTICIPATING ALL THE POSSIBLE CONTINGENCIES FOR OUR PRODUCT LAUNCH.*

Notice that, in some cases, you may need to directly advise the reporter that you can't or won't answer the question as stated because of its speculative nature. Do this politely, but be firm. Tactfully dismiss the speculation, then make a factual statement that supports one of your messages.

Maintain your resolve NOT to speculate even if the reporter asks the same question repeatedly. A common mistake of the novice interviewee is decline to speculate the first two or three times a question is repeated but then give in and blurt out a speculative response out of frustration. If you decide that you cannot respond to a reporter's question the first time it is asked, then the number of times that question is repeated should make no difference. Train yourself to be comfortable with repeating the same answer no matter how many times



If you decide that you cannot respond to a reporter's question the first time it is asked, then the number of times that question is repeated should make no difference.

you get the same question. In most cases, the reporter will ultimately get the message that you are not vulnerable to this approach and move on. If the reporter doesn't get the message, you are within your rights to tactfully (but again, firmly) say: "Bob, I think I've made it clear that I won't speculate on an answer to that question. Now, what else would you like to discuss?"

Here's another example:

QUESTION: *THERE IS A LOT OF CONJECTURE THAT THE FDA IS GOING TO TELL YOU TO TAKE THESE PRODUCTS OFF THE MARKET. HOW DO YOU PLAN TO HANDLE THAT?*

Notice how this question wraps up several tough question categories in one. Not only is it speculative, but the speculation is attributed to an unnamed third-party. There is also an unstated premise that your products are somehow flawed. While the word "not" isn't used, the tone of the question is highly negative. The key to handling this question is to immediately tag it as speculative and decline to engage in predictions about what might happen. Here's our suggested response:

ANSWER: *IT WOULD BE UNWISE TO SPECULATE ON THE FDA'S PLANS. BUT, WE DO KNOW THIS: OUR PHARMACEUTICAL PRODUCTS HAVE NATIONWIDE RESPECT IN THE MEDICAL COMMUNITY FOR THEIR POSITIVE RESULTS. WE'RE VERY PLEASED WITH THEIR PERFORMANCE, AND THE FDA IS VERY AWARE OF THEIR WIDE ACCEPTANCE AND SUCCESS.*



The Personal Opinion Question


If you're a spokesperson for your organization, it's likely that your personal opinion really isn't part of the story.

Do you agree this is the right decision? What would you do differently if the situation were left up to you? What's your reaction to these events?

Some people still believe that news is all fact. The perception still exists that reporting the news is a simple process of collecting all the relevant facts about a given situation and writing them up in an article or stating them in front of a camera or microphone. News would be a boring commodity if that were the case.

Even a casual glance at today's news reveals that much of it consists of the opinions of news makers. That's fine for some situations. Politicians and sports figures, for example. If your personal opinion is genuinely part of the news story, that's one thing. But if you're a spokesperson for your organization, it's likely that your personal opinion really isn't part of the story. Still, that won't prevent a reporter from asking you personal opinion questions.

Whether it's sincere curiosity, or just poking around for controversy, a reporter will sometimes ask for your opinion as an individual. The question can sound innocent: "How do you feel about these new policies and procedures?" Or, it can be pointed: "Aren't you worried about the company's lack of concern for the environment?" Either



Most likely, the reporter sincerely believes your opinion will add depth, and human interest to the story.

way, if you're representing your company or organization rather than your own personal interests, such a question should set off alarm bells and sirens.

Reporters ask personal opinion questions for any number of reasons. Some may have hidden agendas, it's true. But in most cases, the reporter probably is just trying to build a story that is relevant and interesting to his or her audiences. Most likely, the reporter sincerely believes your opinion will add depth, and human interest to the story.

When facing such questions, most organizational spokespersons feel on solid ground as long as their personal opinion matches that of the organization. But for those whose opinion differs from the organization, this can pose a real dilemma. Some say they fear appearing evasive if they refuse to state their own opinion in favor of the organization's position. For some, it's even an ethical issue.

In this case, lawyers provide a good comparison. Lawyers are paid advocates for their clients. They know their personal opinions are not the issue when they are representing a client. Public relations people also frequently adopt this position when they represent an organization. If you are answering news media questions on behalf of an organization, you may have to take the same approach. The alternative may be deciding that you are not the right person to be interviewed.



How To Handle It

In a word: “Don’t!”

Whatever the decision about your opinion versus the organization’s, make it before you are face-to-face with a reporter.

We understand there are times when your personal opinion may clash with policies and organizational positions. But does that belong in the news media? Obviously not. Whatever the decision about your opinion versus the organization’s, make it before you are face-to-face with a reporter. Otherwise, you may inject your own thoughts or feelings into an interview about the organization. Whether you do that intentionally or unintentionally, it will only get you in trouble. You, and your boss (or bosses) probably won’t like the way it comes out in a story.

If you’re asked for your personal opinion, use the question to lead you back to one of your key messages. For instance, let’s pick up one of the examples from above:

QUESTION: *“AREN’T YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE COMPANY’S LACK OF CONCERN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?”*

ANSWER: *“THE FACT IS, OUR ENVIRONMENTAL RECORD IS EXCELLENT, AND IT’S SPECIFICALLY BECAUSE OUR COMPANY MAKES SURE WE CONSIDER THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT FROM ALL OF OUR OPERATIONS AND ACTIVITIES.”*



Note that the example question includes a built-in premise as well as a request for your personal opinion. A personal opinion question can be combined with any of the other seven categories of tough questions.

Now, let's take this a step further. Let's say the interviewer persists:

FOLLOW UP: *"YES, BUT WHAT ABOUT YOU? CLEARLY, THIS IS PUSHING THE EDGE ON ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT. AND, WHILE I KNOW YOU HAVE TO SPEAK FOR THE COMPANY, DOESN'T IT MAKE YOU UNCOMFORTABLE? "*

RESPONSE: *"YOU KNOW, MY FAMILY AND I LIVE IN THIS COMMUNITY JUST LIKE YOU. AND I KNOW OUR COMPANY TRACK RECORD AND THE CARE IT TAKES ENVIRONMENTALLY. AGAIN. I THINK THAT RECORD SPEAKS FOR ITSELF"*

The point is to avoid allowing yourself to be pushed into straying from your agenda. The moment you do, you become the story!

And remember, personal opinion questions won't always come as part of the formal interview. Either before or after the interview in casual conversation, the reporter might solicit your personal opinion on some of the issues. Best advice: assume the interview is underway from the time the reporter arrives (or begins with you on the phone) until he or she leaves (or hangs up). It's just like having a tape recorder and/or camera in the room. Always assume they are recording you.

Avoid allowing yourself to be pushed into straying from your agenda. The moment you do, you become the story!



Final Thoughts

If you insist on seeing news interviewing only in terms of a conflict or battle with reporters, then that's probably what you will get.

The eight categories of reporters' tough questions and the techniques we've recommended for dealing with them represent only one aspect of news interviewing. In practicing the techniques we recommend here, it would be easy to begin thinking of all reporters and all interviewing in these terms. In fact, some in the media training world teach nothing other than these techniques. We feel that's a bad model for your relationship with the news media.

Certainly, anyone who faces the news media will encounter these situations sooner or later. Reporters do use these types of questions, some more than others, and to be successful in meeting the media you must be skilled at applying the techniques recommended here. However, if you approach all reporters with only these tools, you may set yourself up for tougher interviews than you otherwise would have to face. In other words, if you insist on seeing news interviewing only in terms of a conflict or battle with reporters, then that's probably what you will get. If your goal is to stop a story or to prevent reporting, then even these tools won't help you.

Facing the news media, however, does not have to be a self-fulfilling prophecy of combat with reporters. Learn and practice these techniques. Have them ready to use when they are needed. But don't



Make it your goal to help the reporter get the best story possible.

Of course, that will include your messages, your agenda, reported professionally in a fair and balanced way.

go into every interview anticipating the worst. Instead, give each reporter the benefit of the doubt, at least to begin with. Expect that he or she is simply doing a job. The job is to get a story and the story happens to involve you and your organization. Expect that there will be a story, and make it your goal to help the reporter get the best story possible. Of course, that will include your messages, your agenda, reported professionally in a fair and balanced way.



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TMT is planning series of eBooks addressing other aspects of news interviewing. Meanwhile, if you've enjoyed this module and have comments we'd like to hear from you. We'd also be interested in your suggestions for subjects for future TMT eBooks.

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The Media Trainers, LLC

4220 Cove Court, NE

Marietta, GA 30067

Phone: 770-971-6619

Fax: 770-974-0384

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