

Handling Difficult Questions

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To buy your product or service, customers need to have their questions answered. If you do a good job of responding, your customers will conclude you are competent and trustworthy and decide to do business with you. On the other hand, if you are defensive or gloss over issues, chances are they will choose one of your competitors. How you answer questions can either make or break the deal. It is important that you are prepared, not take challenging questions personally and think before you respond.

One of the reasons people do poorly when answering questions is that they are unprepared. The night before you go into any meeting or presentation, brainstorm all the possible questions you will be asked on index cards, one question per card. Once you are through, write out the answers to those questions on the other side of the index card. Then, practice saying the answers to the most challenging questions out loud. The more you practice, the more confident your voice will sound and the more succinct your answers will become.

Although it doesn't happen a lot, there will be times when questioners seem quite hostile and attacking. Do not take it personally. They may be upset with things in their personal life. They may also be annoyed with how they were treated by a previous representative from your company or by-products that haven't lived up to expectations. They may even have a clear preference for another vendor or product and want to make you look bad. It is a mistake to argue, defend, or put down hostile questioners. Others will notice. People feel that they can see your real colors by how you handle their questions. The more professional you are; the more people will respect you.

Before you respond to a difficult question, pause and get your wits about you. Give yourself time to think. You do not have to rush right into respond-

ing. A three or four-second pause will help you to determine the best approach.

When you do start to answer, begin your response by aligning with the questioner. It will make a hostile questioner receptive to your answer. An acknowledgment statement starts with agreement. For example, "Yes, you are right, our products do cost more than our competitors, and we realize how important containing cost is to you." The word "OK" is not an adequate acknowledgment. Also, do not follow your acknowledgment with "but" or "however." It will negate your previous acknowledgment; instead, use "and" or simply pause.

Any answers should be clear and concise. Think before you speak and do not ramble. People hate it when a speaker says the same thing over and over or when they aren't logical. Ideally, your answer should be no more than a minute. If your answers take two or three minutes, others will start to lose interest. If your answer does need to be detailed, you might consider taking it off line or asking your audience if they need the same level of information. If they do not, then arrange another time to go into more depth with the questioner. When possible, link your answer to a point or recommendation you made earlier in your prepared remarks.

Be sure to include as many people as possible in your answer by engaging them with eye contact amounting to a full sentence or thought. The more you include others in your answer by looking at them, the more likely they will be to trust and believe you.

Avoid saying "Does that answer your question?" If the person has been truly hostile, he or she will say, "not really" or "no," and you will lose ground. It is unlikely that any answer will win over a hostile questioner so don't waste precious time or jeopardize your credibility. Also, avoid saying "good question." It can be seen as patronizing or a "stall" tactic. Begin with the attitude that every question is a good valid question.

When you conclude your Q&A session, be sure to summarize your key points again. Do not skip this step. It is the last thing people will remember. As you summarize, repeat any recommendations or ac-

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tion steps, as well as the benefits. No one takes action unless they can see what's in it for them.

Doing a good job of answering questions is critical to selling your ideas. The more convinced your customers are that they understand and need your product or service, the more likely they will close business with you. Be sure that you go into any meeting or presentation prepared and focused on getting your customer to understand by responding to their questions in a clear professional manner. If you do, your customers will see you in positive light.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. To reach us, phone (847) 438-4480 or contact our web site, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.