

# Seven Strategies for Handling Difficult Questions - What to Say When You Don't Know the Answer

by Mary Sandro

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Honesty is the only policy when presenting to a group. However, blatantly admitting, “I don’t know”, in response to a direct question from an audience member can be disastrous. The solution is to be honest and maintain credibility at the same time. No one can know the answer to every question. It’s how the inevitable situation is handled that separates great presenters from amateurs. Study the following seven strategies and keep them in your back pocket so that you can field even the toughest questions with confidence.

## 1. Reflection

Repeat the question and toss it back to your audience, “Does anyone here have any experience with that?” When you allow the audience to help you, they will save you without ever realizing it. In fact, the audience will revere you because adults love to be involved and share their knowledge. After you have fielded all of the contributions, be sure to summarize and add your own ideas if any have been sparked by the interaction. Summarizing at the end helps you to maintain control and authority. Always repeat questions before answering for the same reasons.

## 2. I’ll Get Back to You

This is an old standard and it works well if you do three things. First, write the question down. Be conspicuous. Make sure everyone knows you are writing the question down. I go so far as to tell the audience, “I am writing this question down.” Second, tell the questioner exactly when you will get back to them. Be honest. Then do it. Can you get back to them by the end of the day? If it is an all-day program, can you get back to them after lunch? Third, be sure to get the questioner’s contact information if you don’t have it. All of these things make this strategy very powerful. It is not smoke and mirrors. It is an opportunity to go the extra mile, expand your knowledge, and impress your audience.

## 3. Defer to the Expert

This is a more sophisticated version of the Reflection technique. Sometimes a question is legitimately outside of your area of expertise. You may be a marketing expert and someone asks a question about the engineering aspects of a product. This is a question that requires an engineer. If there is an engineer in the room you could say, “Sally, you’re an engineer. Do you have any insights into that?” If there are no engineers in the room, state that you will confer with an engineer and *get back to them*. Notice I have just combined two techniques.

## 4. Compliment the Questioner

For this to be effective, the compliment must be sincere. Sometimes I get lulled into thinking I have seen and heard it all on a particular topic. It never fails though, someone comes out of left field with a question I have never thought of and I say, “That’s a great question. I’ve never thought about it that way. *Does anyone here have any ideas on that?*” (I have just combined two techniques.) When I use this strategy it is usually not a conscious decision. It’s a reaction. That’s how sincere it needs to sound. It always works when it’s sincere because audience’s love to be complimented. I might also combine this technique with *I’ll Get Back to You*.

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## 5. Answer a Question with a Question

Sometimes questions are too narrow or too general to answer. Reserve the right, as the expert, to open a question up or close it down by asking a question in response. Once upon a time I was a software trainer. One day a woman asked me a very specific question, "What does that button do?" I had no idea, but I didn't confess, "I don't know." Instead I asked her a question, "What is your goal in pushing that button?" She elaborated for me and explained what she wanted to accomplish. I knew a way to help her and it didn't involve pushing that button. She was happy. I was honest, credible, helpful, and very happy.

## 6. Parallel Answer

If you don't know the bull's eye answer to a question, offer what you do know quickly to demonstrate some credibility and then combine with a previous technique. When I was a software trainer I used to be an expert in the Lotus spreadsheet package. However Microsoft's Excel began to gain popularity and I had to learn it so I could teach it. In the beginning I was on a learning curve. Sometimes I would be asked a question about Excel that I didn't know the answer to, however I did know the answer in Lotus. Quickly I would say, "I know that is possible in Lotus. I'm not sure if that is available in Excel. *I'm writing this question down. I'll research it at the break and get back to you.*" Refrain from droning on and on about your parallel knowledge. Brevity is the key to this technique.

## 7. Set the Rules

You can avoid many difficult questions simply by setting rules for questions in the beginning. Whenever you present to a group, you are the leader. You are accountable for everything, so lead. My experience is that if you set rules and follow them, the audience respects you. If you make rules up as you go along, you lose credibility.

The number of rules you set will vary depending on the topic. When I taught technical subjects, I set lots of rules because I knew the questions would be many and varied. I would start a software seminar by saying, "I welcome general questions at any time about anything on the agenda. If you have a specific question about a project you are working on or a subject outside of the agenda, please see me at a break for a private consultation. Because we have limited time together, I reserve the right to stop taking questions and comments. This is not personal. It is to make certain we cover every topic today."

## Summary

You can't know the answer to everything. It's how you handle yourself. Study these seven strategies and use them to maintain credibility and confidence.

## About the Author

Mary Sandro helps organizations achieve results through effective presentation skills. She delivers fun, interactive presentation skills training programs and train-the-trainer licenses. Learn more at [www.ProEdgeSkills.com](http://www.ProEdgeSkills.com) or call 800-731-0601.

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