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Understanding Journalists' Questions

Understanding the motives behind the difficult questions journalists ask in a crisis not only helps you prepare more thoroughly for an interview, but also helps you meet their needs without compromising your own performance or the reputation of your organization, product, or indeed your own family.

Journalists do not necessarily ask *questions from hell* simply because they are out to get you. It pays to remember that a journalist's job is to be skeptical, and when a crisis happens they are there to get the answers—to get to the bottom of what happened and to make sure that it does not happen again. If they always believed everything they were told and took everything at face value, most of the best news would never break, criminals would roam free, and bad behavior would go unpunished, or worse, unnoticed or detected.

A journalist becomes our conscience, a watchdog, a person who can ask questions that others are thinking but afraid or not in the position to ask.

Also, the questions you think are tough are often the *obvious* questions to the journalist. Many would be surprised to know they have put you on the spot because they do not necessarily appreciate the sensitivity and politics of the information they are seeking. (See Box 17.1 for a list of reasons why journalists ask the tough questions that they do. This list will be helpful in anticipating questions in a crisis.)

BOX 17.1 WHAT IS WITH THE TOUGH QUESTIONS?

Why do journalists ask difficult questions?

- To test the validity of your claims.
- To sort out the reality from the rhetoric.
- To probe for facts as the crisis unfolds.
- To get the other side of the story—*balance*.
- To see if ulterior motives are at play.
- To find the holes in things that seem too good to be true.
- To lever out information they think should be made public.
- To find someone to blame.
- To pit the good against the bad.
- To substantiate off-the-record or unsourced information.
- To elicit a response to another party's claims.
- To make sense out of a *jigsaw* of information.
- To resolve conflicting claims and information—who is telling the truth?
- To get to the bottom of *why* something happened and *what* is being done to ensure that it does not happen again.
- To flex their muscles.
- And, yes, sometimes to *get you* (when they feel you have lied, cheated, or simply deserve it).

So now, let's look at the rules of engagement for a media interview.

Remember that whatever you say is likely to be balanced against opinions that are different from yours. That has always been the case in live television—which, like the theater and movies, thrives on drama. It is a rule of the theater, movies, and television that you cannot have drama without conflict in some form or another. On the one side will be the bad-die, the villain, and on the other side, the good guys.

One clue how to handle questions or to help you understand whether you will get more than your fair share of difficult questions is to anticipate how you will be framed—as the good guy or the bad guy.

In his book *How to Make the Most of Every Media Appearance*, George Merlis, former executive producer of *Good Morning America*, the CBS

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Morning News, and *Entertainment Tonight*, refers to typical good and bad guys (Box 17.2).

BOX 17.2 GOOD GUYS VERSUS BAD GUYS

Good Guys

- Environmentalists who do not commit acts of sabotage
- Firefighters who are not arsonists
- Poor people who are not criminals
- One-person law firms whose one lawyer dresses in Walmart suits

Bad Guys

- Polluters or anyone who can be construed as a polluter
- Rich people, unless they got rich by being actors, singers, comedians, or novelists
- Partners in large law firms who wear \$2,500 suits

Source: George Merlis, *How to Make the Most of Every Media Appearance: Getting Your Message across on the AIR, in PRINT, or ONLINE* (New York: McGraw-Hill), 2004, p. 101. (Reprinted with permission.)

Populist current affairs TV shows such as *60 Minutes* and others often portray their stories as shocking and shameful or warm and wonderful. Think Captain Sully Sullenberger versus Bernie Madoff.

In the unfiltered, unedited social media world, the bad are often corporate fat cats, politicians, and big brands perceived to be behaving badly—think Nestlé and Proctor & Gamble. Governments will also be heavily criticized in this low trust environment. We are quick to judge people we perceive to be acting unethically or who are not responding quickly enough. The good comes into play when we are surprised by a corporation or government's *speed* of response and how *genuine* they are in their efforts to fix problems.

Paul Gillin,* American writer, speaker, and social media strategist, whom I interviewed for this book, says that “purists” hang out in the social media space so you are likely to attract more criticism in SocialMediaLand.

* Paul Gillin, interview with author, June 30, 2009.

And then there is the downright cool, who have millions of followers and hefty Facebook fan pages like Ashton Kutcher, Ellen DeGeneres, Zappos Shoes, President Obama (when he was campaigning,) Ford's Scott Monty, and most recently Bill Gates and the Dalai Lama. (For the record, purpose-built Facebook pages created more than 5.3 *billion* fans in January 2010, and these will be both good and bad!)

In a crisis, where the stakes are very high, it pays to stop and think about how you and your crisis might be framed so that you can prepare appropriately. Dig deep and know what and where the skeletons are likely to be *before* you do any interview. And remember that once you put "it" on the Internet, "it" remains there forever.

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Techniques to Get Your Message Across

Now, here is a conundrum—questions are gifts! Journalists' questions are simply a strategic opportunity for you to communicate a vitally important message to your key audiences. Sure, you have to listen attentively to hear the right word or phrase that presents the opportunity to grab the gift and respond appropriately. But it is possible, even in the most hostile of situations, to get your message across.

First, let's think about the media interview and how it is structured. The interview is designed to be a question-and-answer format. The journalist asks you a question and you respond with an answer. They ask another question, you respond, and so it goes.

BOX 18.1 Q = A

(Question = Answer)

Box 18.1 shows the basic formula of how we converse. This means the questioner is doing all the leading. The journalist is in control as you politely follow his or her line of questioning. What if you changed that basic formula and used the journalist's question as a springboard, a bridge to your prepared, rehearsed, and learned lines? (You are the actor on the stage, after all.)

The skills needed to transition from the journalist's questions to your responses do require practice and more practice. Many of their questions are *counterintuitive*, often the exact opposite of, for example, what an attorney may advise in a deposition or in court, or what your parents and teachers may have taught you when you were growing up. The media interview technique is the *exact opposite* of "Just answer the question" in most instances.

The biggest mistake you can make is to think that an interview is like a conversation. It is anything but a conversation (and beware the journalist who says, "Talk to me as if we are having a conversation"). It is anything but a friendly chat! Remember, it is the journalist's job to get you to relax and give them a good, newsworthy story. They will often start an interview with broad, general questions to warm you up, or they will appear friendly and chatty before the interview begins—all designed to get the necessary facts and background of a hot issue. You need to be in active listening mode and need your wits about you at all times!

BRIDGING TECHNIQUE

So, let's look at some alternatives to the Q & A routine. To get your message across in a media interview you need to do what we call *bridging*, which leads to a formula like this:

$$Q = A + 1$$

For many of you who have had professional media training, bridging should sound familiar. If not, get some training fast!

BOX 18.2

Q is the question.

A is your brief answer.

+ is a bridging word or phrase: *however, but*.

1 is your key message.

Your response, represented in Box 18.2, *must* be delivered in 30 seconds or less! In fact, in today's Twitter age of instantaneous news, your response is most likely to be edited down to just 120 characters or three short sentences or less, and aggregated, out of context in a quote or sound bite of just six or seven seconds! Yes, media interview skills are to be taken very seriously if you want to succeed and be an effective and trusted company spokesperson.

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The principle behind this formula is to avoid taking the question at face value. If you simply answer the question, you will spend most of your interview on the journalist's bridge, which in a crisis will be tough, rigorous, and downright uncomfortable.

You need to find ways to get to your own bridge, where it is safe or safer ground.

No, it is not about avoiding the question—never, ever. You must always respond to the essence of the question.

Let's look at some examples. The interviewer asks you to respond to a criticism or comment on someone else's opinion:

Q: We have heard that the mayor is furious that you have rejected his attempts to negotiate with the unions on your behalf?

A: We have heard that too, *but* (bridge) our priority right now is to get the vital equipment out to the hospitals so that lives can be saved (key message).

Here is a real-life example: Australian TV's "unmissable" premiere current affairs program, *Lateline*, featured an interview with Mark Regev, Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesperson, about the apparent deliberate targeting by the Israeli Defense Forces of an observer post with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. Four unarmed international observers were killed during the conflict with Hezbollah. *Lateline* coanchor Tony Jones conducted the interview.

Jones: How does an Israeli jet using laser-guided bombs manage to wipe out a UN post of which the coordinates were well known to the Israeli military?

Regev: I think that's an excellent question and I wish I had a good answer for you, but I'll be honest, I don't.*

Now, Regev bridges (silently) to his key message:

The Prime Minister has ordered the military to conduct a comprehensive investigation. He has promised Kofi Annan that we will share the results of that investigation with the UN and with the relevant countries that lost their servicepeople ...†

* Tony Jones interview with Mark Regev, *Lateline*, ABC Channel 2, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2006/s1697956.htm>, 10:46 PM, July 26, 2006.

† Ibid.

This is an excellent example of not taking the question at face value but dealing with the question honestly and, most importantly, *briefly*, and then bridging to his key message. (See Box 18.3.)

BOX 18.3 KEY BRIDGING PHRASES

These phrases will help you deal with a question without biting into the poison or repeating a negative.

That is an interesting perspective ...

That is a great question ...

On the contrary ...

I've heard that too ...

There is a bigger picture ...

There is more at stake or more to it than your question suggests ...

There is more to the situation than you are asking ...

What you are really asking me is ...

Before I get to the heart of the question, let me give you some background that will be useful in understanding what is really going on ...

You are asking me a legal question and you'll need to speak to a lawyer about that, but what I can tell you is ...

As much as I'd like to help you, that would be breaking client confidentiality but on a broader level this is what we do in the process at that stage ... (give a generic example)

WHEN YOU DO NOT KNOW THE ANSWER

I am constantly asked by clients, "What if I don't know the answer? Is it OK to say 'I don't know'?"

Yes, it is, as long as you immediately follow up and bridge to a key message that will help your credibility or help your key audience understand your motives. You will never have all the answers, and in this era of low trust, it will help your credibility if you demonstrate that while you do not have all the answers right now, this is what we do know and what we are doing, or this is what we have learned so far. Open, honest, and

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transparent communication, please, *not* spin. Take a lead from the Israeli Defense Ministry spokesperson.

The "I don't know" response is useful when you just cannot answer the question, whether it is because you are not allowed to (for policy or legal reasons) or you simply do not know. Often in a crisis you will be asked questions that are more appropriate for more suitably qualified people, say, a lawyer or a doctor. Or, you may not have the exact, precise, or relevant information on hand. So, what can you do?

Let's take another look at how Mark Regev handled another pointed question.

Jones: We understand it was a bombing from the air. Do you know whether in fact that it was a laser-guided bomb?

Regev: No, I do not have that information and I apologize for that (but) there is nothing to hide here ...

He then goes back to his point about "a full and open investigation."

This strategy is particularly useful when you are asked to speculate or predict something.

GETTING BEHIND THE QUESTION

Often, you need to interpret the question and respond to what is behind the journalist's question. This technique, which addresses the underlying issue of the question, is a sophisticated response; but it is powerful and one to master.

For example, you may be asked a very broad question (a macro issue) but you may only be able to answer from a micro position. Or the question might be very specific, a micro question, and your role is to talk about the broader issues. The following is an example taken from an interview on an Australian current affairs program with a suburban mayor in Melbourne:

Q: How can you justify seizing 12 trucks apparently conducting legal business?

* Tony Jones interview with Mark Regev, *Lateline*, ABC Channel 2, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2006/s1697956.htm>, 10:46 PM, July 26, 2006.

A: Well, we're normally considered to be a friendly sort of council, so that action is out of character, but ...* (He then bridges to his key message.)

The interviewee, an Australian mayor, responded to the underlying issue of the question—the (illegal) behavior—and addressed that behavior in his response. He responded very effectively without any hint of toxic language. If he had taken the question at face value he may have answered, "We were perfectly justified in seizing the trucks because ..."

While taking the question at face value is clearly a choice, it is the least effective interview technique. The vast majority (at least 90%) of the time, you will end up spiraling down a deep, dark well that is extremely difficult if not impossible to climb out of, and if you do, you will be damaged by the encounter.

QUESTION THE QUESTIONER

Sometimes you will be asked a vague question that is clearly open to interpretation, or worse still, one that puts (the interviewee) on the back foot making assumptions about a certain point in the question. Make sure that you always deal with or question the assumption.

For example, you may be asked about a certain report or survey in very general terms: "We have seen reports that 8 out of every 10 people being interviewed lie."

Your response could be: "What report are you specifically referring to?"

Or, if the question is unclear, you could say: "I'm not sure that I understand the question. Could you please ask that again?"

It is OK to question the questioner, but not for every question. As I say, you need your wits about you, and you need to be in active-listening mode when you are being interviewed.

GIVE-AND-TAKE IN AN INTERVIEW

Clearly, it is important to have "give and take" in an interview and to realize that you are human and not a robot, and that you will flounder from time to time. As the saying goes, "To err is human." The key is, how do

* Kerry O'Brien interview with Mike Hill (former Mayor, Mooreland City Council), 7:30 Report, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 1997.

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you recover from a blunder when you are in the middle of an interview? What do you do and say?

Unlike the former Miss California (2009), you do not take off your microphone and pretend not to hear the question, have a conversation with your publicist that you think cannot be seen or heard, refuse to answer any more questions, and then walk off the set.*

* Larry King interview with Carrie Prejean (former Miss California, 2009), *Larry King Live*, CNN, <http://larrykinglive.blogs.cnn.com/2009/11/12/carrie-prejean-threatens-to-leave-larry-king-live/>, November 11, 2009.

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Dealing with Difficult Questions

Questions come in a variety of forms. The *degree of difficulty* usually depends on the content of the question, the severity of the crisis, whether you are perceived to have acted slowly or quickly to the situation, and if you have waited to respond toward the end of Stage Two or Stage Three. It is not good to be late in a crisis. Remember that speed is of the essence in a crisis, particularly in this lightning-fast digital age.

In a high-stakes crisis interview, you will be asked to speculate, confirm, deny. You will be asked a range of questions—hypothetical questions, questions full of opinions, leading questions. How do you handle them?

Below is a list of possible questions with some suggested responses that we, at Media Skills, have collected over the years.

Q = HYPOTHETICAL

These are the questions that ask *what if*? You are required to *speculate* on possible scenarios. Hypothetical questions are highly dangerous. Before you know it, you are being held to what you said, even though it was only speculation. Hypothetical questions may also seek *guarantees* from you. And, as we all know, "the only guarantees in life are death and taxes."

Examples of hypothetical questions:

- What happens if this does not work?
- What will you do if something unexpected happens?
- If this fails, will you step down?

A good way to handle hypothetical questions is to first *identify* the question for what it is: "You're asking me to see into the future." Then move back to the safety of what already is, rather than what might be.

Q = LOADED

A *loaded* question contains an *assumption* that may well be *incorrect* or *misleading*. If you simply answer the question and ignore the incorrect part, you may seem to be agreeing or *endorsing the negative ideas*.

Examples of loaded questions:

- When did you stop beating your wife? (Assumes you were beating your wife in the first place.)
- Given your poor record, this could be seen as another failure, couldn't it? (Assumes a poor record.)

An effective way to deal with loaded questions is to tackle the underlying assumption. "Actually, our record is second to none." Then respond with your message.

CASE STUDY 19.1

Timothy Geithner Responds to a Loaded Question

U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner demonstrated how to handle a loaded question during an interview on June 18, 2009, about reactions to the financial rescue plan as a result of the economic meltdown in October of the previous year, with the veteran broadcaster Jim Lehrer on *PBS NewsHour*. Lehrer asked this question:

Joe Nocera, financial writer for *The New York Times*, had a piece today, and he said that your plan is, quote, the Obama-Geithner plan, let's call it, is, quote, "little more than an attempt to stick some new regulatory fingers into a very leaky dam rather than rebuild the dam itself."

Geithner responded:

Well, as you say, we're going to get it from both sides. Some people will think we're being unfair, doing way too much, and overdoing it. And some people are going to say we're not doing enough. But let me say that the most important things we are doing, we're going to put in place stronger protections for consumers; that's a basic obligation of governments, and our systems failed to do that. We're going to make sure that the system has much stronger shock absorbers, cushions to absorb the

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stress of future recessions. And we're going to make sure that government has better tools for managing future crises. Those three things are very important. They're the most important things for us to do, and we've put a set of very strong proposals to achieve that outcome.'

Do you see how Geithner responded to the essence of the question *rather than take it at face value*, and then bridged to his key message and wisely resisted the temptation to criticize or comment directly on *The New York Times* piece or admonish the journalist?

Q = LEADING

Leading questions often come as a *series*, using *closed* yes and no questions to *lead* you to a particular conclusion. Journalists use this technique to either lead you toward an *admission* or a *promise*, or merely as an attempt to *simplify* or *summarize* a complex issue.

Examples of leading questions:

- You've said you would support such an initiative and criticized the government for moving too slowly. So, that means we can expect to see this being introduced as soon as you are elected?
- So, what you're telling us from all of that is to watch out for this company?

By avoiding a simple yes or no answer, you will slow the pace and make it more difficult for a journalist to lead you.

Q = EITHER/OR

These questions are looking for *either* the black or white of an issue, leaving no room for the gray. Such questions can trap you into definitive responses you would rather avoid.

Examples of either/or questions:

- Are you going to resign or not?
- Is this investment safe, or should we be pulling our money out?

* Jim Lehrer interview with Timothy Geithner, *PBS NewsHour*, Public Broadcasting Station (PBS), http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/business/jan-june09/geithner_06-18.html, June 18, 2009.

- Your chairman has said this is the case. Do you agree or not?
- Is this a recession or the worst market collapse ever?

Responding to the heart of the question often works. "If it's a scapegoat you're looking for, it's a little more complicated than that. The real issue is what we do to improve the economy."

An *I don't know* type of response can also be effective. "Without having heard the government's exact words, it's a bit hard for me to say one way or the other." Then bridge to your key message or important point.

Q = CLOSED

Any type of difficult question can come in a *closed* form, demanding a *simple yes or no answer*.

For example, "Will you be paying compensation to the victims?" Using the principle that you must *respond* as opposed to *answer*, I recommend taking a word or phrase from the question and using that to frame your response. A response could be: "The best thing we can do right now for the victims is to concentrate on what went wrong and how we can all prevent this from happening again, so that's why we are doing ... (state actions that you are taking)." Or, "We have taken responsibility for what has happened, and we will be looking at all aspects of the accident to see what the best solution is for everyone, so that's why we are ... (state actions that you are taking/have taken)."

You should always avoid answering these questions definitively because not only will you miss the opportunity to reinforce your message, but there could be some doubt as to whether you are either agreeing or disagreeing with the issue.

Q = MULTIPLE

Some questions seem to have three or four different parts to them, all of which you feel obliged to answer. Treat them as *multiple choice*. Choose the question you are happiest to answer. If the journalist wants to deal with the other parts of the question, they will be asked later.

Many journalists, particularly print journalists, frame their questions as they proceed with the interview, so listen for the opportunity to see the *gift*, and choose that part to respond to.

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For example:

Q: Many people are frustrated at the slow response to the accident and the length of time it is taking to clean up the mess. You have stated you are working around the clock to fix the problem and that does seem to be working. And both the Coast Guard and the EPA are now talking about the exhaustion of the crews and their concern for their safety and well-being. The environment is also a major concern. What is your reaction to this?

A: I understand and share that frustration. This is a really difficult situation. Please understand that we are putting all of our resources on this most challenging situation. As for the safety of our crews—that is uppermost on my mind, and we are flying in extra resources to solve all of the issues that are confronting us at this time. And we will continue to work around the clock until this is solved.

Q = GUARANTEE

Often a stumbling block, the guarantee question is predictable in many situations. Avoid guaranteeing anything, other than what is already the case.

Q: Can you guarantee this will work?

A: I know people would love for me to be able to give a guarantee, but it's never that black and white. What I can say is that we have taken the right steps, in the right order, at the right time, to give us the best set of conditions possible.

Or some alternative responses are as follows:

A: All I can guarantee is that I will work day and night until we have found the solution to this problem.

A: I can guarantee that we will take the results of the investigation very seriously.

In your frustration, you may be tempted to be sarcastic and say something like, "Can you guarantee that every word of my interview will be aired/printed?" That will most likely cause a confrontation with the journalist and, if live, will leave the audience wondering why you lost your cool. *Impressions do matter.*

Better to practice a response like the example given and say it with feeling!

Q = QUESTION FROM HELL

It may be a question that you are expecting, but struggle to answer without getting yourself into trouble. Or, it may be a question from out of left field that catches you by *surprise*.

The impulse will be to avoid the question from hell. But be warned: A "no comment" will only suggest that you have something to hide—even when you don't. A good control technique, thinking through the possible hot spots before the interview, will help you here.

HANDLING SILENCE

Say what you want to say, and stop. *Resist the temptation to fill the silence.* Once you have said what you want to say—zip the lip! And wait. It is the job of the journalist to fill the silence and ask another question. Your job is to respond—always—within two to three seconds. If you hesitate or take too long to respond, you will look compliant or guilty.

HANDLING INTERRUPTIONS

In fast-moving situations like crises, you will also face the challenge of interruptions. They may occur during a hostile, aggressive, tough interview, or when you are on live radio or TV and there is breaking news.

- *On live radio*—A breaking story happens and time simply runs out. An interruption could also happen if the quality of your phone line deteriorates.
- *On TV*—If being interviewed via satellite, a breaking story could happen and satellite time could run out. If you are in a panel discussion with multiple spokespeople, there are constant interruptions because people talk over each other.

You are also likely to be interrupted on live radio or TV if:

- You are taking too long to get the point.
- You fail to make a concrete point after a few questions.
- You have avoided the question.

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- You are using spin, corporate speak, jargon.
- You are perceived to be lying.
- You are perceived to be the bad guy.

During my coaching sessions with chief executive officers and major spokespeople during a crisis, I often remind them that they have choices with interruptions. These include:

- Ignore and continue with your point.
- Wait until the interviewer has asked his or her question and then go back to your response.
- Respond to the interruption and wait for another opportunity to make your point.

The best approach is to pause, allow the interruption, and then quickly make your point. At that point, you can choose to respond to the (interrupted) question. You may have heard politicians say, "if you would just let me finish." That is a phrase you could use, but be aware of how you say it. Impressions are key in a crisis. You will be judged in a nanosecond, as we discussed in Section III.

As we can see, media interviews are anything but normal conversations in which we always speculate, hypothesize, and offer opinions. Be very careful of what you say, and avoid thinking that just because a reporter is asking you questions, your opinions are worth more than the messages that you are supposed to be delivering. And, above all, be prepared.