

9 out of 10 Questions Don't Need an Answer

by Paul R. Edwards

When you're called upon to answer questions, chances are that you sense that many questions are piggy-backing another meaning than that indicated by the words. Research in "Synectics" has shown that nine out of ten questions that people ask are seeking something other than information. The "something" people are seeking is recognition, stimulation or demonstrating that they're "one-up" on the person called upon to answer.

Based on what motivates questioners, questions can be classified into three categories:

- *Message* questions,
- *Getcha* questions and
- *Answer-Seeking* questions

Message Questions

A message question is one in which the asker is using a question to present an idea, state a conviction or share information. Sometimes message questions are statements without the raised tone of voice that signals a question. Program moderators try to guard against message question when they say, "No statements, only questions." Usually when that happens, message senders are a little more skillful in phrasing what they have to say as a question.

Message questions begin with phrases such as, "Don't you think," "Have you ever considered," "Since" and "What would happen if." The asker of the message question is looking for affirmation of his position or idea. Message questions account for about 45 percent of questions asked.

An effective way to deal with the message question is to agree with it, thereby stroking or affirming the asker. When the idea or opinion is unacceptable, it is important to personally recognize the asker in some way. For example, you can say, "I sense that you have given this a great deal of thought and have some feelings about it. I share your concern, and my thinking is. . ."

Getcha Questions

The getcha question is used to reveal a blemish in the speaker or his question. The goal of the getcha questioner is to be "one up" by making the answerer appear inadequate, show anxiety, embarrassment, guilt, or anger. The getcha questioner is trying to toss somebody else his or her hot potato of anger, fear or woe. And, people who catch the hot potato may change it from anger to anxiety or get angry themselves.

Getcha questions often begin with "Why" or "How come" and they account for about 45 percent of questions asked.

Getcha questions are actually games in a behavioral sense. Because games are predictable, it's not necessary to become defensive and fall into the trap set by the getcha questioner. There are a variety of ways of dealing with these hot potatoes.

One way of dealing with them is to admit the failing, yours or someone else's and say, "You got me!" or "You're right!" Admitting that the getcha questioner is correct depends upon whether the facts support the getcha questioner, and whether it's appropriate to say so. Once you've acknowledged the getcha player and his point without hostility, there's not many places left for him to go.

You can disarm a getcha player by saying, "I give up!" or asking a disarming question.

Another way to deal with a getcha player is to redefine the question in terms of a message that you want to get across. If you're asked a "when-did-you-stop,-beating-your-wife" question, such as, "When is your company going to stop evading government pollution standards and finally put an end to ruining the community?" you can state that your corporation employs and serves people and you can't do either without a healthy environment. It's important to have in mind the message you want to convey and not to restate the accusation of the questioner.

With an angry person, you can find something to stroke, such as, "We are glad to live in a community where people care about their environment," and "I am glad to see people willing to commit themselves to ideals they believe in." It may be necessary to do this as many as three or four times.

Another technique is to agree and disagree. Agreeing with part of the point being made and then disagreeing questioner is to be "one up" by making and by presenting factual evidence, differences of opinion or your own feelings. For example, if you're representing a medical association and being asked a question by someone who's using a question about the high cost of health care to put down MDs, you can agree that there is a problem and that caring for the health of 300 million people is too big a job to be done without doctors, and propose what needs to be done to assure an effective health care delivery system.

Sometimes you will need to confront the getcha question by asking "Are you trying to start a fight with me?" or asking the getcha player to talk with you about what's really bothering him or her. Another way of confronting is to say, "If we keep this up, the next thing we know we'll be out in the hall at each other's throat."

In dealing with getcha questions, it's important to stay in the "here and now." Re-living past history is the communications equivalent of walking into a mine field.

Humor can be used effectively in dealing with getcha questioners. Illustrating the use of humor is an incident which Lloyd George, the fiery Welshman and Prime Minister of England, experienced in a parliamentary campaign. A major campaign issue was home rule, and Mr.

George, who was a home rule advocate, was exhorting an audience with, "Home rule for India!" "Home rule for Ireland!" when a burly man at the back of the crowd stood up and shouted angrily, "Home rule for hell!" George paused, and then retorted, "That's right, that's right, each man for his own country!"

Answer-Seeking Questions

The answer-seeking question is the only one in which the questioner is truly looking for an answer. The answer being sought may be facts, opinions or the sharing of feelings. Answer-seeking questions account for only about one of ten questions asked. Questions beginning with "How" are frequently answer-seeking. As a rule in answering, make your most important point first, particularly if you're dealing with the press.

The key to picking up whether a question is carrying a message, seeking to put you down, or asking for an answer is by focusing on the way the question is asked. Voice tone, facial expression, posture and gestures are indicators of hidden messages. People can often tell a getcha question by the feeling they get in the pit of their stomachs. If you want to experiment with this, record a meeting or speech followed by questions. Play back the tape several times, including one time in which you turn down the volume so that you listen only to tones. Then check out how many questions need an answer.

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