

The Art of Anticipation: Developing Effective Q-and-As

**Public Relations Tactics
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The news release has been sent. The employees have been informed. Your company's big announcement appears to be going as planned. And then, right in the middle of an interview, a reporter tosses out a question you and your executives aren't expecting. Instead of scoring a direct hit with a key message, you suddenly find yourself stumbling over your words.

How do you avoid this scenario? With complete preparation, including a good Q-and-A.

The Q-and-A is a fundamental part of any important announcement your company or client is developing. More than any other PR tool, a Q-and-A helps you target your communication to your audience's informational needs. It also enables you to transition back to your core messages without leaving the audience feeling that you haven't answered their questions.

Why a Q-and-A is essential

When an organization issues a major announcement, the news release should focus on the few most critical points. However, it's also wise to provide context and additional detail to ensure your story is understood and accurately reported. One approach is to provide a backgrounder, a collection of supplemental information distributed at the same time and to the same audiences as the news release. A Q-and-A, however, goes a step further — anticipating and providing answers for additional questions those audiences might ask.

A good Q-and-A frames questions the way that they might be posed by a stakeholder —and answers those questions as directly as possible. The act of thinking through a consistent set of responses is valuable preparation for any spokesperson, even if the questions you actually receive are worded differently from those in your Q-and-A document.

Steps to producing an effective Q-and-A

1. Brainstorm stakeholder questions.

Gather a group of people from your organization which represents the viewpoints of each stakeholder audience. The departments represented could include human resources (for employees), government or community relations (for government leaders and community organizations), sales and marketing (for customers), supply chain/purchasing (for suppliers), and investor relations (for the investment community). A face-to-face discussion is best, but if time deadlines or distance prevent it, a conference call will do.

In this brainstorming session, review the announcement and related key messages, and then generate the questions each stakeholder audience is likely to ask. Encourage the group to draw on their past experiences. Think broadly and consider all possibilities.

2. Tailor your answers.

Be aware that the answers to a given question may vary based on the needs of each stakeholder audience. For example, if you are announcing the closure of a manufacturing facility, you can expect a question about the impact of that closure. The answer you develop for employees would address any potential job losses, but the answer for customers would focus on whether the closure might disrupt product supply.

3. Don't be afraid to repeat yourself.

Information from Q-and-As is most often used as needed as the appropriate question arises, rather than in unbroken linear form. Repeating the same concepts in different answers isn't redundant; in fact, it can help increase the chances that your key messages will be stated and heard.

For example, if your company is announcing a new product, you could be asked about how you succeeded in bringing this product to market. Your response might be that "Innovation has been a top priority of our company for many years, and we've focused our resources on new product development." The same concepts —innovation is a top priority and focused resources — might also be a part of the answer to other questions, such as "What differentiates you from your competitors?" or "What are your company's business goals?" In each case, you can use innovation as the link back to your key product messages and go on to describe other innovations that make this product best in class.

4. Tackle the tough ones.

After you've struggled to come up with a good answer to a difficult or sensitive question, it's tempting to simply remove the question from your Q-and-A. Don't. Remember that eliminating a tough question is no guarantee that it won't get asked. Make an effort to answer every single tough question on your list as honestly and openly as possible, even if the only thing you can say is, "We don't have all the information right now, but we'll get back to you as soon as we do."

5. Keep it concise.

Each answer should be concise enough that the person using the Q-and-A can read through it a few times and pick up the thread of the discussion. Complex, multiple paragraph answers are not helpful to either spokespeople or audiences. A good Q-and-A response is no more than three to four standard sentences long. It's also a good idea to limit the number of Q-and-As in your final document to those that the brainstorming group believes are most likely to come up.

6. Decide whether to broadly publish your Q-and-A.

Once a Q-and-A has been completed, you'll need to decide whether to publish it (on a company Web site or in a newsletter, for example) or simply provide the Q-and-A to spokespeople who will share the information verbally.

Publishing your Q-and-A is usually a good idea if:

- The information is straightforward and easy to understand. Highly technical or complex information may need to be explained by a subject expert rather than left up to individual interpretation.
- It doesn't matter who shares the information. Since published Q-and-As may ultimately be distributed through many channels, they should not depend on a specific spokesperson to achieve their impact. In some cases, however, a Q-and-A should be linked to a specific source or spokesperson. A company Q-and-A about the construction of a new facility, for instance, might best be communicated verbally by the CEO rather than published so that audiences know the project has top management support.
- The information is not sensitive and applies to general audiences. Broad distribution is usually best if the information is intended for broad audiences. However, some information is sensitive or audience-specific and should not be shared widely. For example, your organization might be advised not to discuss an ongoing lawsuit, even if you are asked questions about it. Sensitive issues such as layoffs might be best discussed individually with affected employees rather than published.
- The Q-and-A contains information that audiences need to act on. Q-and-As about special programs, promotions, recalls, etc. may contain information such as consumer hotline numbers that audiences need to know. Such Q-and-As should be distributed in print or electronic version to key audiences as quickly as possible.

Watch, learn and improve

When your Q-and-A is complete and the moment of truth arrives, pay attention to which questions get asked — and which stakeholders ask them. Track audience response to the content and detail of your answers. Ask yourself: Did the Q-and-A meet my audiences' needs and reflect my organization's messages? By acting on what you learn, you can continue to refine and update your Q-and-A. Better yet, you'll be able to anticipate and produce a superior one next time around.

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