



Nail the Q&A portion of your interview. Tips for teams to provide 'preferred answers' to questions you do – and don't – expect.

By Anne Scarlett, first printed in the *AE Marketing Letter*

Scenario: Your firm is short-listed for the design of a high profile private university project. You've sent a team of seven to make the pitch. After one hour of formal presentation, the 10-person selection committee launches thirty minutes of questions-and-answers. Is this the moment where the team will make - or break - its position relative to the competition? You bet. Fielding questions with solid, responsible answers is an essential element to win business.

In many scenarios - pitching new business, delivering a formal presentation at a conference, daily interface with clients – we often find ourselves responding to questions that are sensitive or complex. Within any context, we can prepare ourselves by anticipating, and crafting, our best answers. Practicing answers to tough questions will enable you to articulate your response with confidence. Why? Because the 'right' core message is already ingrained in your brain. With flexibility, you will modify the details and your delivery style in order to fit each specific context.

Q&A poses an additional challenge when you are presenting amongst a team. Let's return to the original scenario. A question has been posed of the project manager. You (the Principal-in-Charge/Marketing Director), hold your breath, fearful that the project manager will not provide your preferred answer, much less with eloquence. A project interview is not like the Family Feud game, where teams can huddle before answering. Instead, various team members are expected to answer questions on their own - in short order and with clarity.

Below are eight tips to strengthen Q&A as a team:

Keep a master list of questions received during interviews. Include them all, however oddball, compelling, or common. For context, make note from which client each question was posed. This running list will become an invaluable tool for your team to reference during interview preparation.

Prepare framework for 'company-preferred' response. Why should we select your firm? How does your company reduce change orders? When have you been in litigation? Will you be comfortable if other firms execute your master plan? What is your technique for inspiring stakeholder support? Questions span the gamut. Agree upon the appropriate responder in advance. Why should the principal-in-charge respond to a design philosophy question when it belongs to the senior designer? Why should the project manager answer a question regarding the HVAC system? It appears awkward, or untrusting, when the wrong people respond. Team trust will thrive if core messages – and individualized answers– are known in advance. Provide company-preferred responses for your team; encourage personalization through anecdotes and delivery style.

Videotape your Q&A drills. When prepping for an important interview, videotape your presentation and the Q&A. It's easy, and you'll see the nuances of how your team jives in terms of body language, rapport, and respect. Do you portray compatibility and trust, or do you seem uncomfortable and nervous?

Formulate your opinion regarding the client's unique project. What will be the most difficult aspect of our project? Which construction delivery method makes sense for us? When reviewing the scope, what are your thoughts on phasing?

Is execution of our master plan feasible within the allocated timeframe? These project-specific questions require your opinion; clients will hang on every word within your answers. Don't just think about responses; practice them (aloud)! The clients may not always embrace your answer, but they should be appreciative of your honesty.

Know the specifics of your audience. Owners, user representatives, board members, and primary-point-of-contacts all hold personal interests. Learn their roles on the project (if they have roles). This will help you anticipate who may ask what type of question. Then you can direct the answer by using their name. As well, your answer may have alternatives; savvy interviewees can smoothly articulate responses to each relevant party to ensure all interests are being 'heard'.

Practice your stories. Anecdotes earn immediate credibility, and are sure to be remembered. Practice telling stories using the STAR format (situation, task, action, results) to keep your messages concise, orderly, and effective.

Repeat the question before answering (or within your response). This gives you time to set up your answer, and it gives the asker the opportunity to clarify if you misunderstood his/her intent. Nothing is more unsatisfying than a poor response that doesn't even answer the question.

Don't talk over one another; be smooth. If you disagree with your teammate's response but it's benign, then move on. If you disagree and notice a negative response from the audience, then salvage it by carefully building upon the response with utmost respect. The most adept interview teams defer to one another to enhance - or fully respond to - particular questions. Some teams will use an emcee approach, where the project manager will field all questions and lob them to the appropriate respondent, including the principal-in-charge. This demonstrates a real strength around his/her ability to manage the entire team.

Spice up Q&A by posing questions of the client. What about times when the Q&A portion of the interview is lame, when bored committee members blandly ask questions in an obligatory way? Rev up a dialogue by asking questions of them. Pre-plan these questions in advance. Maybe they're rhetorical, but at least they will inject energy into this closing portion of your interview.

Preparing for Q&A is more challenging than preparing the actual presentation, but it could seal the deal. Here's my question: are you up to that challenge?