

Your answers with clients and prospects should be tight. Answer the question in the first two sentences. Don't start with a detailed explanation and then back into the answer.



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Impress clients with tight answers

RAMBLING PRESENTATIONS and answers project a lack of confidence and undermine relationships with clients

WHEN I WAS PRACTICING LAW, one of the top partners in the firm invited me into his office to discuss the tiny case that I had been working on for his huge client. It was the first case I had worked on by myself, and I desperately wanted to impress.

"So tell me Joey," this partner said as I entered his office. "What is happening with your case?"

I proceeded to tell him everything I knew. I discussed my research for the brief. I summarized the facts of the case. I detailed the challenges we had with witnesses. I went on and on.

The partner interrupted. "Joey," he said. "I've asked you the time of day and you're telling me how to build a &*\$#@ watch!"

Too many of us take questions as invitations to deliver rambling presentations. We come across as uncertain and disorganized. We project a lack of confidence that undermines relationships with clients or prevents us from winning new accounts.

But handling questions needn't be difficult. All it takes is a little preparation and a strategy for keeping answers simple.

Anticipating the questions

You're not prepared for a meeting if you haven't tried to anticipate the questions. I worked with an attorney who told me about meeting with an investment bank. Having left a job at a London hedge fund, he was seeking a job as in-house counsel. The interviewer's first question was "Why did you leave London?"

"I really fumbled that one," the attorney told me. The meeting went downhill from there. He hadn't thought about the questions, including the totally predictable "Why did you leave London?"

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once opened a press conference with "Does anyone have any questions for the answers that I've prepared." Kissinger understood that you always anticipate questions.

Keep the answers tight

Of course, once you've written down the questions, the next step is to come up with tight answers. Tight answers inspire confidence.

When Gen. Colin Powell was asked during a press briefing about the strategy for the first Iraq war, he said, "Our strategy for going after this army is very, very simple. First we are going to cut it off, and then we are going to kill it." His tight and simple answer inspired confidence.

Your answers with clients and prospects should be similarly tight. Answer the question in the first two sentences. Then explain further if you like. But don't start with the detailed explanation and then back into the answer. That makes you sound rambling and uncertain.

I've had several years to think up a good answer to the partner's question, "What's happening with your case?" Here's what I've come up with: "We're trying the case in two weeks and it looks like we're going to lose."

When I tell this story, people say, "But then the partner is going to ask 'Why are you going to lose?'"

That's fine. Follow-up questions are OK. But trying to answer every possible follow-up question before they're asked becomes a rambling presentation. That makes you look and sound uncertain.

So let your listener ask follow-ups. That's called "having a conversation." And it's better than telling your listener how to build a &*\$#@ watch! 