Mastering Technical Sales
2037 Trowbridge Drive
Newtown, PA 18940
Phone +1-215-431-1552
John@masteringtechnicalsales.com
www.masteringtechnicalsales.com
John Care, Managing Director

Questions and Answers

Some Q&A About Q&A

(This is a condensed version of a "Q&A about Q&A" session I participated in last year at an MBA level presentation workshop for scholarship candidates.)

As Sales Engineers we spend a lot of time (and training) figuring out the right questions to ask of our customers. This article will focus on what happens when we are responsible for the "A" rather than the "Q" in a Questions and Answers Session.

When we are trying to 'sell" something to a "buyer" the entire process is packed full of Questions and Answers. From the SE's viewpoint at the start of the sales cycle the Q&A is heavily biased towards the Q and as we progress through technical validation towards closure the ratio switches and we become responsible for the A's. This is known in the trade as *technical whack-a-mole* after the popular children's game.

I'll break down a Q&A event into three sections; the prelude, the performance and the postscript, all based upon a 60-90 minute presentation format.

The Prelude

1. How much time should I plan for Q&A? Making the assumption that you will have an interactive audience I'd say plan for a minimum of 10 minutes and a maximum of 20 minutes, but not to exceed 25% of your available presentation time. Less than 10 minutes can leave the audience feeling short-changed, and more than 20 can start to get boring and off-point.

2. How should I position the Q&A? Be positive about running a Q&A session. Don't say "*and of course there will be the obligatory Q&A at the end*." That doesn't make it sound very exciting or rewarding. By letting the audience know that here will be Q&A towards the end it may give you more control of the demo or presentation

3. How can I best prepare for the Q&A? Put yourself in the audience's shoes and game plan what questions you may be asked. You need to suspend your expertise (eliminate what is known as The Curse Of Knowledge) and imagine what you have left unsaid. It is often helpful to run the presentation past a colleague, spouse or friend and get their reaction. Then prepare some material or technical/business references if necessary to back up your presentation. If you are commonly asked the same questions after every presentation you may want to think about adding or modifying something in your pitch to proactively answer that question.

4. If it is a team presentation, how do we co-ordinate answers? That is an easy question. Whoever is at the front of the room (i.e the current presenter) should act as the MC and co-ordinate on behalf of the team. It makes you look very professional and prevents "add-on" answers (as in "I'd just like to add that we also…")

The Performance

5. How do I encourage questions? First off all you need to move into plain sight, which means step away from the podium, table or laptop and get closer to the audience so that you seem approachable. You may want to seed the audience with a couple of people (for example your coach in a sales situation) who will ask questions. You can also ask the audience a question to provoke some interaction, as in "how many of you agree/disagree with …"

6. What do I do when I am asked a question? I get very self-conscious and nervous. Listen. Look at the person asking the question, make eye-contact, acknowledge their presence and then listen some more. Once the question has been asked, stay silent for a second or two, and then start to answer. Don't interrupt anyone in the audience (unless they are monopolizing the time or making their own speech). Actually, before you answer, make sure you understand the question. If you are unsure of the question, or it seems a little harsh, then paraphrase it first and then answer.

7. How long should my answer be? I actually answered "long enough"! In a sales situation less is more. Both "Yes" and "No" are complete sentences and are acceptable answers to certain questions. You probably need to provide more detail than that, but be careful about volunteering extra facts or details that may get you into trouble. I always draw the analogy to the detective series on TV – the main suspect always provides that one extra detail within an alibi that trips them up.

8. What happens if I don't want to answer the question or need to make some other point? Do not be a politician – you need to provide an answer or someone will call you out on it. You can defer the answer and use *it's complicated/needs research* – but don't entirely avoid the question. If there is some other unrelated point you need to make it should have gone into the presentation to start with. By all means be creative and if you can find a linkage with a little bit of artistic license then go ahead.

9. How do I handle the obsessive questioner? You should answer their first few questions fully and professionally. If there are other people waiting to ask questions then call on them. Often the other people in the room will help you out anyway. If you do encounter an obsessive "Seymour" then as you are finishing up the answer to his/her question make sure you are in eye contact (and if possible standing in front of) the most powerful person in the room. Seymour will then usually be quiet.

The Postscript

10. So do I finish with Q&A? No. Note that is a complete sentence (point #7). Finishing with Q&A is a weak ending and offers you minimal control over the end of the meeting.

11. OK. What should I do instead? Finish with a slide/screen or statement that wraps back to the way you started the presentation. When announcing the Q&A you should foreshadow the wrap-up by stating that "OK now we will have about 15 minutes of Q&A, and then I'm going to wrap up with telling you about a customer who..". This is analogous to the news media running a teaser like "the chemical in your home that may be killing your children …. News at 11!"

12. Any more advice about the ending? Yes – be conscious about your residual message. That is the one thing that you want people to remember about your presentation after they forget everything else. It's highly unlikely they'll remember the great Q&A three weeks from now. For more on this read "What Goes On The Last Slide?"

13. What about after everything is said and done? Be conscientious about follow-up. If you promised to make your slides available, to get back to someone about a question or to provide some additional reference or technical material – check in with that person at the end of the presentation, confirm what they needed, and then follow-up in 24 hours if possible.

Summary

I was amazed how often my two colleagues on the panel interrupted questioners because they knew what they were going to ask! More than half the work in any relationship is learning to listen. As Sales Engineers we can bring tremendous credibility into any sales situation and there is no faster way to lose that credibility than to conduct a poor Q&A. Don't get so focused on your Discovery skills and asking Questions that you forget about how to provide Answers.

"Computers are useless – they can only give you answers."

Pablo Picasso, artist.

"A man who knows all the answers most likely misunderstood the questions"

Anonymous.

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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