

Welcome to Chemistry Café. This column provides tips and tools to help you communicate effectively about your work, research, studies, or activities and public engagement. Our goal is to help you tell your story about science and, in the process, put a human face on chemistry. Each column covers one topic. Let us know how we can support you by sending questions, suggestions and feedback to chemistrycafe@acs.org.

How to Handle Uncomfortable Questions

by Angie Abraham

At one time or another, you may experience a situation when you're asked an unexpected question that puts you in a difficult position. Whether you're chatting at a conference, responding to a post on social media or being interviewed for a blog or article, it's important to know how to navigate challenging questions. This is especially true when questions are asked about confidential information, proprietary data, legal issues or ongoing negotiations. Use this guide to learn how to respond to uncomfortable questions with tact.

Recognize risky questions. The Office of Strategic Communications & Public Affairs at University of California Irvine identifies several questioning techniques that should alert you to be cautious:

Loaded question

Question "The article you authored last year was ineffective in spurring action for change. What makes you think more research would help solve the problem?"

Tip: First, consider whether the question is asking you to respond on your own behalf or on the behalf of an organization you belong to. If it's the latter, refer to one of the responses in the "Say no to 'no comment'" section below. If it is appropriate for you to respond, either counter or accept their statement, then bridge your answer to a positive message.

Answer: "What's ineffective is doing nothing. Providing an original contribution to the research strengthens the knowledge base on [subject] which hopefully will lead towards the development of practical solutions."

Commenting on other's comments

Question: "How do you respond to the recent remark that [organization name] could 'do more'?"

Tip: This question invites you to speak for someone else. Don't do it, especially if you did not hear the statement yourself. It's possible that the quote was taken out of context to get a reaction.

Answer: "I don't have a full picture of what was said, so I don't have a response to that question at this time."

Challenging a colleague

Question: "How would you go about increasing diversity at [organization name]?"

Tip: The question could put you at odds with your superiors or colleagues, if you answer it by telling people how YOU would handle the matter. If something is out of your area of expertise, say so.

Answer: "I am not the one who does the hiring at [organization name]. But I can tell you that all of us have a responsibility to create a welcoming environment for all cultures."

Negative Entrapment

Question: "Some individuals have told me they had a lousy experience at [organization name]. What is

your response?"

Tip: In your response, never repeat the negative part (i.e., the "lousy experience") from their question.

Answer: "I believe we work hard at [organization name] to provide a positive experience for people. In fact, several new programs have been developed that cater to the needs of our [associates]."

Say no to "no comment"

When responding to a problematic question, saying "No comment" is the public relations kiss-of-death. A no-comment response can be interpreted to mean that the person is knowingly hiding the truth to avoid giving an honest answer. It also suggests a disinterest in helping answer the question. Use one of these responses instead:

- "I'm sorry, but I'm not able to answer that question at this time."
- "I wish I could help you with that, but it is not my area of expertise. I wouldn't want to give you the wrong information."
- "I'd be happy to clarify the matter once I have all of the information."
- "That's an important question and one I will answer when we know more detail."

For help with questions about ACS, always be sure to contact us at newsroom@acs.org