

BEP 36 - Presentations: Question and Answer (Part 1)

Today, we're going to take another look at making presentations in English with the first in a two-part series focused on question and answer - popularly referred to as Q&A.

This listening is from the Q&A session that follows on from our previous episode on closing presentations - BEP 33. It takes place during a meeting of senior sales and marketing staff at Harper-Tolland, a global producer of special purpose steel. As we begin, Nick Fisher, the European sales director, is just finishing his presentation.

There's quite a lot vocabulary and idioms in today's episode—more than we can comfortably cover in our debrief. So you might want to visit our website at www.businessenglishpod.com and sign up as a premium to access a complete transcript for this and other podcasts.

Now let's listen. Pay attention to how Nick and Nick's boss, Max, handle questions from Bryan, the European marketing director and Cindy, the regional sales manager for Germany.



Vocabulary

value proposition – The basic value to the customer that differentiates one's product from the competitors' products.

the proof is in the pudding – Idiom. It means that the true quality or value of something can only be judged when it's tried and tested.

to lend credence to something – To believe sth is true or valid.

to make a sweeping indictment of sth – A broad accusation, usually made without fully understanding the situation.

to paint with numbers – Idiom. To use numbers (statistics) to make a situation look better than it is.

the facts on the ground – Refers to the real situation.

to tell a different story – To present the situation in a different way. So in literal terms, Nick means that the real situation is different from Bryan's statistics.

to butt heads (over sth) – To have a disagreement about sth.

to sound out a proposal – To discuss the advantages and disadvantages in detail.

Listening Comprehension Questions:

1. What is a basic problem with the ColorMax launch, according to Nick?
2. What figure does Bryan site to argue against Nick's assertion that ColorMax lacks a clear value proposition?
3. What simple fact does Nick think clearly demonstrates the problem?
4. Who is Nick proposing the company retrain?

Dialog:

Nick: ...that we can address this training shortfall. Then, by this next time year, instead of scratching our heads we'll be cracking the champagne.

Many thanks for your attention. So now I'm very interested in hearing your comments.

Bryan: Well, thank you very much. I'm sure we all agree that it's an interesting proposal.

Nick: Thank you.

Bryan. Now, going back to what you were saying about our product lacking a clear value proposition.

Nick: Uh huh.

Bryan: You're saying that our sales people are not successfully differentiating our product from the competitors' products.

Nick: Yes, that's right. They're not communicating to the customer the experience of using ColorMax—not just facts and figures, but what makes ColorMax different, in terms the customer can relate with.

Bryan: Then why would you say that our market surveys are ranking us 30% ahead of the competition in the key values that we are promoting?

Nick: That's a fair question, Bryan. I know your team has worked very hard on the launch, and I've studied the latest survey results. But the proof is in the pudding. We have to ask ourselves, why aren't we selling more steel?

Bryan: So you just don't lend any credence to the survey?

Nick: That's not what I'm saying...

Bryan: With such positive results, has it occurred to you that it might be a just a little bit too early to make such a sweeping indictment of our training?

Nick: Look, Bryan, I didn't say the survey's not important. But all of us can read the numbers differently—it's a little like painting with numbers sometimes. But the facts on the ground tell a different story. Why isn't our order volume going up?

Bryan: Nonsense! I think you have to take into consideration the fact that we have a lag time....

Max: Nick, Bryan, hold your horses. I can see we're butting heads a little bit, and it's not productive. Let's use the time we have left to sound out Nick's proposal.

Cindy: Can I come in here?

Max: Go ahead Cindy.

Cindy: If we retrain all the sales people...

Nick: Sorry, hold on a sec Cindy, perhaps that wasn't totally clear.

Cindy: Oh?

Nick: In the first phase, I'm just proposing we retrain the project engineers and key account managers, not the whole sales force. Just the people with the greatest customer contact.

Cindy: All right, but it's still a lot of people.

Nick: Right, I can see what you're getting at. However, I expect that with proper implementation, we can get the job done in a month.

Cindy: But how do we measure success?

Nick: You mean, how can we tell if it's working?

Bryan: Yes, that's right.

Nick: That's a good question. I would expect to see a 5% increase in order volume...

Debrief

Let's go through the dialogue piece by piece to analyze how Nick and Nick's boss Max deal with questions. Of course, often the presenter is also the chairperson of the Q&A session. In this case, Nick and Max are sharing this duty, so we can learn from both of them.

First of all, how does Nick open the question and answer session?

Many thanks for your attention. So now I'm very interested in hearing your comments.

Of course, there are other phrases to open a question and answer session and you can check BEP 33 for more examples. But let's get back to the Q&A.

What's the first question Nick's asked? Bryan, the European marketing director, is skeptical about Nick's proposal, but he's careful to start out gently by offering some polite praise. This is always a good idea (as it shows respect for the presenter).

Bryan: Well, thank you very much. I'm sure we all agree that it's an interesting proposal.

Nick: Thank you.

Bryan. Now, going back to what you were saying about our product lacking a clear value proposition.

Nick: Uh huh.

What does Bryan mean by value proposition? In marketing, a value proposition is how one intends to differentiate one's product from the offerings of competitors.

Do you remember how Bryan begins his question? He says, "Now, going back to what you were saying..." This is a useful way to refer to an earlier point. Nick himself could use this way to bring up something he had mentioned earlier simply by changing "you" to "I." For example, "Going back to what I was saying about establishing a clear value proposition."

There are more ways to refer to earlier points. Listen.

- What exactly did you mean when you were talking about?
- I was interested in your comments about timing. Could you say a little more about that.
- Could I just go back to the point you made about branding. Well, in my experience....

So Bryan has just referred back to the earlier point about establishing a clear value proposition. What happens next?

Bryan: You're saying that our sales people are not successfully differentiating our product from the competitors' products.

Bryan clarifies Nick's earlier point to make sure he understood correctly and, perhaps, to state the situation to his advantage. He uses "You're saying..." to paraphrase Nick. To paraphrase means to restate something using different words. This is a useful skill in clarifying—we often paraphrase what we understood to check that it's correct.

Then, notice how Nick paraphrases himself, partially to further clarify the point and perhaps to further restate the situation in a way that is advantageous to him.

Nick: Yes, that's right. They're not communicating to the customer the experience of using ColorMax—not just facts and figures, but what makes ColorMax different, in terms the customer can relate with.

It's interesting to note that in clarifying, we are not always just checking understanding, but also strategically restating the situation to our advantage.

Later on in the dialogue there is another example of clarifying.

Cindy: But how do we measure success?

Nick: You mean, how can we tell if it's working?

Bryan: Yes, that's right.

Cindy asks Nick, "How do we measure success." Then Nick, to make sure he understands, says "You mean, how can we tell it's working?"

"You're saying" and "you mean" are both ways to introduce a paraphrase for the purpose of clarification. Let's listen to some other ways to clarify.

- Let me check I understand. Are you asking why our market share has increased?
- Well, it all depends on what you mean by "in the near future." Are you talking about next week? Or are we talking about the next 2-4 months?
- Could you be a little more specific?

Let's go back again to the earlier part of the dialogue to examine how to deal with another kind of Q&A situation, what to do when you receive a hostile or aggressive question. Nick has just restated his belief that the poor sales are due to unclear communication to customers of value proposition. How does Bryan respond?

Bryan: Then why would you say that our market surveys are ranking us 30% ahead of the competition in the key values that we are promoting?

Nick: That's a fair question, Bryan. I know your team has worked very hard on the launch, and I've studied the latest survey results.

Bryan is on the attack here. He sites a market survey that seems to contradict Nick's belief that the value proposition is not being communicated to customers. Nick responds by saying, "That's a good question, Bryan. I know your team has worked very hard..." This is a kind of buffer—sometimes also called a softener, or cushion. He uses this language to soften the disagreement that he expresses next. Using a buffer is one effective strategy for dealing with hostile questions. As a buffer, Nick could also say,

- Thank you for your question.
- That's a very interesting question.
- I'm glad you asked that.
- Thank you for giving me the opportunity to comment on that.
- Thank you for raising this point. You know, I really appreciate all your hard work.
- Very good question.

Now that he has softened it with a buffer, how does Nick express his disagreement with Bryan? He uses an idiom to describe his attitude to the marketing survey.

Nick:...But the proof is in the pudding. We have to ask ourselves, why aren't we selling more steel?

"The proof is in the pudding" is a shortened version of "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." Nowadays, people usually just say "The proof is in the pudding." It means that the true quality or value of something can only be judged when it's tried and tested. The meaning can be summed up as, "Results are what counts" So Nick is saying that good market survey results are useless unless they translate into something real—profits.

Understandably, Bryan, as the marketing director, is not so happy about Nick's attacking the value of his market survey.

Bryan: Nonsense! I think you have to take into consideration the fact that we have a lag time....

Max: Nick, Bryan, hold your horses. I can see we're butting heads a little bit, and it's not productive. Let's use the time we have left to sound out Nick's proposal.

Max, who is the boss, gives us another good example of dealing with a hostile situation. He uses a couple idiomatic expressions to calm everyone down. The informality of these idioms probably helps relax the situation.

"Hold your horses" is used to ask someone to slow down. It usually implies that someone is moving too fast, or assuming too much. "Butting heads" literally refers to two or more people or animals hitting each other with their heads, (like deer). Max employs the softener "a little" to make the situation seem less serious and he uses the inclusive "we" to remind everyone that we're a team—"I can see that we're butting heads here a little." The image is humorous, which probably also works to smooth the situation.

Now, Cindy has a question, but it seems as though she might not have been paying attention. What does she ask?

Cindy: Can I come in here?

Max: Go ahead Cindy.

Cindy: If we retrain all the sales people...

Nick: Sorry, hold on a sec Cindy, perhaps that wasn't totally clear.

Cindy: Oh?

Nick: In the first phase, I'm just proposing we retrain the project engineers and key account managers, not the whole sales force.

Nick says "Sorry, hold on a sec Cindy, perhaps that wasn't totally clear" to clear up a misunderstanding. "a Sec" is an informal abbreviation for "second." It signals a relaxed tone.

Also, earlier when Bryan says Nick doesn't believe the market survey, do you remember how Nick replies?

Bryan: So you just don't lend any credence to the survey?

Nick: That's not what I'm saying...

"That's not what I'm saying..." is another way to clear up a misunderstanding.

Here is some other language you could use.

- Actually, let's go back to that point for a second. From what your saying, I'm not sure that I made myself totally clear.
- Oops, hold on a moment. I think there might be a slight misunderstanding about the scope of this project.
- Sorry, but that's not quite right. Instead of 70—seven-zero—I meant 17—17.

Before we finish today's show, let's go back to the dialogue to examine one last point. Listen to Cindy and Nick continue their discussion. Nick has just said that he only wants to retrain project engineers and key account managers, not the whole sales force.

Cindy: All right, but it's still a lot of people.

Nick: Right, I can see what you're getting at. However, I expect that with proper implementation, we can get the job done in a month.

“Right, I can see what you’re getting at...” is a way to concede a point. That is, to admit that someone may be right. It’s a kind of agreement, and can also be used as a buffer (or softener) before you disagree. There are many more ways to concede a point. Let’s look at a few.

- Right, I can see what you’re saying.
- Mhmmm. You may have a point there.
- Yes, there’s something to that.
- Uh huh, that makes sense.

All right. That’s all for today’s episode. Today, we’ve looked at a lot of effective skills and language for dealing with and asking questions. (including opening a Q&A session, clarifying, referring back, dealing with hostility and conceding a point. You’ve also studied some great business idioms).

Be sure to go to www.businessenglishpod.com and sign up as a Premium Member to access the study notes for this and other episodes. The study notes include a full transcript, additional explanations, and review exercises.

Thanks for listening & take care. Oh, and hold your horses—don’t worry, we’ll be back soon with the second in this two-part series on dealing with questions. See you then!

Language Review Questions:

Rearrange the jumbled sentences to make useful phrases for Q&A. Identify the function of each phrase (i.e., buffer, clearing up a misunderstanding, etc.).

- | | |
|---|-----------|
| 1. Misunderstanding slight think I might there been have a | Function: |
| _____ | _____ |
| 2. Giving that comment to opportunity you me thank for the on | Function: |
| _____ | _____ |
| 3. Right sorry that’s but quite not | Function: |
| _____ | _____ |
| 4. That to there’s yes something | Function: |
| _____ | _____ |
| 5. That asked glad you I’m | Function: |
| _____ | _____ |

Useful Language:

To begin the Q&A:

- Right, that concludes the formal part of my presentation. Now, I'd like to invite your comments.
- And now, if you have any questions, I'll be happy to answer them.
- Now we have half an hour for questions and discussion.
- Right, now any questions or comments?
- So, now I'd be very interested to hear your comments.
- Great, now I'd like to open it up for Q&A. Does anyone have any questions.

To refer to an earlier point:

- What exactly did you mean when you were talking about?
- I was interested in your comments about timing. Could you say a little more about that.
- Could I just go back to the point you made about branding. Well, in my experience....

To clarify a question:

- Let me check I understand. Are you asking why our market share has increased?
- Well, it all depends on what you mean by "in the near future." Are you talking about next week? Or are we talking about the next 2-4 months?
- Could you be a little more specific?

Using a buffer to handle hostile questions:

- Thank you for your question.
- That's a very interesting question.
- I'm glad you asked that.
- Thank you for giving me the opportunity to comment on that.
- Thank you for raising this point. You know, I really appreciate all your hard work.
- Very good question.

To help correct a misunderstanding:

- Actually, let's go back to that point for a second. From what your saying, I'm not sure that I made myself totally clear.
- Oops, hold on a moment. I think there might be a slight misunderstanding about the scope of this project.
- Sorry, but that's not quite right. Instead of 70—seven-zero—I meant 17—17.

To concede a point:

- Right, I can see what you're saying.
- Mhmmm. You may have a point there.
- Yes, there's something to that.
- Uh huh, that makes sense.

Answers

Listening Comprehension

1. Lack of a clear value proposition
2. Market surveys show ColorMax 30% ahead of the competition in the key values that the company is promoting.
3. Poor sales
4. Project engineers and key account managers during the first phase (maybe more people later)

Language Review

1. I think there might have been a slight misunderstanding.
Function: *Buffer*
2. Sorry, but that's not quite right.
Function: *Clearing up a misunderstanding*
3. Yes, there's something to that.
Function: *Conceding a point*
4. Could you be a little more specific?
Function: *Clearing up a misunderstanding*
5. I'm glad you asked that.
Function: *Buffer*