

Using Precision Answering in Email

Answering email creates endless opportunities for building skill at Precision Answering. Email is easier to edit than speech, so before you press that “Send” key, pause for a half-second. Re-read the question they asked, re-read the answer you gave, and then ask yourself: Have I been clear? Crisp? Concise?

The Three Rules of Precision Answering

Learning Precision Answering is like learning any complex skill. We need to return to the fundamentals again and again. For Precision Answering, there are three.

Rule 1: Answer the Question

Q: “Are we going to hit our next milestone?”

A: “The next milestone isn’t the issue. It’s the following one that’ll be the problem. It looks like there might be a strike next month. If that happens....”

Q: “Yes, we will have to think about that, but what I need to know right at the moment is whether or not we are going to hit the next milestone.”

A: “Yes, we will. In fact, we’re two days ahead of schedule.”

Don’t answer the question you think they should have asked, or wish they had asked, or were certain they meant to ask. You don’t know where the questioner is coming from or where they are going so, for starters, assume they asked exactly the question they wanted to ask. If you don’t understand, clarify.

Rule 2: Start with the Core

Q: “Are we going to hit our next milestone?”

A: “You know, at that last review I didn’t think Luis’ team was on track, but after talking to him yesterday and phoning the Detroit team today, I went back to my spreadsheet and....”

Q: “So, are we going to hit our next milestone?”

A: “Best case, yes.”

In everyday discussion we often try to “save” our answer for the end of the meal, like dessert. Precision Answering says to serve dessert first. We start with the core (yes, no, number, date, etc.). This makes the logic of our thinking clearer to others.

Rule 3: Keep It Short

We know a great deal about our work, and we're excited by what we know. So when we're asked a question we have a natural tendency to want to share our expertise. All of it. All at once. We naively assume that the more we say, the more value we add. The fact of the matter is that the poor questioner doesn't know what to do with our heaping pile of information, jam-packed with answers to questions that haven't been asked and that would never have been asked. The more we say, the less they hear. As a result, the efficiency of discussion plummets.

The Essence of Precision Answering

"Speak in bullet points." The three basic rules of Precision Answering can be boiled down into those four simple words. Bullet points help us discover the structure in our thinking, and they help us communicate that structure to others.

Exercise

Martha asked John three questions. As you can see, John's reply was blurry. Rewrite his email using the Three Basic Rules of Precision Answering. Think in bullet points! Compare your answer with ours on the following page.

From: martha@vervago.com
Sent: Mon 25/09/2006 10:17 AM
To: john@vervago.com
Subject: GoldPoint Project Status Update

Hi John,

Could you give me an update on the GoldPoint Project? Specifically, I want to know:

1. Will the late product samples push back the schedule?
2. Any feedback from our customers so far that might require us to retool features for the product?
3. Anything else that might affect the final schedule?

Thanks,
Martha

From: john@vervago.com
Sent: Mon 25/09/2006 11:48 AM
To: martha@vervago.com
Subject: RE: GoldPoint Project Status Update

Hello there, Martha,

The project is going pretty well. I just made a call to Hajiko and that call was great. Harry at Hajiko really liked the product sample and thought some of the new features were really beneficial. They have not done all the testing yet, so they'll get back to us sometime next week. I have not spoken to anyone else about the product samples, and I haven't yet checked in with Mae who is doing the rest of the product sample calls, so I'll have to get back to you. The late product samples will not affect the schedule. However, we are going to need to push back the schedule two weeks, because I got a note from Ken at DellaCorp who is on vacation. Since he's on vacation, he will not be able to look at the product sample we sent him for a couple of weeks.

John

“If it doesn't fit in the preview pane, it doesn't get read.”
Stacey Dickinson, PQ Trainer

John's response could be rewritten this way:

1. The late samples won't push back the schedule.
2. No, but we've only made one call so far, to Hajiko. I'll get back to you when we have finished the calls.
3. Ken from Dellacorp is out of town, so the schedule will need to be pushed back two weeks.

Good luck on your trip! By the way, the call to Hajiko went really well.

Alternatively he might reply:

1. No.
2. None yet. I'll get back to you when we finish calling.
3. Yes, Dellacorp needs two more weeks.

Depending on the context, a response like this might be seen as either admirably concise or impersonal and downright rude.