

The Most Awkward Question

Type: Q&A Subject: Relationship Management

By Andrew Sobel

Question

What's the best way to respond when a potential client asks you "So, how are you different?"

Answer

Most people squirm uncomfortably when clients pose this challenge, and they give unpersuasive answers. Why? Because when you approach answering this question using traditional descriptive logic, you are never very convincing. No matter what adjectives you use, no matter what effusive praise you heap on yourself and your firm—"We listen well"; "We are the best at what we do"; etc.—someone else can always say the exact same thing. So any effective response to this question must be characterized by honesty, by showing rather than telling, and by actually role-modeling how you are different during the meeting. Here are a number of possible responses that are more effective than simply saying "We listen well" or "We are highly collaborative":

1. "First, let me say that all of the major companies that we compete with have strong technical competence. Where you would really see the differences come out is in actually working with us day to day. I'm curious, what are you looking for in choosing a firm?"
2. "I think that the differences between firms only become tangible during an actual working relationship. Our clients do, in fact, tell us that we are very different to work with than our competitors, and in a sense they are in the best position to answer that question. If it's appropriate, before we finish I'd like to provide you the names of two current clients of mine who would be happy to serve as references and tell you what it's like working with me and my firm."
3. "Trying to describe how we are different is a bit like showing you a photograph of a good meal—it's just not ~~same~~ ~~same~~ spending an evening at the restaurant and eating it in person! The best way to help you understand this might be by describing a couple of engagements we recently completed for clients in your industry (or, "for clients that have faced very similar challenges"). These examples will give you a better sense for the way we work with clients."
4. "I believe there are significant differences between us and our competitors, but it does depend somewhat on the particular issue we are asked to work on and the competitor you are comparing us to. Who else are you thinking of? (or, Who else have you had experience with?)."
5. "The best way for me to demonstrate how we are different is by showing you how we would think about and approach a particular issue you face. Could I ask you to describe your most important priorities right now, or the highest-priority issues you're trying to make headway against?"
6. "One of the ways we are distinctive is in how we invest to understand our clients' business. So the first step for me is to better understand what your concerns or needs are right now, and see if there is a good match with one of our capabilities. We would then want to invest time in both understanding that issue from your perspective, and in showing how we think we could approach it and be helpful."

If you do want to say things like "We have better industry experience than our competitors" then you must back these statements up with specific examples. You must demonstrate that your claim is real and provides a benefit to the client. Otherwise it won't be a credible response