

# “What Do You Do for a Living?”

## Two New Ways to Respond

**Maryanne Peabody & Larry Stybel,  
Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.**

Before reading this article, please take a moment to write down your answer to the following scenario:

You are at an association dinner. The table is round. You are seated next to two people you have never met before. Someone asks you, “What do you do for a living?”

Given the scenario we just outlined, please write down your response...

Finished?

Now you are ready to read!

--

The other day, one of the writers of this piece was at an association dinner. Seated to the author’s left and right were two strangers. The author turned to the man on the right and politely inquired what he did for a living. His response:

“I am a corporate attorney.”

The stranger seated on the left whispered:

“Seen one, you’ve seen them all.”

The purpose of this article is to help avoid positioning yourself as a commodity when someone asks, “What do you do for a living?” or “Tell Me About Yourself.”

This article should be of value to anyone who seeks to gain the attention of busy decision makers.

### **“SEEN ONE AND YOU’VE SEEN THEM ALL”**

We Googled the above phrase and found 3,210,000 instances where it appears.

Why is phrase so common?

We speculate that decision makers are overwhelmed with stimuli. To remain focused, they need rules of thumb to give themselves permission to ignore someone.

“Seen One and You’ve Seen them All” is one rule of thumb that gives decision makers this permission.

What is YOUR reaction if a stranger at a party identifies herself as someone who sells life insurance?

“Seen One, Seen Them All” is the following cognitive rule:

Sample one item in a category, and then declare you have enough information to draw conclusions about the entire category.

“Seen One” may not be valid as a cognitive rule but it does give you permission to move on.

## TWO OPTIONS

Job candidates and people looking to establish business relationships ignore the “Seen One” effect at their peril.

There are two ways to ensure that “Seen One...” does not apply to you:

*create a new category where you dominate*

*focus on dilemmas.*

### ***Create a New Category and Dominate It:***

When we ask an audience to give the first word that they think of when we utter the word “car” there is no consensus.

When we ask the same audience to give the first word they think of when we utter “safe car,” Volvo is the clear consensus.

Volvo dominates the Safe Car category despite the fact that CONSUMER REPORTS lists several cars that are as safe as Volvo.

Ask a business audience “who does strategic planning with Fortune 100 Companies?” and McKinsey will be the first or second name selected.

There was a time when there were just three categories of mutual funds: equity funds, bond funds, and money market funds. Morningstar came up with the idea of classifying equity funds into nine categories. Today there are at least 64 categories of equity mutual funds.

Can you create a category for yourself or your company and then proceed to dominate that category? For example:

“I am a corporate attorney who is often called in by high tech companies to help sell my client company to one of the world’s top ten private equity companies.”

## **Dilemmas:**

A second way to describe yourself is to focus on you or your company as an answer to a dilemma. For example, when we began Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. we never said, "We do outplacement."

We said, "We help CEOs fire their friends."

A problem is defined as a situation where there is a "correct" answer or a "better" answer than the alternatives.

A dilemma is defined as a choice among options that seem equally unfavorable. There is no "better" solution. And there is no "correct" solution. "I should hate you, but I love you" is an example of an archetype dilemma. Being caught between the "devil and the deep blue sea" is another dilemma.

The decision makers you meet often define themselves as outstanding problem solvers.

Define yourself as capable of helping decision makers manage dilemmas, you place decision makers into a cognitive zone where they are quick to express their discomfort and lack of skill. For example here is the dilemma statement for a client who is a corporate transaction attorney:

"I work with corporate clients who find that if they move too quickly on their exit plans, they may leave money on the table. And if they do not move aggressively enough, the entire deal may be lost."

Below are two professions with three self-defining statements for each profession:

### **COMMUNICATIONS**

"Seen One" response: "We do strategic communications consulting."

Category response: "We are the region's leader in specialize in communications with companies who do not have the culture of communications."

Dilemma response: “We work with companies that find communication a risky proposition. And it is an even riskier proposition if they fail to communicate.”

### CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

“Seen One” response “I am a clinical psychologist.”

Category response: “I am the leading psychologist in Portsmouth, NH who specializes in working with clients who work in Boston’s financial services industry.”

Dilemma response: “I am a clinical psychologist. Many of my clients find themselves in situations where the external world evaluates them as successful and yet they evaluate themselves as failures.”

### NOW IT IS YOUR TURN

At the start of this article, we asked you to write down your response to the question “What Do You Do for a Living?”

You have now finished the article

Please review your original response. Are you satisfied?

If not, try something different new!

\*\*

Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. provides leadership and career success services for senior level executives sponsored by companies. Core services revolve around retained search, leadership development, and executive outplacement.

For a 15-minute free consult, contact Larry Stybel at  
[lstybel@stybelpeabody.com](mailto:lstybel@stybelpeabody.com)

Stybelpeabody.com

###