

STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES, INC.

“What Do You Do?”

Here Are Three Ways to Respond.

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

You are at a business dinner at a round table. You are seated between two people you have never met.

The person on your left asks you, “What do you do?”

In the space below, write down how you would REALLY respond to this question:

Finished?

Now read our article

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The other day, I was sitting at a round table at a business dinner. Seated to my left and right were two strangers. I turned to the man on my right and politely inquired what he did for a living.

“I am a corporate attorney.”

The stranger seated to my left whispered in my ear:

“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?”

This article should be of value to anyone who seeks to gain the attention of busy decision makers. This could be for sales meetings, networking events, or job interviews.

“SEEN ONE AND YOU’VE SEEN THEM ALL”

Google “Seen One and You’ve Seen Them All.” There are 3,210,000 instances where it appears.

Why is phrase so common?

From a cognitive psychology perspective, people require rules of thumb to avoid information overload. “If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all” is a useful rule of thumb:

Sample one or two items in a category. Declare you have enough information to draw conclusions about the entire category. No need to spend scarce time learning more about the category: “seen one and you’ve seen them all.”

What is YOUR reaction when you are at a party and you are confronted with a pleasant stranger who tells you she sells life insurance????!!

TWO OPTIONS

There are two ways to insure the “Seen One...” does not apply to you: create a new category where you or your company dominate or focus on dilemmas confronting your clients.

Create a New Category and Dominate It:

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

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

Volvo dominates the Safe Car category.

Mention to an audience “who does strategic planning?” and there is no consensus.

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.

“We are the number 1 mutual fund that does small cap growth equity investments in former Communist countries that begin with the letter ‘C.’”

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

“I am perhaps one of three corporate attorneys who are known for work for New Jersey medical device companies seeking to sell into one of the world’s leading ten life science organizations.”

Dilemmas:

A second way to describe yourself is to focus on you or your company as an answer to a dilemma.

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.

If we keep U.S. troops in Country X, terrible things will happen. If we remove U.S. troops from Country X, terrible things will happen.

The decision makers we work with often pride themselves on their skills as 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 lack of skill.

For example:

“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 number 1 company specializing in nonprofit communications company where it is important to have a strong legislative network in Wyoming.”

Dilemma response: “We work with companies that find communication risky. The culture cries, “Keep it Quiet!” 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 a clinical psychologist who works with extraordinarily successful female business leaders who live West of Boston.”

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, I asked you to write down your response to the question “What Do You Do for a Living?”

Did you focus on “Seen One?” like most of your competitors?

Try rephrasing what you do terms of a category you could legitimately claim to dominate or a dilemma.

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Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. works with companies seeking to grow without destroying what made them great.

Core services: retained search, leadership development, and executive outplacement.

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