

STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES, INC.



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“What Do You Do for a Living?” Two New Ways to Respond

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?”

Finished?

Now read!

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One of the writers was at an association dinner. Seated to his left and right were two strangers. This polite inquiry was made to the stranger on the right: “What do you do for a living?” His response:

“I am a corporate attorney.”

The stranger seated to the writer’s 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?”

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.”

A Google search yielded 3,210,000 instances where this phrase appears. We think this phrase is a cognitive tool decision maker use to avoid information overload. The phrase means:

Sample one item in a category, and then declare you have enough information to draw conclusions about the entire category. No need to explore this category again.

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 or is a financial planner?

Two Ways You Can Avoid the “Seen One.....” Trap.

We work with executive outplacement candidates who sometimes wish to create their own consulting practices. In working with them, we recommend that there are two ways to ensure that the “Seen One...” does not apply to you:

create a new category where you dominate or focus on dilemmas.

Create a New Category and Dominate It:

Think about the first word that comes to your mind when you read the word “car.” If we polled one hundred readers, there probably would no consensus.

Ask the first word that comes to your mind when you read the phrase “safe car,” we suspect that most of the one hundred readers would think “Volvo.”

Volvo dominates the Safe Car category even though *Consumer Reports* lists several cars that are as safe as Volvo.

Mention to an audience “who does strategic planning?” and there will be 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.

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 raise funds by selling equity interest to one of the world’s top ten private equity firms.”

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.

The decision makers you meet often define themselves as outstanding problem solvers. Once you define yourself or your company as a solution to a problem, decision makers will wonder why they can't solve the problem themselves or find someone less expensive to solve it.

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:

“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:

1.

Seen One: “We do strategic communications consulting.”

Category response: “We 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.”

2.

Seen One: “I am a clinical psychologist.”

Category response: “I am a clinical psychologist who works with extraordinarily successful business leaders 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 You!

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

Please review your original response. Are you satisfied?

Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. works with clients to add success to leadership succession: retained search limited to Board Directors, CEOs, and CFOs; C-Suite Outplacement; and leadership coaching for high potentials.

The readers of *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly* voted Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. the #1 or #2 Outplacement Firm for six years in a row!

For a free 30-minute consult, contact:

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