

Is it okay to not have an answer?



My first job out of college was working as a Field Service Engineer. I traveled all around the country (and out of the country), supervising the installation, inspection, and repair of very large industrial compressors. Some of these machines were 13 feet tall and were driven by 5,000 horsepower engines. I had no prior experience with this type of equipment, having just graduated, and felt very inadequate for the responsibilities I was assigned.

One of the most uncomfortable situations for me was being asked questions for which I did not have an answer. How did I respond? I didn't want them to find out I was a rookie and fault my company for sending someone as "green" as me, so here was my approach. After being asked a question I was clueless about, I would instantly start talking but quickly morph the conversation into focusing on something I was much more familiar with. The result was that the client was somewhat impressed with what I shared and usually didn't realize I never actually answered their question. That was probably not the best thing to do, but I figured it was better than lying and less embarrassing than admitting I didn't know the answer. I think it was a knee-jerk survival tactic.

Fast-forwarding a bit, when I first started studying apologetics and heavily using it when talking with skeptics, those deeply rooted tactics crept into my evangelism. Ask me a question I don't know the answer to, and I will talk a lot about something semi-related and really impress you! Simply admit I didn't know? Never!

I have had the following experience many times. Someone would ask me a question, and while I was responding (using my usual tactic), my brain would say to myself, "What are you talking about? You don't know the answer, so where are you headed with this?" I would then tell my brain, "Hush, we do this all the time. It'll be fine. Never admit defeat, it shows weakness, and that's not acceptable!" If nothing else, it was an entertaining internal conversation.

Do I still use that tactic? No. I will explain why in the context of giving you advice for your own evangelistic conversations.

Good Response

When someone asks you a question for which you know you don't know the answer, the best response is to say, "I don't know." Why? Because it's true!

Better Response

Actually, a better response is, "I don't know, but that's an interesting question. I would like to know more about that myself."

Question of the Month

Best Response

The best response is, “I don’t know, but that’s an interesting question. I would like to know more about that myself. Let me ask you, is this one of your top questions? If not, can we temporarily put that one aside and you ask me your most important questions? If it is, I’d love to do a bit of research and get back to you.

Bestest Response 😊

The “bestest” response is, “I don’t know, but that’s an interesting question. I would like to know more about that myself. Let me ask you, is this one of your top questions? If not, can we temporarily put that one aside, and you ask me your most important questions? If it is, I’d love to do a bit of research and get back to you. One more very important question. If I can get back to you with a reasonable answer, will you be willing to hear more about the Bible [*or Jesus or God or salvation... whatever you’ve been discussing*]? (If they say, “No,” they’re not being serious, and you’ll have to pray to determine if you may be wasting your time. If they say, “Yes,” then you have your work cut out for you and need to do exercise due diligence in getting back to them.

As strange as it may sound, only knowing some things tends to lend credibility. When someone seems to “have an answer for everything,” they may come across as being too slick and just really good at pulling the wool over your eyes. When you admit you don’t know something, you are much more relatable and genuine. And human!

I’ll never forget an experience I had just a few years ago. I was talking to one of the leading Creation scientists and I was excited to ask him a few technical questions. At one point, I asked him what his opinion was on a particular fossil, and his answer was, “I don’t know.” That’s it! I thought for sure he would at least say something like, “I don’t know, but from what I can tell...” and then share a few details about what he did know. When I pressed him to share more (in a respectful, sincere way), he simply said he’d never even heard of that particular fossil. At first, I was frustrated, not getting some kind of commentary, but my later reaction was one of being very impressed that this brilliant scientist was comfortable admitting he knew nothing about a particular subject, even though it was within the larger extent of his field of expertise.

Fast-forwarding to the present. It is very rare that someone asks me a question to which I don’t know the answer. Let me quickly add that my consistency in answering questions is not related to being super smart (I don’t see myself that way). It is primarily due to having been speaking for 39 years and typically hearing the same types of questions over and over. In the rare case a challenging question arises, it usually involves a recent discovery that I am unfamiliar with. In those cases, I simply say, “I have not had a chance to read about this discovery, but it sounds very interesting. Do me a favor. Please email me a link to the article you referenced so I can review it and then I’ll be able to get back to you.” How’s that reasonable? I mean, what else could I possibly say? If you don’t know the details regarding something, how could you possibly be expected to have a specific, authoritative answer?

Question of the Month

In closing, if not having answers to every question is a reason to reject a person's belief system, then skeptics are in big trouble. I am not necessarily suggesting this, but you could challenge the skeptic to write down their top 5 questions, and then you can write down your top 5 questions for the skeptic to answer. Then, you can each provide a response to each other's questions and see who has the fewest or weakest answers. I guarantee you, my questions for skeptics are ones for which there is no real answer. If they provide any answer at all, they go against reason, logic, and science, as opposed to being based on, or consistent with reason, logic, and science.

Not having answers is perfectly acceptable, at least temporarily. However, we are also commanded to "always be ready with an answer" (2 Peter 3:15), so we need to seek them out with all our heart, mind, and strength.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him (James 1:5).

If you have any questions about this or any other issue, please don't hesitate to [contact us!](#)