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The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
Autumn 2013

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Who'd be a Subject Matter Expert?

What do subject matter experts think about us? Andrew Peck's recent experiences shed some light on the way we interact.

Recently I became an inventor. Not in the early-hominid rock wielding sense of the word, but in the rather more polished arena of surgical devices. The good news is that if you have a bright idea there are portals that currently exist to get you out of the garden shed and into industry... in the case of anything medical or health related it's the Medilink network¹. One afternoon in early July I had a meeting with an innovation team leader at the Medilink offices in Nottingham to explain my idea.

I was asked questions in exactly the same way that technical authors – and policemen – ask questions of their subjects. My statements were probed, exceptions and ambiguities were sought out, and at one point whilst discussing funding for prototyping I was left thinking *"how should I know if it'll work in space? I've never been!"*

I then had to write a one page précis about the device, and am currently waiting for another appointment to present to a senior academic clinician to generate a 'Statement of Clinical Viability'.

After this, funding may be released for prototyping, where I'll have to attend a very fancy lab somewhere on an academic campus to try to explain the ergonomic and hybridised shape that I see clearly in my head and can mould in blu-tack to someone with a PhD in 3D printing.

The long march – via experimental, veterinary and military medicine – towards the newspaper headline about the 'first successful' treatment has begun.

Throughout the process I'm expecting to be asked more questions in quite graphic – and given the device's purpose, quite gruesome – detail. I'm going to have to know or come up with the answers and have them make sense to my audience. This has already made me feel on the spot and as a result I've been thinking about how we, as technical communicators, ask questions of SMEs, whilst tending to steer clear of the overtly confrontational. I've heard all of the following cringe-inducing strategies

used in the past month, some of them by me:

Opening with flattery

We ask questions like this because we think people like praise, but bad timing can leave people feeling very uncomfortable.

"Michael, you're just the man I've been looking for... you're bound to know the answer to this..."

(Michael is thinking *"I really hope so, the whole office is watching now"*)

"... what's the torque rating on the load bearing nuts on the 1998 short wheelbase variant we shipped to Taiwan?"

"Erm...?"

If you find yourself doing this, try cutting the padding, and asking questions in a way that doesn't make your SME squirm.

The rambling question

When we write technical documents we're masters at getting to the point, but sometimes we throw all the rules out when we ask questions:

"It says here that 'if the TCL is pushed more than 3 degrees past idle, the automatic engine shut-off is disabled whilst the TT and NG thresholds are no longer controlled by the PMS'. I understand that the idle point varies depending on the loading of the aircraft and angle of the taxi-way, but what happens when it's raining and cold?"

Questions like this can leave SME's feeling bewildered and overwhelmed. If this is you, try getting to the point faster, and only provide the rest of the information if asked for clarification.

Correct me if I'm wrong...

These questioners will start with long suppositional statements about the way they assume the system/product works. The responder spends the first 10 minutes addressing the enquirer's mistakes and talking about the mash-up of metaphors used rather than answering the underlying question.

The silent pause

Silent pauses can work, people like to fill space in conversations with

information and chatter... but when done on a conference call with the microphone too close to your face, it just sounds eerie.

I've mentioned the police once already in this article and I have chatted to a uniformed friend about how questions are asked. He explained that learning to ask questions by watching *The Bill* is a pretty bad way to go if you're not quizzing criminals because the tactics used aren't designed to get questions answered, they're designed to confuse, bamboozle and pressure a resistant interviewee into giving something away and cracking. In fact the police are now encouraged to ask nice, open ended-questions and just let people talk².

Open-ended questions are questions like 'how does this work?' or 'why does this work?' or 'then what happens?' They produce rich data, and you're going to need a notepad or a dictaphone to revisit what's been said, but extracting information from our notes rather than an ambushed SME is the way to go and a skill I'm going to focus on developing. **C**

References

¹ www.medilinkuk.com

² Snook B, Luther K, Quinlan H, Milne R (2012) *Let 'Em Talk!: A Field Study of Police Questioning Practices of Suspects and Accused Persons; Criminal Justice and Behavior* vol. 39 no. 10 1328-1339



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