

STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES, INC.



Laurence Stybel, Ed.D., and Maryanne Peabody, MBA, founded Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

“What Do You Do for a Living?”

Two ways you can balance memorability
with professionalism.

Whether employed or in the job market, you will meet strangers who ask, ‘What do you do for a living?’ Our purpose is to help you frame an answer.

Memorability vs. Professionalism

Responding to this simple question is about balancing memorability with professionalism.

The most professional way to respond to the question is to state your current or most recent job title: "I am a chief financial officer," or "I am an attorney," or "I am director of development for nonprofit arts organizations."

That response puts the weight on professionalism at the expense of being memorable.

Michael Katz, founder of the firm Blue Penguin Development, says that responding to this mundane question is not about saying something so profound that the person says, "I've got to hire you now!" The probability of that happening is small.

The purpose of your response is to say something memorable yet professional. There are two ways to balance memorability with professionalism: family/species and paradox/dilemma.

Family/Species.

The standard biological classification of living things focuses on a pyramid structure. Close to the base is Kingdom. As you move up the pyramid, you get to Family. And the narrowest point of the pyramid is Species.

Using this biological framework in describing yourself might result in the following: "I am a lawyer (Family) and my specialty is helping Newark, NJ, restaurants and bars get liquor licenses. (Species)."

Other Family/Species examples:

"I am a chief financial officer (Family) and my specialty is helping life-science companies grow so that they can be acquired (Species)."

"I am a clinical psychologist (Family) and I specialize in provide cognitive behavior therapy for children and adolescents with obsessive compulsive disorders." (Species)

Michael Katz says that he is a marketing professional (Family) who writes email newsletters for small professional service firms (Species).

Michael Troiano of Millbury, Massachusetts, owns a company called MAT Advisory Services, Inc. He describes himself as an expert in business strategy and technology product development (Family) with a focus on the fire and safety industry (Species).

Katz argues that "narrowness is traction." He believes people you meet do not have the time or the motivation to remember you in all your complexity. Specialization helps them remember you.

If you use a Family/Species approach you might wish to get a second opinion that you have selected a species that is in demand.

Paradox/Dilemma.

An alternative to Family/Species is to frame your response around a paradox or dilemma.

Paradoxes are defined as phrases that are "seemingly absurd or self-contradictory." Richard Mandel is an attorney in Concord, Massachusetts. When asked to describe himself he says, "I am an attorney who specializes in personal injury. The time to call is as you fall!"

He has created a paradox: how can anyone call Richard Mandel AS they are falling from being struck by an automobile or a bicycle?

We know many attorneys who specialize in personal injury. But there is only one attorney in our database listed with "The time to call is as You fall."

"When You Have to Fire a Friend."

Using a Family/Species framework the authors of this blog could say, "We are human resource consultants who specialize in executive-level outplacement with leaders who want to network at board of director levels."

Using a paradox framework, however, we could say, "We work with company leaders who have to fire their friends."

Dilemmas Create Stickiness.

Dilemmas are defined as a choice between two or more undesirable options. We counseled one wealth manager to say, "I am an investment adviser who works with families who do not trust outsiders like me, yet their wealth is so complex they are forced into finding an outsider worthy of their trust."

Marshall Goldsmith is a coach who describes himself as someone who works with leaders who realize "What got you here won't get you there." Sir Richard Branson is the founder of the Virgin Group whose companies include Virgin Records and Virgin Atlantic. He defines his brand as "standing still means going backward."

How Do I Know My Message Is Working?

If someone asks, "What do you do?" and the response to your answer is to change the subject, you have a strong indication that your stated brand is not memorable. If the response is "What?" or "Tell me more," then you are on the right track.

Whether you are seeking a new job or selling products/services, you are competing in a marketplace saturated with information. Experiment

with Family/Species and Dilemma/Paradox statements. See what works for you.

References

M. Katz. (Personal Conversation), 2020.

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Stybel Peabody provides companies with “leadership and career success” for valued senior level talent.

Core services include retained search for leaders on Boards or whose jobs touch Boards (Board members, CEOs, COOs, CFOs), leadership coaching, and executive-level outplacement for leaders who should be networking with Board members.

The readers of *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly* voted Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. “Best Outplacement Firm” in 2020.



For a free 30-minute consult, contact:

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