

"I've been asking tough questions for half a century and listening to variously brilliant, boring, evasive or illuminating answers. Jerry Weissman's book will help anyone...anyone...answer even the toughest questions."

Mike Wallace, Senior Correspondent  
*Sixty Minutes*, CBS News



# In the Line of Fire

*How to Handle  
Tough Questions  
...When It Counts*

JERRY WEISSMAN

Author of the Bestselling *Presenting to Win*

## Early Praise for *In the Line of Fire*

“In my role at Cisco Systems, I am confronted with challenging questions from customers, government leaders, press, and analysts on a daily basis. The techniques used in this book, *In the Line of Fire*, are spot on; providing straightforward ways to be on the offense in all communications situations.”

**Sue Bostrom, SVP Internet Business Solutions Group and Worldwide Government Affairs, Cisco Systems**

“In an era where businesspeople and politicians unfortunately have proven their inability to be honest with bad news, I believe this book should be prescribed reading in every business school, and for every management training session. In fact, I hope it is read by a far wider audience than that. It’s just what our society needs right now.”

**Po Bronson, author of the bestselling *What Should I Do With My Life?***

“Jerry Weissman tells the tales of the makings of presidents and kings, the dramas of the dramatic moments of our time, and in each episode he uncovers the simple truths behind what makes great leaders like Ronald Reagan and Colin Powell loved and trusted. Great truths made simple and compelling for any leader to use.”

**Scott Cook, Founding CEO, Intuit**

“Jerry’s book is a must-read for any presenter facing tough and challenging questions from their audience. This book provides the fundamental foundation on how to prepare, be agile, and take charge no matter how difficult the question.”

**Leslie Culbertson, Corporate Vice President, Director of Corporate Finance, Intel Corporation**

“During one of the most important periods of my career, Jerry used the concepts in *In the Line of Fire* to prepare me and my team for the EarthLink IPO road show. He helped us field tough questions from the toughest possible audience: potential investors, but the same skills are necessary for every audience.

**Sky Dayton, Founder EarthLink and Boingo Wireless, CEO SK-EarthLink**

“Jerry Weissman helped prepare my management team for our recent IPO. I sat in on some of the sessions and was most impressed with Jerry’s innovative ways of teaching and optimizing effective executive communication methods. This training, encapsulated well in his new book, *In the Line of Fire*,” paid off handsomely during our numerous road show presentations.”

**Ray Dolby, Founder and Chairman, Dolby Laboratories, Inc.**

“Whether you’re a classroom teacher or the President, this book will help you be an effective communicator. This book is so insightful, reading it feels like cheating. Tough questions no longer test my limits.”

**Reed Hastings, Founder and CEO, Netflix**

“Even the greatest start encounters tough questions. Read Jerry’s book before you need it, or you’ll be in deep sushi.”

**Guy Kawasaki, author of the bestselling *The Art of the Start***

“Have you ever been faced with a tough question? Jerry Weissman shows how it’s not necessarily what the answer is. It’s how you answer that will allow you to prevail and win!”

**Tim Koogle, Founding CEO, Yahoo!**

“Jerry’s technique is both masterful and universal because it finds common ground between audience and speaker, hard questions and direct answers, all with a very simple principle: truth.”

**Pierre Omidyar, Founder of eBay and Omidyar Network**

“I’ve been asking tough questions for half a century and listening to variously brilliant, boring, evasive or illuminating answers. Jerry Weissman’s book will help anyone...anyone...answer even the toughest questions.”

**Mike Wallace, Senior Correspondent, *Sixty Minutes*, CBS News**

# **In the Line of Fire**

**How to Handle  
Tough Questions  
...When It Counts**

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# In the Line of Fire

How to Handle  
Tough Questions  
...When It Counts

■ ■ Jerry Weissman ■ ■

Author of  
*Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story*



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*For Lucie...at last.*






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# About the Author

**Jerry Weissman**, the world's #1 corporate presentations coach, founded and leads Power Presentations, Ltd. in Foster City, CA. His private clients include executives at hundreds of the world's top companies, including Yahoo!, Intel, Cisco Systems, Intuit, Dolby Laboratories, and Microsoft.

Weissman coached Cisco's executives before their immensely successful IPO roadshow; afterward, the firm's chairman attributed at least two to three dollars of Cisco's offering price to his work. Since then, he has prepared executives for nearly 500 IPO roadshows, helping them raise hundreds of billions of dollars.

Weissman is author of the global best-seller *Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story* (Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2003).

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# INTRODUCTION

## Agility Versus Force

During my 40 years in the communications trade ranging from the control rooms of the CBS Broadcast Center in Manhattan to the boardrooms of some of America's most prestigious corporations, I have heard...*and* have asked...some highly challenging questions. One of the most challenging I ever heard came during Bill Clinton's presidency when he was engulfed in the firestorm ignited by the revelation of his extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky, a White House intern.

Despite intense public and media pressure, Clinton continued to fulfill his presidential obligations, among them hosting a state visit by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair. On the afternoon of February 6, 1998, after the two heads of state made their customary prepared statements to the press, President Clinton opened the floor to questions from an audience packed with reporters. At that point, he became fair game for nonstate questions on the subject that was uppermost in the minds of the media and the public. One question in particular came from Wolf Blitzer, the senior CNN political correspondent:

*Mr. President, Monica Lewinsky's life has been changed forever, her family's life has been changed forever. I wonder how you feel about that and what, if anything, you'd like to say to Monica Lewinsky at this minute?*

The stinging question brought a few scattered titters from the other reporters. Looking straight ahead, right at Blitzer, Clinton



smiled and bit his lower lip, an expression that had become his trademark (see Figure I.1).



▲ **FIGURE I.1** *Bill Clinton reacts to a question about Monica Lewinsky.*

Then he said,

*That's good!*

The crowded room erupted in laughter. After it subsided, Clinton continued:

*That's good...but at this minute, I am going to stick with my position and not comment. [I.1]*

Blitzer had nailed the acknowledged charismatic master of communication skills at his own game, and the master acknowledged it publicly for all to hear. Fortunately for Clinton, he was able to default to his legal situation and not answer.

Very few people on the face of this planet have the expertise, the charm, the quickness of wit, or the legal circumstances to respond

so deftly to challenging questions. Yet very few people on the face of this planet sail through life without being confronted with tough questions. The purpose of this book and its many real-life examples is to provide you with the skills to handle such questions, and *only* such questions. If all the questions you are ever faced with were of the “Where do I sign?” variety, you could spend your time with a good mystery novel instead. Forewarned is forearmed.

One other forewarning: All the techniques you are about to learn require absolute truth. The operative word in the paragraph above, as well as on the cover of this book, is “handle,” meaning how to deal with tough questions. While providing an answer is an integral part of that “handling,” every answer you give to every question you get must be honest and straightforward. If not, all the other techniques will be for naught. With a truthful answer as your foundation, all those techniques will enable you to survive, if not prevail, in the line of fire.

## ■ ■ Challenging Questions

We begin our journey of discovery by understanding why people ask challenging questions. Journalists such as Wolf Blitzer ask these kinds of questions because, being familiar with the classical art of drama, they know that conflict creates drama. *Aristotle 101*.

Why do people in business ask challenging questions? Because they are mean-spirited? Perhaps. Because they want to test your mettle? Perhaps. More likely it is because when you are presenting your case, which is *just* the case in almost every decisive communication in business...as well as in *all* walks of life...you are asking your opposite party or parties, your target audience, to change. Most human beings are resistant to change, and so they kick the tires. *You* are the tires.

In the most mission-critical of all business presentations, the Initial Public Offering (IPO) road show...a form of communication I have had the opportunity and privilege to influence with nearly 500 companies, among them Cisco Systems, Intuit, Yahoo!, and Dolby Laboratories...presenters ask their investor audiences to change: to buy a stock that never existed. In fact, when companies offer shares to the public for the first time, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission mandates that the companies specifically state their intentions in print. The SEC requires distribution of a prospectus containing a boilerplate sentence that reads, "There has been no prior public market for the company's common stock." In other words, "Invest at your own risk." *Caveat emptor*. As a result, when the companies' executive teams take their presentations on the road, they are inevitably assaulted with challenging questions from their potential investors.

While the stakes in an IPO road show are exceedingly high...in the tens of millions of dollars...the character of the challenge is no different from that of potential customers considering a new product, potential partners considering a strategic relationship, pressured managers considering a request for additional expenditures, concerned citizens considering a dark horse candidate, or even affluent contributors considering a donation to a nascent, not-for-profit cause.

The inherent challenge in these circumstances is compounded in presentation settings where the intensity level is raised by several additional factors:

- **Public exposure.** The risk of a mistake is magnified in large groups.
- **Group dynamics.** The more people in the audience, the more difficult it is to maintain control.
- **One against many.** Audiences have an affinity bond among themselves and apart from the presenter or speaker.

The result is open season on the lone figure spotlighted at the front of the room, who then becomes fair game for a volley of even more challenging questions.

How, then, to level the playing field? How, then, to give the presenter the weapons to withstand the attack? How, then, to survive the *slings and arrows* unleashed in the form of questions?

The answer lies in the David versus Goliath match, in which a mere youth was able to defeat a mighty giant using only a stone from a slingshot. This biblical parable has numerous equivalents in military warfare. History abounds with examples in which small, outnumbered, under-equipped units were able to combat vastly superior forces by using adroit maneuvers and clever defenses. Remember the Alamo, but also remember Thermopylae, Masada, Agincourt, The Bastille, Stalingrad, The Battle of the Bulge, Iwo Jima, and The Six-Day War. All these legendary battles share one common denominator: leverage, or the use of *agility to counter force*.

Use agility to counter force.

## ■ ■ Martial Arts

For our purposes, the most pertinent modern equivalent is the martial arts, in which a skilled practitioner can compete with a superior opponent by using dexterity rather than might. Bruce Lee, a diminutive kick boxer, became an international star by virtue of his uncanny ability to prevail over multiple and mightier *armed* opponents using *only* his flying feet and hands. Evolved from Asian philosophy and religion, the martial arts employ these critical mental and physical skills:

- Concentration
- Self-defense

- Balance
- Agility
- Discipline
- Self-control

A solitary presenter or speaker facing challenging questions from a hostile audience can deploy these same pivotal dynamics *against a sea of troubles and, by opposing, end them*. This book will translate each of these martial arts skills into Q&A techniques and then demonstrate how you can apply them in your mission-critical encounters. The objective is to put you in charge of those sessions and enable you to win in your exchanges when it counts.

This objective can be stated in one word, although it will take 168 pages to present them in full. That one word is *control*. When you are confronted with tough questions, you can control

- The question
- Your answer
- The questioner
- The audience
- The time
- Yourself

## ■■ Effective Management *Perceived*

A synonym for the verb “control” is “manage.” Therefore, the subliminal perception of a well-handled question is *Effective Management*. Of course, no one in your target audience is going to conclude that because you fielded a tough question well, you are a good manager. That is a bit of a stretch. But the converse proves the point. If your response to a challenging question is defensive, evasive, or contentious, you lose credibility...and with it the likelihood of attaining your objective in the interchange.

If your response is prompt, assured, and to the point, you will be far more likely to emerge unscathed, if not fully victorious.

This concept goes all the way back to the first millennium. In *Beowulf*, the heroic saga that is one of the foundation works of the English language, one of the lines reads: “Behavior that’s admired is the path to power among people everywhere.” [1.2]

In the twenty-first century, that same concept as it relates to tough questions was expressed by David Bellet, the Chairman of Crown Advisors International, one of Wall Street’s most successful long-term investment firms. Having been an early backer of many successful companies, among them Hewlett-Packard, Sony, and Intel, David is solicited to invest almost daily. In response, he often fires challenging questions at his petitioners.

“When I ask questions,” says David, “I don’t really have to have the full answer because I can’t know the subject as well as the presenter. What I look for is whether the presenter has thought about the question, been candid, thorough, and direct and how the presenter handles himself or herself under stress; if that person has the passion of ‘fire in the belly’ and can stand tall in the line of fire.”

## ■ ■ Baptism Under Fire

I, too, was once in the business of asking tough questions. Before becoming a presentation coach for those nearly 500 IPO road shows, as well as for thousands of other presentations ranging from raising private capital to launching products, seeking partnerships, and requisitioning budget approvals, I spent a decade as a news and public affairs producer at CBS Television in New York. As a student of the classical art of drama and with the full knowledge that conflict creates drama, I became an expert at asking challenging questions.

My baptism under fire came early in my tenure at CBS. In 1963, I was assigned to be the Associate Producer of a documentary series called *Eye on New York*, whose host was the then newly hired Mike Wallace. Although *Sixty Minutes*, Mike's magnum opus, would not debut for another five years, he came to CBS largely on the strength of the reputation he had developed on another New York television station as an aggressive interrogator on a series called *Night Beat*. Mike had regularly bombarded his *Night Beat* guests with tough questions and was intent on maintaining his inquisitorial reputation at CBS. He fully expected his Associate Producer to provide him with live ammunition for his firepower. Heaven help me when I did not.

Fortunately, I survived Mike's slings and arrows by learning how to devise tough questions. In the process, I also learned how to handle those same questions. This book is a compilation of those techniques, seasoned and battle-tested for nearly 20 years in business with my corporate clients.

You will find the techniques illustrated with a host of examples from the business world, as well as from the white-hot cauldron of debate in the political world.\* In that world...unlike business and other areas of persuasive endeavor where facts and logic are at stake...the issue is a contest of individuals pitted one against the other in mortal combat: Only the winner survives. Although the lone presenter or speaker pitted against the challenging forces of an audience is not quite as lethal as politics, the one-against-many odds raise the stakes. Therefore, analyzing the dynamics of political debate will serve as a tried and tested role model for your Q&A skills. The following pages will provide you with an arsenal of weapons you will need when you step into the line of fire.

Expanding upon David Bellet's observation, the objective of this book is not so much to show you how to respond with the right answers as it is to show you how to establish a positive perception with your audiences by giving them the confidence that you can manage adversity, stay the course, and stay in *control*.

\*For a companion DVD of the original videos of these examples, please visit [www.powerltd.com](http://www.powerltd.com).

**CHAPTER**

**1**

# The Critical Dynamics of Q&A



To fully appreciate the importance of control in handling tough questions, we should first look at the consequences of loss of control. A vivid example of such a disastrous unraveling comes from an episode of the 1970s comedy television series, *The Bob Newhart Show*. The widely known series is still running in syndication. One particular episode has become a classic. In it, Newhart plays a psychologist named Robert Hartley, who amiably agrees to appear on a Chicago television program to be interviewed by Ruth Corley, the program's hostess. This is the interview:

**Ruth Corley:** *Good morning, Dr. Hartley. Thank you for coming. I hope it's not too early for you.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *No, I had to get up to be on television.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Well, I'm glad you're relaxed. I'm a little nervous myself, I mean, I've never interviewed a psychologist.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Don't worry about it; we're ordinary men you know, one leg at a time.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Well, if I start to ramble a little or if I get into an area I'm not too conversant with, you'll help me out, won't you?*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Don't worry about it. If you get into trouble, just turn it over to me and I'll wing it.*

**Augie (Voice Over):** *10 seconds, Ruth!*

**Ruth Corley:** *Thanks, Augie.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *You'll be fine.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Here goes.*

**Augie (VO):** *3, 2, you're on.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Good morning. It's 7 o'clock, and I am Ruth Corley. My first guest is psychologist, Dr. Robert Hartley. It's been said that today's psychologist is nothing*

*more than a con man; a snake oil salesman, flim-flamming innocent people, peddling cures for everything from nail bites to a lousy love life, and I agree. We will ask Dr. Hartley to defend himself after this message.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Was that on the air?*

**Ruth Corley:** *Oh, that's just what we call a grabber. You know, it keeps the audience from tuning out.*

**Augie (VO):** *Ten seconds, Ruth.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Thanks, Augie.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *We won't be doing anymore grabbing will we?*

**Ruth Corley:** *No, no. From now on we'll just talk.*

**Augie (VO):** *3, 2, you're on.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Dr. Hartley, according to a recently published survey, the average fee for a private session with a psychologist is 40 dollars.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *That's about right.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Right? I don't think it's right! What other practitioner gets 40 dollars an hour?*

**Dr. Hartley:** *My plumber.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Plumbers guarantee their work, do you?*

**Dr. Hartley:** *See, I don't understand why all of the sudden...*

**Ruth Corley:** *I asked you if you guaranteed your work!*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Well, I can't guarantee each and every person that walks through the door is going to be cured.*

**Ruth Corley:** *You mean you ask 40 dollars an hour and you guarantee nothing?*

**Dr. Hartley:** *I validate.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Is that your answer?*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Could...can I have a word with you?*

**Ruth Corley:** *Chicago is waiting for your answer!*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Well, Chicago...everyone that comes in doesn't pay 40 dollars an hour.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Do you ever cure anybody?*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Well, I wouldn't say cure.*

**Ruth Corley:** *So your answer is "No."*

**Dr. Hartley:** *No, no my answer is not "No." I get results. Many of my patients solve their problems and go on to become successful.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Successful at what?*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Professional athletes, clergyman, some go on to head large corporations. One of my patients is an elected official.*

**Ruth Corley:** *A WHAT?*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Nothing, nothing.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Did you say an elected official?*

**Dr. Hartley:** *I might have, I forget.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Who is it?*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Well, I can't divulge his identity.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Why? There is a deranged man out there in a position of power!*

**Dr. Hartley:** *He isn't deranged.... Anymore.*

**Ruth Corley:** *But he was when he came to see you, and you said yourself that you do not give guarantees.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Uh...*

**Ruth Corley:** *After this message we will meet our choice for woman of the year, Sister Mary Catherine.*

**Augie (VO):** *Okay, we're into commercial.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *Thanks, Augie.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Thank you, Dr Hartley. You were terrific. I mean, I wish we had more time.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *We had plenty.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Well, I really enjoyed it.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *You would have enjoyed Pearl Harbor.*

**Ruth Corley:** *Good morning, Sister. It's wonderful of you to come at this hour.*

**Dr. Hartley:** *If I were you I wouldn't get into religion, she will chew your legs off. [1.1]*

Newhart accompanied his uncertain verbal responses to the interviewer's attacks with an array of equally edgy physical behavior: He squirmed in his seat, he stammered, he twitched, his eyes darted up and down and around and around frantically, and he crossed his arms and legs protectively. But even without these visual images, his words alone depict a man desperately trying to cover his tracks. Despite all the humor, Bob Newhart came across as *defensive*.

## ■ ■ Defensive, Evasive, or Contentious

Different people react differently to challenging questions. While some become defensive, others become *evasive*. A vivid example of the latter came at the end of a string of events that were set into motion on the evening of December 5, 2002.

Strom Thurmond, the Republican senator from South Carolina, with a long history of segregationist votes and opinions, reached his one-hundredth birthday. At a celebratory banquet on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. on that fateful Thursday, Trent Lott, the Republican

senator from Mississippi and then Senate Majority Leader, stood to honor his colleague. During his remarks, Senator Lott said:

*When Strom Thurmond ran for President, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either.*

The statement created an uproar that raged like wildfire across the country. Five days later, even the pro-Republican *The Wall Street Journal* ran an editorial condemning the statement. In an attempt to quell the furor, Lott issued a two-sentence written apology on December 10.

*A poor choice of words conveyed to some the impression that I embraced the discarded policies of the past. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I apologize to anyone who was offended by my statement.*

The statement failed to stem the continuing public outcry. A week later, in what he thought would be a bold step to make amends, Lott agreed to appear on Black Entertainment Television. He was interviewed by anchor Ed Gordon, who went right to the heart of the matter. At the very start of the program, Gordon pushed the hot button by asking the senator to explain what he meant by “all of those problems” in his original statement.

Lott responded with a wide array of problems, none of which addressed Gordon's question.

Gordon interrupted Lott's rambling, evasive answer to remind him that Thurmond was also a strong proponent of segregation.

Lott tried to change the subject but Gordon pressed him as to whether he knew that Thurmond was a segregationist. Lott finally capitulated. True to his journalistic profession, Gordon immediately followed with another question seeking confirmation that Lott understood.

Unable to evade any longer, Lott capitulated again.

Politicians are not the only people who become evasive under fire; such behavior extends even to sports. Pedro Martinez, one of the most dominant pitchers in Major League Baseball, provides a case in point. After seven successful years with the Boston Red Sox, culminating in a dramatic World Series victory in 2004, Martinez decided to leave his team to join the New York Mets, a dismal team with a losing record. In an effort to reverse their fortunes, the Mets outbid the Red Sox with a four-year contract for the pitcher worth \$54 million.

When he arrived in New York, Martinez held a press conference filled with cynical sports reporters who bombarded him with tough questions about his decision, one of which was

*What about people who think this is all about you taking the money? That is the general perception in Boston now.*

Martinez answered,

*They are totally wrong, because I was a millionaire, I had already achieved a lot of money. I'm a wealthy man since I got to Boston. Like I said before, in the press conference today, when I got to Boston, I was making millions. Every million, every minute in the big leagues, is more than I had ever in my life. I'm a millionaire once I got to the big leagues. Money's not my issue, but respect is, and that's what Boston lacked to show by not showing interest. They're going to make it look like it was the money. Now my question would be, "Why did they have to wait until the last moment to make a move, until I had committed to another place?"[1.2]*

To answer a question about money with an answer about timing and respect is not much better than answering a question about segregation with an answer about fighting Nazism and Communism. It is equally evasive.

After evasiveness and defensiveness, the third variation on the theme of negative responses to challenging questions is *contentiousness*. One of the most combative men ever to enter the political arena is H. Ross Perot, the billionaire businessman, with a reputation for cantankerousness. In 1992, Perot ran for president as an independent candidate and, although he conducted an aggressive campaign, lost to Bill Clinton. The following year, Perot continued to act the gadfly by leading the opposition to the Clinton-backed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Matters came to a head on the night of November 9, 1993, when Perot engaged then Vice President Al Gore in a rancorous debate on Larry King's television program.

In the heat of battle, Perot launched into the subject of lobbying.

*You know what the problem is, folks? It's foreign lobbyists... are wreckin' this whole thing. Right here, Time Magazine just says it all, it says "In spite of Clinton's protests, the influence-peddling machine in Washington is back in high gear." The headline, Time Magazine: "A Lobbyist's Paradise."*

Gore tried to interject.

*I'd like to respond to that.*

Larry King tried to allow Gore to speak.

*All right, let him respond.*

Perot barreled ahead, his forefinger wagging at the camera...and the audience.

*We are being sold out by foreign lobbyists. We've got 33 of them working on this in the biggest lobbying effort in the history of our country to ram NAFTA down your throat.*

Gore tried to interject again.

*I'd like to respond...*

But Perot had one more salvo.

*That's the bad news. The good news is it ain't working.*

Having made his point, Perot leaned forward to the camera, smiled smugly, and turned the floor back to Gore.

*I'll turn it over to the others.*

Larry King made the hand-off.

*OK, Ross.*

Gore took his turn.

*OK, thank you. One of President Clinton's first acts in office was to put limits on the lobbyists and new ethics laws, and we're working for lobby law reform right now. But, you know, we had a little conversation about this earlier, but every dollar that's been spent for NAFTA has been publicly disclosed. We don't know yet... tomorrow...perhaps tomorrow we'll see, but the reason why...and I say this respectfully because I served in the Congress and I don't know of any single individual who lobbied the Congress more than you did, or people in your behalf did, to get tax breaks for your companies. And it's legal.*

Perot bristled and shot back.

*You're lying! You're lying now!*

"You're lying!" is as contentious as a statement can be. True to form, Perot showed his belligerence. Gore looked incredulously at Perot.

*You didn't lobby the Ways and Means Committee for tax breaks for yourself and your companies?*



Perot stiffened.

*What do you have in mind? What are you talking about?*

Gore said matter-of-factly,

*Well, it's been written about extensively and again, there's nothing illegal about it.*

Perot sputtered, disdainfully.

*Well that's not the point! I mean, what are you talking about?*

With utter calm, Gore replied,

*Lobbying the Congress. You know a lot about it.*

Now Perot was livid. He glowered at Gore and insisted,

*I mean, spell it out, spell it out!*

Gore pressed his case.

*You didn't lobby the Ways and Means Committee? You didn't have people lobbying the Ways and Means Committee for tax breaks?*

Contemptuous, Perot stood his ground.

*What are you talking about?*

Gore tried to clarify.

*In the 1970s...*

Perot pressed back.

*Well, keep going.*

Now Gore sat up, looked Perot straight in the eye, and asked his most direct challenging question.

*Well, did you or did you did you not? I mean, it's not...*

His back against the wall, Perot fought back.

*Well, you're so general I can't pin it down! [1.3]*

The adjectives *defensive*, *evasive*, and *contentious* are synonymous with “Fight or Flight,” the human body’s instinctive reaction to stress. In each of the cases above, Fight or Flight was the response to tough questions: Ross Perot became as pugnacious as a bare-knuckled street fighter; Trent Lott danced around as if he were standing on a bed of burning coals; and Bob Newhart’s jumping jack antics looked like a man desperately trying to eject from his hot seat.

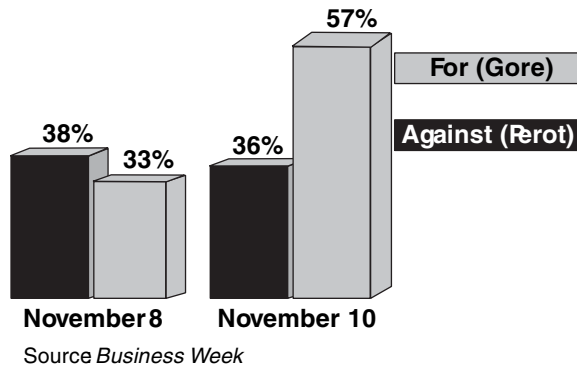
## ■ ■ Presenter Behavior/ Audience Perception

While Bob Newhart’s words and behavior produced a comic effect, any such response in business or social situations would produce dire consequences. A presenter or speaker who exhibits negative behavior produces a negative impression on the audience. This correlation is a critical factor with far-reaching implications in *any* communication setting, particularly so in the mass media.

Pedro Martinez’s behavior produced reams of caustic cynical reaction in the press, and even stronger criticism on the Internet. The day after his press conference, the fan chat boards lit up with vituperative messages, several of which referred to the pitcher as “Paydro.”

While Martinez went on to join the Mets unaffected, Trent Lott did not get off so lightly. His behavior on Black Entertainment Television had a profound effect on public opinion. The week after his appearance, with the furor unabated, a disgraced Lott resigned his position as Senate Majority Leader.

Ross Perot's behavior on the Larry King program also had a profound effect on public opinion. Figure 1.1 shows the results of polls taken on the day before and the day after the debate.



▲ **FIGURE 1.1** 1993 NAFTA public opinion polls. (Reprinted by permission of Business Week.)

In the 48 hours between the two polls, the only factor with any impact on the NAFTA issue was the debate on the Larry King program. It had to be Ross Perot's contentious behavior that swung the undecided respondents against his cause.

One final example of negative behavior in response to challenging questions comes from that most challenging of all business communications, an IPO road show. When companies go public, the chief officers develop a presentation that they take on the road to deliver to investors in about a dozen cities, over a period of two weeks, making their pitch up to 10 times day for a total of 60 to 80 iterations.

The company in this particular case had a very successful business. They had accumulated 16 consecutive quarters of profitability. Theirs was a very simple business concept: a software product that they sold directly into the retail market. The CEO, having made many presentations over the years to his consumer constituency, as well as to his industry peers, was a very proficient presenter. At the start of the road show, the anticipated price range of the company's offering was nine to eleven dollars per share.

However, the CEO, having presented primarily to receptive audiences, was unaccustomed to the kind of tough questions investors ask. Every time his potential investors challenged him, he responded with halting and uncertain answers.

After the road show, the opening price of the company's stock was nine dollars a share, the bottom of the offering range. Given the three million shares offered, the swing cost the company six million dollars.

The conclusion from the foregoing harkens back to David Bellet's observation that investors are not seeking an education; they are looking to see how a presenter stands up in the line of fire. Investors kick the tires to see how the management responds to adversity. Audiences kick tires to assess a presenter's mettle. Employers kick the tires of prospective employees to test their grit. In all these challenging exchanges, the presenter must exhibit positive behavior that creates a positive impression on the audience.

The first steps in learning how to behave effectively begin in the next chapter.

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