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## *If You Don't Know, Just Say So! Honesty Builds Credibility!*

*Eric Krock*

Product managers are constantly asked questions from all directions by co-workers, customers, prospects, analysts, reporters, and others. But what do you do when you don't know the answer? Just say "I don't know," then get back with an answer later!

There are at least three kinds of people in the world:

- People who don't know everything, are self-aware enough to realize it, and are self-confident enough to acknowledge it in front of others.
- People who don't know everything, are self-aware enough to realize it, but aren't self-confident enough to acknowledge it in front of others.
- People who don't know everything and aren't self-aware enough to realize it.

Which group do you want to be part of?

It never ceases to amaze me the lengths people will go and the risks they will take to avoid saying "I don't know" in front of others. Who are they kidding? Does anyone really believe that any person knows all the answers to everything? Yet some people seem afraid or unwilling to acknowledge what everyone else already knows about them: they don't know everything.

Answering a question by saying "I don't know" has many benefits:

- It's honest. In our appearance-obsessed culture, the value of simply telling the truth at all times has been forgotten. It's liberating, and it keeps you and your company grounded in reality.

- It's safe. You don't have to risk inventing an answer on the fly. Some of my most terrifying moments in customer meetings have been when an account manager began improvising a response and I had to start thinking about how to gracefully walk back a statement that could set expectations we couldn't possibly meet. As former House Speaker Sam Rayburn [once said](#), "Son, always tell the truth. Then you'll never have to remember what you said the last time."
- It hurts less than you think. Coworkers, customers, and prospects don't generally expect you to know the answer to all questions off the top of your head. If you don't know, just say so, promise to get back to them with an answer, and then in fact get back to them promptly with an answer. They'll be satisfied.
- It actually builds credibility. When you tell someone "I don't know," it sends several powerful implicit messages:
  - "All those other times I told you something, I really did know the answer and wasn't trying to fool you."
  - "In the future, if I answer a question, you can trust me."
  - "I'm honest and self-confident enough to simply acknowledge it when I don't know the answer."

I've found this technique to be effective both in product management and in direct sales.

In product management, engineering appreciates a product manager who doesn't pretend to know it all and is honest about what they do and don't know and how certain they are. Customers appreciate an honest statement about the company's future plans that they can believe in, including a clear statement of what you don't know or haven't decided, as opposed to an all-knowing, set-in-stone product road map that will have no relationship to what ultimately happens. One of the many benefits of Agile project management is that by embracing uncertainty about the future and focusing development planning on the immediate future, it reduces the pressure to make firm statements about a distant future that can't possibly be known.

Similarly, I once did an eighteen-month stint as a sales engineer because I wanted direct sales experience and my employer needed to close some enterprise deals quickly. I consistently followed two rules: "If you don't know, say so, then get back with an answer" and "If you're not going to do something the customer requested, say no and explain why." We were selling a highly technical product and deploying it into complex enterprise network environments we hadn't faced before, and I got a lot of questions I didn't know the answer to. I said "I don't know" and then got back with an answer many

times, and it caused no problems at all. My account manager and I were assigned the company's two largest deals in the pipeline and we closed them both, establishing solid customer relationships that continue to the present day. In fact, after I returned to product management, the manager of sales engineering later mentioned that one of the customers had repeatedly said they missed working with me and that the customer had almost a "strange" liking for me. The manager gave me a sidelong glance at that point as if to suggest that I'd been using some kind of voodoo on the customer, but I hadn't. I'd simply been consistently telling the truth at all times.

I'm not the first to make this observation. [Redeye VC](#) notes that [saying "I don't know" works when raising venture capital](#) as well. But the practice doesn't seem to be taking off. Honesty pays handsome dividends. Try it!

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