

Defend Your Research

HBR puts some surprising findings to the test



Todd Rogers is a senior researcher at ideas42, a think tank at Harvard, and the founding executive director of the Analyst Institute.

Michael I. Norton is an associate professor of business administration at Harvard Business School.

People Often Trust Eloquence More Than Honesty

The finding: People who dodge questions artfully are liked and trusted more than people who respond to questions truthfully but with less polish.

The study: Todd Rogers and Michael Norton showed subjects different videos of a political debate. In the first, one of the candidates answered the question asked. In the second, he dodged it by answering a similar question. In the third, he dodged it by answering a completely different one. When the candidate answered a similar question, subjects failed to notice the switch. They also liked him better if he answered a similar question well than if he answered the actual one less eloquently.

The challenge: Can style really trump substance? *Todd Rogers and Professor Norton, defend your research.*

Rogers: In our study, subjects found the candidate answering a similar but different question just as trustworthy and likable as when he answered the original question. What's more, after hearing an artful dodge, subjects had much lower recall of the question asked; in some of our studies, less than half could remember it accurately. If anything, that result is artificially high, since when we asked them to recall the question, we gave them four options, so they had a 25% chance of guessing correctly. But the important finding is that the audience didn't penalize a speaker who dodged a question well.

Norton: But you had to be good at it, and you couldn't be obvious. When the candidate answered a completely different question, he was penalized heavily and rated less likable and trustworthy.

Interestingly, people were much better at recalling the actual question in those cases.

After we did this research, we really paid attention to the national elections. We noticed how some politicians seemed to have mastered this skill. Hillary Clinton was phenomenal at dodging questions. Looking back, Ronald Reagan was a master dodger, too.

Rogers: Robert McNamara famously said, "Never answer the question that is asked of you. Answer the question that you wish had been asked." Our research suggests that he was onto something.

HBR: Are there any other famous dodgers?

Rogers: Well, Sarah Palin had a unique approach. She was sort of intellectually honest about dodging questions. She

basically stated her intention to answer a different question than the one asked. **Couldn't ratings be colored by, say, the fact that the speaker reminds me of an uncle I don't like? Or maybe I rate someone lower just because I disagree with their position.**

Rogers: It would be interesting to study how factors like ideology affect our sensitivity to dodged questions. Do we, for example, forgive dodging more readily if we agree with someone's view, and penalize it more if we disagree?

Norton: The ratings are affected by these other factors. And that's just the point. Once we're in an audience situation, many social cues start competing for our attention. In these audiovisual presentations, substance tends to get underweighted. To put this in a business context: You can read a résumé and then listen to a person talk about their résumé, and have extremely different reactions.

There's something disturbing about all of this. Aren't question dodgers taking advantage of people?

Norton: It's troubling because we'd like to think honesty would be rewarded, but in fact, people who deftly sidestep questions are rewarded more than people who answer honestly but ineloquently. A leader could rationalize that it's better to dodge well, because his intentions are good and he needs people to like and trust him. But I would say that if you're trying to advance a public discourse, you have a responsibility to not dodge questions.

Rogers: There are ways to counteract these effects. A simple way to increase re-

ARTFUL DODGING: HOW AUDIENCES RESPOND

What will you do about the health care problem?

DIRECT ANSWER

"I'm glad you asked me that. We need universal health care in America."



LIKABILITY RATING FROM AUDIENCE (OUT OF 6)

3.3

% OF AUDIENCE THAT RECALLED THE QUESTION

84%

What will you do about the illegal drug use problem?

DODGE, ELOQUENTLY DELIVERED

"I'm glad you asked me that. We need universal health care in America."



3.2

68%

What will you do about the health care problem?

DIRECT ANSWER, INELOQUENTLY DELIVERED

"Uh, I'm glad, you, um, asked me that. We, you know, need universal health care in America."



2.8

84%

call of questions and punish dodgers is to post the question on the TV screen while the person answers it. Unfortunately, the networks don't always do this well. They may ask a question like "What will you do to create jobs in the domestic manufacturing sector?" and put "The Economy" as a summary line on the screen. We speculate that this enables dodging.

What other techniques can help us suss out dodgers?

Norton: It's important to recognize transition devices. The first 10 words of an answer are key to creating an artful dodge. You'll hear phrases like "That's a good question" or "I'm glad you asked that." We think these help prime the listener to accept what comes next as relevant, but we still have to test that.

Rogers: We humans have finite attention. The more words there are in a transition, the harder it is to make the cognitive link between the question and the answer. That's the mechanism we think underlies this.

Politicians need to be liked and trusted to get elected. What if that doesn't apply to business leaders?

Norton: My sense is that politicians train to do this more and may be innately good at it, but it applies to business as well. Think about the leader fielding tough questions about layoffs. Or George Clooney's character in *Up in the Air*. He flies around the country firing people.

They say things to him like "How can you fire me?" And he doesn't answer them. He dodges. He says, "This is an opportunity for you." He's shifting the conversation.

Where else could you take this research?

Rogers: One direction would be to look at negotiations. If you hold valuable information and don't want to disclose it, how do you avoid disclosure without lying?

Norton: The next round might focus on how to stop people from dodging your questions. Whether you're a manager or an employee, it's not easy to say, "You're

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changing the subject." When is it wise to call someone on it?

And how do you call them on it?

Norton: I test this when I'm teaching with the case method. I say, "I asked you this, but you answered something else. Try it again." Now, I'm in a position of authority, so it's quite easy. What about the other way around? People talk about speaking truth to power. This would be learning how you get power to speak truth. ♥

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