

7 Better Ways to Answer "What Do You Do?"

By [Amanda Berlin](#), January 18, 2015

I came across this article and just had to share it with my Lake Tech comrades. It is in line with our mission statement and vision statement that we have just learned.

The question “What do you do?” is basically synonymous with “Who are you?” There is a reason it usually follows “What’s your name?” in polite conversation: It is helpful. It is get-to-know-you shorthand. The one-word answer to “what do you do?” lets people categorize us and gives them a snapshot of what we do or who we are.

However, there is also a dark underbelly to introducing ourselves with this kind of shorthand: When labels go wrong, they can lead to stereotypes. Perception becomes more about the experiences accumulated by the people you are talking to than anything that they may or may not know about you, personally.

For example:

You Say: I’m in sales.

They Think: You’re a pushy, sweet-talking charmer.

You Say: I’m a lawyer.

They Think: You’re the argumentative type.

You Say: I’m an accountant.

They Think: You’re a numbers geek.

Maybe I’m being a little harsh, but you get the picture; odds are, whatever quick description you’ve used in the past barely does what you do—or who you are—any justice. Nevertheless, everywhere from networking events to family gatherings, this question is going to live on, so we need to find a way to answer it so it is [an energizing conversation starter](#), instead of a fast track to the pigeonhole.

Here are seven ways to reframe this common question to help you come up with a more compelling answer. Experiment with different ones during conversations in the next couple of weeks to see which allows you to represent yourself the best and build more relationships that are meaningful.

1. Talk About How You Help People

You might be, say, a copywriter; or you might be someone who helps companies tell compelling stories about their brands. Doesn't that sound infinitely more interesting? I've used this at dinner parties to great effect: It instantaneously removes stereotypes about your job title and [explains the value you bring to the table](#). Start your next response with "I help people..." and see where the conversation takes you from there.

2. Tell an Anecdote About Your Job

Narrative is always compelling. It helps us make connections. [A study out of Princeton University](#) found that the brain activity of the storyteller and the listener actually begin to mirror each other, despite the fact that one person is talking and one is listening. In addition, best of all, to solve the "What do you do?" problem, you get to provide context for the person you're talking to, instead of relying on the picture they have in their minds of what you do.

When implementing this strategy, you might have to use your job title as a segue, but transition immediately into a story about something that was fun or inspiring to you at work. For example, at a recent party I told someone I was a communications consultant, but then followed up with a story about a client that offered context for my work and illustrated the need in the market for what I do.

3. Make it a Teachable Moment

Think about your answer in this light: You are educating the other person on the subject of you. So instead of just saying your title, explain something he or she might not know about your work or industry. Talk about the void in the market that you are filling. Talk about the latest thing happening in your industry. Talk about the most interesting thing you have learned lately.

4. Be Vulnerable

Do not be afraid to get personal and talk about your journey. What led you to where you are today? What are your dreams for the next phase of your career? Every conversation

is building a relationship. To do this effectively, you need to let people behind the curtain, even just a little, so they understand where you are coming from.

5. Be Relevant

It is not all about you, even when it is. Relay the details about you and your work that are relevant to the person you are talking to. The client whose story I told at the party was also finishing successful rehab after a car accident, and as I told it, I saw the cardiac rehab therapist's face light up with recognition. Think about what experiences you have that will resonate with the people you are talking to or be able to help them out in some way.

6. Let Your Freak Flag Fly

Find something about what you do that really lights you up, and focus on that. When you show how enthusiastic you are about something, you are a magnet. People actually really want to be around that. Don't let anyone tell you to take a chill pill. Ever.

7. Be Self-Promotional

We need to rebrand self-promotion. We need more people who can speak frankly about the value they bring to the clients and organizations with which they work. Wouldn't the world be a better place if everyone just let down the veil and really opened about what they are good at? More people would be doing things they love. We would, collectively, be happier.

So, don't be shy. You're actually doing everyone a favor by being honest about what you're good at and what lights you up. Moreover, you can plainly see how much better that is than saying "I'm an accountant" the next time someone asks.

"What do you do?" may forever be synonymous with "Who are you?" but with one of these alternative answers, you have a say in who you get to be in the mind of the person you are talking with.

"I provide quality career training opportunities for our community." Sound familiar? What's yours?