

Part 2: It's Yours for the Asking: Tips for More Effective Questioning

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While listening is crucial to gathering information about your customer and her situation, asking good questions is just as important. Successful salespeople use a balance and blend of both skills to accurately judge their customers' needs and match them with workable solutions.

Setting the Stage: The Value of Asking Effective Questions

It's true: many salespeople have the gift of gab and many are hired for this very reason. But if we're doing all the talking, when or what are we learning about our customer? A strong customer relationship is much more than merely spouting why a customer should buy our wares – it's about continually finding out more about our customer's needs and tailoring a fit based on that information.

Sounds great, doesn't it? But all of us have missed the boat on one sales call or another. Have you ever said after a client meeting, "Geez, I should have asked her that!" Have you wished you could have connected to your customer better? Maybe, six months down the road, you've realized you're missing a key piece of client information that you should have asked before presenting your proposal. Those realizations can suck the selling strategy out of just about anyone.

It's worth learning a big lesson right now: effective questioning is valuable in everything we do and in every decision we make. It gives us the power to help our customer make good decisions, as well. Effective questioning must happen all the time – every time we engage with our customer.

But it's more than lip service. In order to build trust with our customers, we need to understand who they are, what their business is and how they do business. That's where effective questioning comes in.

What's In It For you?

Besides learning a lot about your client and his business that you didn't know before, effective questioning can deliver a wealth of benefits:

- You gather richer information that's better geared to a tailored solution for:
- You and your customer: you improve communication and form a partnership.
- You as a salesperson: you shorten the selling cycle by gaining better information up front, making you better prepared to pose a solution that makes sense.
- You position yourself as a trusted, informed resource.
- You become knowledgeable and enhance your ability to customize your "stuff" for your customer. You're no longer simply pitching a widget.
- You have more information for future sales calls, allowing you to build a relationship with your customer.
- You stand out from the competition as a person who takes the time to listen and learn about your customer – versus merely "telling and selling."
- You show your customer you care. Don't ever avoid asking a question because you think you'll appear uninformed. In fact, asking questions is a sign you're committed to tailoring the solution to your customer's needs.

The 411 on Information Gathering

Now that we're moving into information mode, how do we really know the scoop we're getting is what we need? After all, as business people we're very complex – and our businesses are pretty complex too. Often, though, what's shared up front between salespeople and customers is usually on the surface.

It's our job to become skilled in asking questions to unpeel the layers of a subject, to target future opportunities – to go deeper and wider with our questions. Don't be satisfied with only basic information. Nurture your innate human curiosity to get the answer that can enhance your connection to your customer and her business.

Know, too, that information gathering is an ongoing process that requires frequent revisiting – because we work in a changing, evolving universe. Don't rest on your laurels and make assumptions based on past information (which can kill a sale!). Use your questioning skills to stay current on what's happening in your customer's world.

Prepping Your Questions

As with any sales skill, it's worth practicing what you want to say before you actually talk to your customer.

- Prioritize what you need to know and when you need to know it.
- If you only get 20 minutes with this person, what five or six questions would you ask her?
- Think of the broader, big picture questions – not just the minutiae. These are the kinds of questions that let you piggyback more questions on top of them, giving you a more accurate sense of your customer's challenges.
- Physically prepare your questions. Script them, plan them, phrase them. If you know what you're going to ask ahead of time, you can better concentrate on the answers (and give yourself time to ask more questions based on those answers!).

Know Thy Buyer's Rules, Motives and Politics

It's a cardinal rule of questioning. Get a sense of what drives your customer to do her job, to make decisions, and to forward your ideas on to others:

- Key in on your client's personality style and tailor your questions to fit her style. Some people are more numbers-oriented, while others will be more personal in telling you their needs (maybe it's a promotion or some kind of recognition).
- Understand where your client fits in the business's hierarchy. Who's the real buyer? Are decisions made by committee or by the Big Boss?
- Know your customer's motivation to buy. Is it based on budget? Or on an emotional reason?
- Find out as much about your client's business and needs up front; prepare questions based on your existing knowledge and research – do what it takes to learn about the company. That means homework.
- Pen the all-important who, what, when, where, why and how questions to expand the base of your current information – they work!

Try these sample questions to get a grasp of your customer's makeup:

- "Do you have a budget in mind for this project?"
- "What's your role in the buying process?"
- "Why do you want to buy/find a new solution?"
- "Is there anyone else we should be working with so implementation/purchase will go smoothly?"
- "Do you need assistance in presenting this internally?"
- "What is your time frame?"

Tailor Your Questions to Your Customer's Style

Not only do you need to feel at ease when you're asking questions, your customer needs to feel that way, too. Evaluate your customer's style and custom-fit your questions accordingly.

By asking questions early on, you also can field objections early on, and get a good idea of how and why your customer buys. Otherwise, you won't get what you want and your customer won't be comfortable sharing the information you need.

Consider the following when taking the pulse of your customer:

- Does your customer stall? There's probably somebody else involved in the buying decision or he doesn't have the power to make the decision (or may be afraid to "risk" the purchase decision himself).
- Does your customer show indifference to your service? Plant seeds of doubt about the value she's currently getting or the needs not being met – and don't give the competition any air time.
- Does your customer appear skeptical or say he needs more proof? Give him the ammo he needs to pitch the idea to his internal higher-ups. Use data, references, demos or pilots.

- Does your customer appear to misunderstand what you're saying? Nip it in the bud by confirming the terminology you're both using and by saying "Tell me more about the type of call center services you're using" or "What does your current clinic look like?"

Listen for clues that show you how to ask questions to get the answers you need.

- If you have a customer who is unwilling to respond freely, use closed-ended, short-response questions to confirm factual information. "How many injuries have you had in the past six months?"
- Employ open-ended, "feeling"-type questions for your expressive customers. "How do you feel about the way your call center is handling customer concerns?"

Be Natural – Not Rehearsed

In a face-to-face meeting, referring to written questions can come off as too canned or make you seem like you're crossing off items from a checklist. It's ok to bring some notes with key words or phrases to prompt your questions, but steer clear of relying on your notes too much.

Learn to be a good questioner and the pay-off will last you a lifetime. Above all, remember that effective questions need to:

- Get your answers
- Be phrased in an effective manner
- Be appropriate in sequence
- Identify a need (before you can put a solution on the table, you have to address the need first)
- Convert opportunities to the customer's need; use questions to see "if I fix this, are you willing to buy my new product?"
- Tie your questions to your customer's personality style and attitudes



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