
Questions Seal The Deal

by DONNA L. COHEN

In selling situations, the problem the prospect brings you is rarely the actual issue or concern. Your job as the salesperson (i.e., problem solver) is to uncover the problems and identify the real issues. By spending the time up front asking intelligent questions, you'll be able to provide real value to the client down the road. And, if you discover there's nothing for you to help with, move on.

The key is to slow down early in the process to ask the questions necessary to gain understanding and insight. What's your rush? Before plunging in, determine if the prospect is trying to fulfill a vision or solve a problem. Prospects will be more motivated to buy if they have a problem to eliminate rather than a long-term vision to realize.

But even if the prospect starts out talking about "vision," if you ask the right questions, you'll uncover the obstacle that's preventing the vision from being realized. For example, if their vision is, "I want to increase market share by 20 percent," you can quickly get to the problem by asking, "What happens if you don't achieve a 20 percent increase in market share?" Your job is to help prospects discover the real problem and see the solution, and then help them understand the consequences if they fail to act.

I have a system for asking questions that covers ground quickly in a logical sequence. This questioning methodology is called COGS:

C=Current situation questions

O=Objectives questions

G=Gap questions

S=Solution questions

Here are some examples.

C= Current Situation Questions

"What are you currently doing to increase market share?" "How is that working for you?" "What other options have you explored?" "What have you seen that you felt would not work for you?"

When a prospect makes a statement about his current situation (i.e., "We're in a highly competitive marketplace," continue to ask a series of questions from general to specific — from intellectual to emotional (I call it "peeling the onion") to gain insights into the situation.

"Tell me more about that..."

"In your opinion, what are the reasons for that?"

"What happens if the trend continues along this path?/What happens if you stay status quo?"

"What are the consequences for the company?"

"What are the consequences for you personally?"

That last one — that's the real issue. They probably won't get the annual bonus, promotion, or might even lose the job! The personal impact is what will prompt someone to change.

Fine Tuning Current Situation Questions

Questions to a vice president of marketing regard-

ing advertising (based on knowing that his company is focused on increasing market share) might be:

“What level of interest do you have in reaching new/additional markets?”

“How do you measure success in your advertising campaigns?”

“What are you doing that seems to be effective in gaining market share?”

“How long have you been looking into new ways to capture additional sales?”

“How serious would you say the problem is today (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most serious)?”

If the prospect answers on the low end of the scale, your reply could be:

“Perhaps it is not a priority?”

Or...

“It sounds as though you’re happy with your current level of sales and the costs associated with getting those results — or am I totally off base on that?”

If the prospect’s answer is, “Not exactly,” you have an opening to ask:

“How might you see our solution working for you?”

This could lead to being able to say, “So, may I ask what you think not having a web-based ordering process might be costing you (in round numbers)?”

Follow up with questions like these.

O= Objectives Questions

“What are your departmental goals and objectives around enhancing customer relationships for the upcoming year?”

“Who else (other departments and/or individuals)

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is impacted by these objectives not being met?”

“What, if anything, is preventing you from achieving these objectives?”

G= Gap Questions

(The “gap” is the difference between where they are and where they need to be to achieve their objectives.)

“What are the consequences if you stay status quo?”

“Suppose this project fails?”

“Suppose it is hugely successful?”

“How would it impact you personally? Employees?”

“In round numbers, what is this challenge now costing you on an annual basis?”

S= Solution Questions

“What solution do you envision to reduce costs (improve productivity, enhance sales follow-up, improve marketing and service, and increase organizational efficiency)?”

“What do you picture as some possible options?”

“How, specifically, would you define success?”

“What would be ‘satisfactory’ improvement? What would be exceptional improvement?”

Ask Appropriate Questions

Of course, depending upon the level you are calling on, the questions will range from big picture and visionary (What are your plans for addressing increasing competitive pressures in your industry?) to more tactical the lower in the organizational structure you go. Your understanding of the concerns of individuals at certain levels can help you plan appropriate questions. The higher you call in an organization, the more visionary that individual will be. You might start with:

“What are the two biggest challenges facing your industry?”

“What do you see as opportunities for your industry in the next 5-10 years?”

“From your perspective, what is the most exciting

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future market for your company?”

“How are you planning to increase shareholder value?”

Then begin to peel the onion (i.e., dig deeper for understanding, meaning and clarity).

“Tell me more....”

“Can you be specific?”

“Could you give me an example?” (Remember, you’re just having a conversation!)

“Usually when I talk with CEOs, they have concerns with shareholder value (future market opportunities, marketplace or industry trends). Which one of these concerns are you dealing with?”

Other open-ended questions:

“What we hear occurs often in your industry is ____.” “What’s been your experience?”

Remember, asking good questions trumps answering questions any day. □



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