
Uncover More Opportunity — Ask Great Questions

by SUZANNE BATES

“It’s not you, it’s me,” is a classic, cliché breakup line — and a bad one at that.
“Me, me, me” is what most businesspeople talk about during any courtship.
My company, my product, my service is the leading, the best, the only, the blah, blah, blah.

It’s interesting that the secret to success in business is not the word “me,” but the word “you.” Count the words in the average conversation or sales letter. Chances are the words “I” and “my” are heard many times more often than the words “you” and “your.” Yet all people want to talk about is them!

Salespeople can set themselves apart and uncover far more opportunity if they begin every conversation by focusing the “you” point of view. “How do you see it?” “What’s your take on this?” “How would you like to see this resolved?” Try asking a question without using the word you! It isn’t easy. Switching into “question mode” forces a salesperson to use the word “you,” which leads to opportunity.

Non-Productive Questions

A lot of people believe they are asking good questions, but if they

were to videotape mock sales or business conversations, they can see their questions are not productive. The mistake they make is not going deep enough to uncover real issues, challenges and needs.

Consider this:

If an office was in need of a new copier, they would shop around and look at a few different models, at a few different stores. Which one would they end up buying? The model from the sales representative who finally asked, “What do you really need? How much will you actually use the copier?” That salesperson might not have had a huge elaborate pitch, but they asked the right questions and made the sale.

Whether a sales representative for a copier store or a partner at a firm trying to land a big client, the salesperson needs to ask great questions. They not only find out what people want, or get a whole picture of their point of view, they send the strong impression that

they actually care about the customer. There is no influencing the outcome until the customer believes the salesperson is listening and cares about them.

Questions also lead to a deeper level in conversation. If a conversation is allowed to breathe, one will find out about the deeper, more important needs or desires. Often, the “presenting” need is not the big one — questions will help uncover the real trouble.

After taking this step it’s far easier to precisely tailor a presen-

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tation for the audience. By taking the time to truly understand a customer, the salesperson will not have wasted anyone's time and will have formed the basis for an on-going relationship.

Questions also imply that a salesperson has the answers and expertise. If they know what to ask, they must know the answers.

Avoiding the Hard Sell

Questions help avoid the hard sell. If the right questions are asked, the other person articulates the needs and solutions. The salesperson doesn't do the work; the customer does. When a customer is doing the talking, they are more likely to buy. They reach their own conclusions. They don't feel pushed.

Perhaps the most important quality to questions is they help develop stronger relationships. When questions are asked, people believe the asker is genuinely curious. They are more interested in the sale, because the salesperson is interested in them.

Good questions encourage

people to open up. This is one of the most powerful assets in selling ideas, products or services.

Open questions work best in this phase of conversation. These are the "Five W's plus H."

- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?
- Why?
- How?

In preparation for the next important meeting, write down a list of questions to ask. Anticipate what the other person's needs or concerns will be, and tailor the questions to that. Many people prepare for an important meeting by buffing up on their specialties, by practicing their routine speech about what they're good at. A salesperson will stand out from the rest if they go into the meeting or presentation with a list of questions that delve into what the other needs or thinks.

Here are a few examples of great questions:

- What could we do to make this a good meeting, well worth your time?
- What are your goals?
- What is the biggest challenge you're facing right now?
- What is it costing you in time/money/resources?
- What would be an ideal outcome?
- Is there anything else we need to talk about today?

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