
Gaining Credibility By Asking Questions

by JEFF THULL

I'm sure you'll agree that establishing credibility is one of the most critical elements in securing a new customer. The customer must see you as a credible and trustworthy resource. When we ask our program participants to describe the elements of credibility, they often will suggest things such as the following:

- A proven track record.
- A list of satisfied customers.
- Number of years in business.
- Financial strength.
- Business size, etc.

Our next question is: "How do you establish that credibility or convey that credibility to a prospective customer?" Invariably, the response is "We tell them."

Now the sobering question, "How different are your two best competitors' credibility stories from your own company's credibility story?" Unfortunately, other than a few minor elements, they are likely to sound quite similar. Therefore, telling the credibility story suggests you and

your competitors are more equal than you are different. This type of credibility is what we refer to as "expected credibility." In other words, people expect you wouldn't be in business if you couldn't provide the above credibility story. They really see it as table stakes. It's expected, and they'd be surprised and quite skeptical if you didn't have it.

To truly set you and your company apart, what needs to be developed with your customer is what we refer to as "exceptional credibility." Expected credibility is what you know about your business and your solution. Exceptional credibility is what you know about your customer, their individual job responsibilities, their business objectives, performance and their challenges. The best way to develop exceptional credibility is through diligent preparation and thought-provoking questions. Unfortunately most salespeople prepare very little, ask too few questions, and seldom reach the

level of asking thought-provoking questions that is required.

Let's look at the traditional approach that finds the majority of salespeople starting with the needs analysis, which is a fine concept. The trouble is, most of the questions are rarely taken beyond the most superficial level. The following is a worst-case example in a scenario of selling software to control compressors.

- **Qualification:** "Are you using compressors to support your manufacturing process?" If yes, they are qualified; go on to needs analysis.
- **Needs Analysis:** "Are you currently using software to coordinate the output of the compressors?" If no, they have a need; go on to presentation.
- **Presentation:** "Let me show you the advanced control systems we have built into our software and how they will increase the productivity of your refinery and reduce your energy costs." If the customer seems interested, go on to the close.
- **Close:** "Let's set a date for the pilot installation."

The emphasis on presenting the solution as quickly as possible leaves little time to understand the unique nature of the

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customer's situation. In fact, the standard approach assumes the customer has completed some sort of self-diagnosis and, therefore, they will be able to connect your solution to their problem.

We all ask many questions during our sales processes, but what type of questions are we asking, and are we establishing exceptional credibility? Let's consider three levels of questions.

1. Level one consists of the personal questions about the demographics of the customer. So often salespeople ask questions to discover personal facts about customers, and use those facts to tell stories and "relate." Nothing is wrong with level-one questions, unless that's as far as the conversation goes and the engagement doesn't proceed.

2. The second level of questions is the "opinion" type questions. These questions are designed to collect information from the customer. In other words, information the customer already knows. Questions like: "What are your concerns regarding ...? What's keeping you awake at night? How would you like to measure the solution success?" These are the standard questions to gather the customer's view, the customer's opinion about their problem, what they think the solution should be, how and when they will be making their decision and, of course, how much money they are planning to invest.

These are questions about what the customer already knows and do not expand the customer's knowledge of the problem, their view of the solution, or our credibility. Again, these are good questions, far better than level one, but very limiting if we stop there, and even more limiting if

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we assume the customer's opinions represent a complete understanding of their own situation and the optimum solution.

3. Level-three questions expand the customer's understanding of the problem to be solved and the optimal way to solve it. These questions are required to build exceptional credibility. We expect no less from other professionals, and here's an example.

Anyone with a healthy net worth knows that it is foolish to write his or her own will. While you may be able to enumerate the goals you want to reach, you would be doing yourself a great disservice to dictate every clause of the will to a lawyer. Rather, you retain an expert in estate law, let him know your objectives and financial situation, and trust that this professional will ask additional important questions you haven't considered and the end result will be a well-crafted and well-thought-out plan. You would be comfortable that you are being served by a highly credible resource.

Surprisingly, what is clearly unprofessional conduct, and in some cases malpractice in medicine and law, is all-too-often standard operating procedure for sales professionals. We not only let customers diagnose their own problems, we actually encourage them to do it by asking them to report it through these "opinion level" questions.

To move the diagnostic process toward revealing and clarifying the problem affecting the customer, we need to drill deeper with third-level questions, questions about observations.

The Diagnosis of a Problem

To illustrate the difference, let us again consider a chemical plant where an inefficient compressor and the lack of proper controls are resulting in three or four all-day shutdowns per year. If you ask, "Are you happy with your production numbers?" an opinion question, the answer will be "Yes. We're hitting our production goals and we're under budget." The question, "Are you happy with ...?" asks the customer to draw a conclusion based on an implicit self-diagnosis and render their opinion.

Instead, ask a question that calls for an empirical observation. For example, "How many unscheduled shutdowns have you experienced during the past two years?"

"We've had about half a dozen."

"So you're shutting down two or three times per year?"

"Yes, that's about right."

Ask another observation. "Have you noticed compressor surges prior to any of the shut downs?"

"Why yes, now that I think about it, we have."

"We've been able to develop

control algorithms that have worked in other plants. Would it make sense to look a little closer at these shutdowns and see if there would be a possible application in your plant?"

"Well it sure would, but you will have a ways to go to make a believer out of me."

A key takeaway here is that the opinion question generates an answer that more often than not provides a "we're satisfied" type answer. The observation question allows you, the professional, to access the facts that are relevant to a complete diagnosis. And you'll notice, as in the above example, that these questions will take the conversation in a totally different direction.

The goal is to let your questions help you establish exceptional credibility and become a problem-solver for your customers. This level of engagement guides customers through making quality business decisions and, as a result, you will win more sales! □



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