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# Use Questions To Gain More Selling Power

by BILL BROOKS

Studies show that most people approach a buying decision with some level of anxiety. The truth is, they really don't want to have to make a decision. Believe it or not, your prospects are very often looking for an excuse not to satisfy a need or want. The decision-making process is just too stressful for them.

**W**hat does that mean for you? Your job as a sales professional is to help your prospect overcome this anxiety — their desire to avoid making a decision — and commit to satisfying his or her need or want with *your* product or service.

So how do you do it? There are two keys here:

- ***You've got to ask the right questions — everyone knows that.***

However, in training thousands of salespeople every year, we've found that salespeople talk their way out of more sales than they listen their way into. Salespeople who talk instead of listen tend to lose sales because they let their focus slip: They start thinking about what they want to have happen instead of what their prospects want to have happen.

- ***You've got to listen to your prospect's responses to your questions carefully so that your follow-up questions keep the focus where it needs to be — on that prospect and what he or she wants to have happen.***

In this article, we're going to look at 10 tips that will help you ask the right questions and keep your focus on your prospect.

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## Questioning Tip #1

### Prepare in Advance the Questions You Will Ask

Of course, every prospect is unique and every selling situation requires some variation, but certain basic questions that come up in every interview can be planned in advance. By carefully planning your basic questions, you can make sure you cover all bases and that your wording will be precise. Here are some examples:

- What about the product/service is most important to you?
- Have you seen anything else on the market that you especially don't like?
- What do you most want to have happen as a result of using this product/service?

I do have one caution: Be careful not to phrase them so they sound canned.

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**Questioning Tip #2**

**Open the Sale With a Good Question**

The best way to open a sale is with a question. If you're calling on someone, always ask, "Is this a good time for you?" And always ask your prospect, "In order to be of service to you, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

If they have the time, people will almost always answer "yes" to that second question. Whether or not that leads to a sale depends almost entirely on how good your follow-up questions are and how good you are at listening to the answers.

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**Questioning Tip #3**

**Ask Open-Ended and Indirect Questions**

Closed questions that call for a "yes" or "no" answer tend to discourage people from talking, to give only limited information, and to set a negative tone. Instead, you should ask open-ended questions that require prospects to tell you how they feel, what they want, or what they think. For example, you may ask something along the lines of, "How would you describe your current situation (with or without this product/service)?"

The answer will tell the observant sales professional a great deal — including what benefits of their offering to emphasize.

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**Questioning Tip #4**

**Ask Need-Development Questions**

When you are in the questioning phase of the sale, you want to do more than get the prospect to talk — you want that prospect to tell you what he or she needs. Therefore, frame questions that will give you insights into how prospects perceive their needs. You may ask, for example, "What would your primary use be for this product/service?"

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**Questioning Tip #5**

**Ask Questions That Help You Identify Dominant Needs**

Usually there is a single overriding need in the prospect's mind — a need you can pinpoint by asking the right questions. You may ask,

- "What would you most like to change about your present situation?"
- "What would it mean for you if you could improve your current situation?"

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**Questioning Tip #6**

**Ask Questions That Help You Pinpoint the Dominant Buying Motivations**

Buying motivations and needs are not always the same. Buying motivations have to do with desires, feelings, tastes and so on. Needs are logical, fact-based and tangible. Buying motivations are more emotional and intangible. The truth is, people tend to buy what they need from you when they see that you understand what they really *want*.

You can find out what motivates your buyer — what he or she wants — by asking what kind of similar products or services they've used in the past. Even if all they give you is a list, you at least learn what they like, or are familiar with. Often, however, people will talk about one or two experiences that were particularly well received. That knowledge will tell you exactly what benefits to emphasize most.

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**Questioning Tip #7**

**Avoid Offensive Questions or Asking Questions in an Insensitive Way**

This may seem obvious, but some salespeople make

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this mistake because they make assumptions about the prospect. Some questions can offend a prospect and cause them to back away from you.

- Don't ever use leading or "setup" questions such as, "You do want your children to have a fair chance, don't you?" What is the prospect going to say: "No! Let them tough it out"?
- Nosy or overly personal questions can be a real turnoff. Stick to business! It's always a good idea to avoid explosive subjects like religion, politics, race and deep personal issues. Bonding on a personal level can help cement a sale, but as a professional you want to keep the interview focused on the business at hand.
- Sometimes your manner can be threatening. Instead of asking, "How much do you want to spend?" why not phrase it, "How much had you planned to invest?"

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### Questioning Tip #8

#### Start With Broad Questions, Then Move Toward Questions With a Narrower Focus

Broad questions are usually less threatening and yield general information. Thus, they can help you get things rolling and steer you in the right direction. Your prospects may know, for example, that they want your product/service, but they don't always know what specifics of your offering would work best for them.

Prospects who call us, for example, tend to know they're looking for help in improving their organization's sales, but they don't always know the details of how our training programs are assembled. Why would they? It's up to us to ask the prospect questions and find out what the best course of action is for them.

Not until your probing becomes more comfortable and picks up speed should you start asking more specific questions that allow the prospect to mentally take ownership of your product or service.

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### Questioning Tip #9

#### Ask Questions That Are Easy to Answer

Questions that require knowledge the prospect doesn't have can often make a person feel dumb and reinforce his or her natural state of anxiety and discomfort in making the decision to buy or commit to a purchase.

Here's a broad example: Computer salespeople who ask a prospect what kind of memory they're looking for usually get a blank stare or silence over the phone. As Dell computer salespeople know well, a better question would be, "What do you plan on using the machine for?" If a person says, "Gaming, video conferencing and media storage," the salesperson knows this prospect is going to need a boatload of memory. If the prospect says, "e-mail, home file management and surfing the web," the salesperson knows a smaller amount of memory will work.

Try asking questions that don't depend on the prospect's technical knowledge. If they use jargon and technical speak that's one thing, but just because you're an expert doesn't mean they are. The smarter you make your prospects feel, the smarter they'll think you are and the better they'll like you.

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### Questioning Tip #10

#### Ask — Then Shut Up and Listen

The prospect can't talk while you're talking. Besides, you can't learn while you're talking. Don't just get quiet and think up something to say next; listen to and analyze every word that prospect says.

Remember: You can't talk people into buying, but you can listen them into it. Questions are your greatest selling tool. The better you become at asking questions, the easier it will become for you to sell. □



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