

Effective Questioning Combats

BY WELDON LONG

Since the dawn of mankind we have been buying and selling “stuff,” and over the centuries a predictable pattern has developed between buyers and sellers. The buyer-seller dynamic can spell “commission catastrophe” for the sales professional who lacks the artful skill of effective questioning.



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Centuries-Old Selling Problem

The Old Way — The Buyer Stalls

Essentially the old way involves the purchaser following a reliable pattern when choosing to come off his or her hard-earned cash to buy something and the unskilled seller who can easily fall victim to this insidious game.

The dynamic begins with buyer gaining as much information about the product or service from the seller as possible. This information may include price, warranties, financing options or delivery options.

Second, the buyer will withhold valuable information from the seller. For example, if a buyer walks onto a car lot to buy her dream car, she is unlikely to tell the salesperson that her old car just blew up and that she has a pocket full of cash she's just dying to spend. Instead, even if she loves the sparkling new car on the showroom floor, she will keep her cards close to her vest. After all, everyone knows that knowledge is power, and none of us want to give an advantage to the salesperson; thus, we keep our mouths shut.

Next, the buyer relies on the tried and true strategy of stalling in an effort to put off spending her hard-earned money. It's not that the buyer won't spend the money, it's just that given the choice, we all prefer to postpone spending it as long as possible. Stalling also provides the buyer the opportunity to revisit competitive offerings one last time and maybe work the seller over a bit on price.

Which brings us to the fourth step in this age-old game: The buyer asks for a cheaper price. This step is as predictable as the sun rising over the Atlantic. It is going to happen — even if the buyer likes the product or service and thinks the price is fair. Remember, this process has been ingrained in us for generations and no one writes a check without at least a halfhearted attempt at getting a lower price.

While this series of steps is natural, it can devastate the income of a seller who is not adept at derailing the process with effective questions. For example, when the seller begins step one, gathering information, an inexperienced seller may begin randomly spewing information about how wonderful his product or service is without ever probing for information of his own. When

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the buyer begins step two, withholding information, some sellers may continue the information spewing routine, further saturating the buyer with more information. When the buyer stalls in step three, the seller panics and begins offering concessions the buyer hasn't even asked for, and is then left with no defense when, in step four, the buyer asks for the lower price.

Sadly, this process is played out countless times everyday to the chagrin of sellers who depend upon commissions to pay the bills and business owners who depend on decent margins to keep the doors open.

The New Way — The Seller Asks Questions

How can sales professionals avoid this pitfall and improve the probability of closing the deal while maintaining sustainable margins and commissions? Excellent question.

The solution to this problem is the solution to almost any sales problem: Ask questions.

The first series of questions should be designed to uncover the hidden emotions underlying the buyers' needs and/or wants. This can easily be accomplished by asking basic questions about the current problem facing the buyer and then following up with a simple question or two about how the buyer "feels" about the current situation or would "feel" about the benefits of the proposed solution.


Once the buyer responds with an emotional term, you will know you are on the trail of what is really driving the purchasing decision. That information can skillfully be used to close the deal without having to resort to dropping the price.

Another useful way to use questioning is by asking “Duh” questions and then following up by asking, “Why do you say that?” This simple strategy simply requires giving the buyer the answer before asking the question, then benefiting from the classic influence strategy that “public declarations dictate future actions.”

A buyer is far more likely to take actions consistent with their statements. Remember, public dec-

larations dictate future actions. The seller merely has to hold the buyer accountable to their own words and, bingo, the sale is made and his wife and kids have enough money for groceries and mortgage.

Skillfully asking questions chang-

es the direction and the dynamic of a centuries-old buying-selling cycle. Our choice as sales professionals is simple: Learn to use questions or learn to get by on smaller commissions. We always have a choice, don't we? What's it going to be? 

Weldon Long is the President and CEO of Wright Total Indoor Comfort, Inc., a leading HVAC company in Colorado. Effective questioning is one of the skills he used to jumpstart his sales career and create an INC 5000 business. He now provides sales and motivational training to businesses and volunteers his expertise and time with the formerly incarcerated. Long's memoir of building his business success from his final release from prison after battling addictions is titled, *The Upside of Fear*, and has won several book awards and critical acclaim. Contact: www.weldonlong.com; (719) 304-5300.

