

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

by W. Scott Downey

When sales students first learn about selling, there's an interesting transition as they discover the importance of asking questions. At first selling seems easy. Even if they've never sold anything before, most have bought a car or stereo and have a general sense of the process. Although experienced sales professionals know better, most students believe that selling is just having a good line of bull and never taking "no" for an answer.

However, when students are sent out to sell, the task seems much harder. Students begin a little nervous. They make some small talk that calms them down and may even ask a few questions, but beginners tend to rush toward talking about the products — how great the products are, how they'll slice and dice and deliver the mail. Sometimes students get lucky and make a sale. Often they are shot down. After a while, students learn success comes by asking questions to uncover the customer's needs and values; only

then can a discussion be crafted to how a product fits the customer.

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

What makes a good question? A good question is one that produces a thoughtful response. Whether it's an "open" question designed to get customers talking or a "closed" question that asks about a key fact is not as important for experienced sellers as the quality of the response generated.

Asking good questions doesn't happen off the cuff. Good questions require as much planning as good presentations. Most sellers do a great job of asking operational questions, but even experienced sales professionals may get distracted from really thinking about questions that go beyond.

One distraction is knowing customers too well. A salesperson may have served a customer for years, resulting in a high degree of confidence about his or her needs. That's good but may result in few ques-

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tions being asked. It's easy to assume that what was true last season is true now, unless the customer says differently. Sometimes changes are gradual. For example, many producers increase or decrease the size of operations in increments, picking up a small parcel of ground or reducing herd size a bit. Sons or daughters may grow into more influential roles. Other suppliers or competitors may have changed. Because priorities shift over time, it can be helpful to take a step back and ask some pointed questions about what has changed.

Another reason sellers get distracted is that delivering product information may seem more important than asking questions. Salespeople spend much time learning about their products. There are thousands of details about product usage, components and configurations that the salesperson must know extremely well to discuss effectively. Salespeople work hard to be considered experts in their fields, and their product and technical knowledge is highly prized by customers. Studies have shown repeatedly that product knowledge and expertise are important components of value in relationships between business-to-business buyers and sellers. There is real desire to bring value to customers without wasting

Questions to help lead customer to objective

Customer's goals	Features of products	Measurable customer benefits	Ways to help customer recognize benefits
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their time. As a result, asking questions may not receive a high priority.

Because it's easy to get distracted, a little tune-up on asking questions is probably worthwhile. Remember that questioning has two functions. One is to get information, which is important, but questioning also directs the conversation. That's where the true power lies. Sales people can use questioning to direct both the content of the conversation, *what is discussed*, and the direction of the conversation, *where it is heading*. If the seller doesn't direct the conversation content, the customer runs the show. That's fine early in the call, but later the salesperson may want to select specific topics that will lead to a sale. Not directing the conversation with questions puts the salesperson in a role similar to that of students — directing the call by talking too much instead of asking questions and listening.

SPIN SELLING

Neil Rackham's book *SPIN Selling* changed the way many companies sell. "SPIN" stands for Situation, Problem, Implication, Need-Payoff. Rackham looked at the differences between more and less effective salespeople. He initially thought that effective sellers used more open-ended questions — questions designed to get the customer talking — but found there was more to it. Both effective and less effective salespeople were pretty good at getting customers to talk about situations and problems. The difference was in where the conversation went after that.

Once the less-effective sellers discovered the problems, they moved right into the presentation and began to address solutions. The most effective sellers went on to ask implication questions, "So how much is that problem costing you?" and need-payoff questions, "So, if I could solve that problem for you, how much would that solution be worth to you." The difference between more and less effective salespeople was their ability to get the customer to think about the received value. In SPIN selling and other question-based sales approaches, the salesperson doesn't

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explain value until the customer places a cost on the problem.

When customers think about value, they typically make a comparison between the benefits they receive and what it will cost them. Value is not easily measured but price is. Helping customers put a dollar value on the benefits of an agribusiness solution helps them see how an investment in that solution will post returns. It makes the customer's decision easier and results in a higher likelihood of success for the seller.

That may mean pointing out broader value than what is delivered solely through the product features, and definitely asking questions that will help customers reach a favorable conclusion. Questions about the cost of making the wrong decision, the dollar benefit of advice they received last season or the security they get from working with a trusted source are all examples of questions that help customers recognize and measure the value of the benefits they are getting.

This approach requires more intentional effort with complex business buyers. Multiple parties involved in a purchase decision may have different perspectives on the severity of a problem. Each decision-maker or influencer may have his or her own set of priorities. Because of this, the salesperson must have an understanding of the business goals, which needs arise from, as well as the personal goals, which are the values and biases of each influencer in the decision.

This is illustrated even in household decisions between husbands and wives. Perhaps the wife sees more value in an extended cab truck than the husband, or the husband sees more value in an annual fishing trip than the wife. A seller, who must reconcile these different uses of limited resources, must lay the groundwork by asking questions that help them discover the common ground. Only then can a series of questions

that lead to a mutually understood concept of value be crafted. In a complex agribusiness with farm managers, respected hands, technical advisers and owners having some input and influence on purchasing decisions, developing a common view of the cost of a problem can be nearly insurmountable without an organized plan for discovering the business goals and values of all involved.

To ask a really good question requires intentional planning, some real thought about what types of questions would lead the customer toward the seller's objective. A good method is to divide a piece of paper into four columns (a spreadsheet will do nicely). In the first column write down the customers' goals — what they hope to accomplish in their operation. In the second column, write down the features of the products, services or actions that address a need that arises from the goal. In the third column write how those products, services or actions can result in benefits that can be measured by the customer. Finally, in the fourth column think about how a question might be phrased that would lead the customers to recognize the benefit listed in column three.

While there is no magic question that will get every sale, some good planning time and thinking about what to ask can pay big returns. **AM**

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