

# Asking Questions

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**A Perspective 101 Series**

# Asking Questions



The most important skill in selling is the ability to ask questions.

*“Asking questions is 3 times more persuasive than presenting information”.*

This is true. The best salespeople ask more questions and listen effectively. The least successful salespeople think that listening means “waiting to interrupt” So, what are the main things we can do to improve this most important of skills?

There are 3 issues: design, sequence and introduction.

## **Design**

The most effective questions are open questions, closed questions and follow up questions.

## **Open questions**

Open questions are useful because they enable us to do several things:

- Establish rapport
- Open up particular topics
- Discover how customers feel

Open questions are those which cannot be answered with a simple yes or no, but require the customer to give more information. They generally begin with words like `how' and `what' or `tell me' and have the effect of `opening' the customer up.

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Examples of open questions:

How did you first hear about us?

What made you decide to invest in a Personal Pension?

Tell me, what is the best time for us to call and see you?

Who else would benefit from being at our meeting?

These open questions bring out facts, opinions and suggestions from the customer. These are particularly useful in sales when customers are uncommunicative and not very forthcoming.

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## Closed Questions

Closed questions can be equally useful in the sales process because they enable us to gain specific information.

Closed questions bring responses that arm us with facts or specific yes/no opinions.

For example:

Did you remember receiving our literature?

How old are you?

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## Follow-up Questions

Effective listening can involve the use of follow-up questions. The objectives of asking follow-up questions are as follows:

- To show interest and encourage the customer to keep talking.
- To increase the quality and quantity of information already gained.
- To confirm understanding of information already gained.

For example, by responding with really? or ?... and then?, you encourage the customer to continue by actively showing interest in what he, or she, is saying.

Examples of follow-up questions So, you changed the policy last year. Why was that? You say you weren't happy with the service. What happened?

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**Sequence** The sales process is intuitive and while we can plan ahead, we need to keep flexible. Part of our planning should be to think about the key areas that we need to find out about when talking to our customers.

These are:

- 1. Our contact.** The person we are talking to. Their role, responsibilities, job history and personal motivation. People like talking about themselves. This is a good way of building rapport.
- 2. Their organization.** Ask them about their business. Where are they based, what are their major products, where are they going?
- 3. Their decision making process.** Who makes decisions, how do they do it and what time scales are involved?
- 4. Problems.** Selling is problem solving. What problems do they face that we could help solve?
- 5. Needs.** What are their needs? What are they looking for from a supplier? Can we give them what they are looking for? Find out their buying criteria
- 6. Finance.** What are the budget issues we need to discuss? How important is cost to them?
- 7. Current suppliers.** Who are they? How happy are they with the service they receive? Can we do better? 8. **Competition.** Are we in a competitive situation? Who else is involved? Introduction To make sure our questions do not seem abrupt, irrelevant, critical, manipulative, or inquisitorial, we need to introduce them in such a way as to make the feel customer comfortable. To do this we can use 3 techniques; Prefacing, Labelling and Linking.

# Asking Questions



## Prefacing

All communication contains 2 main elements - content and feeling. Once we have decided on the content, we must make sure the customer feels right about us. The easiest way to do this is to begin our question with polite phrases, such as:

May I ask you.....? Could you tell me.....? I would be interested to know.....? Can we establish when.....? Would you mind telling me.....? It would be helpful to know.....? Can you explain.....?

This method helps us to create a positive working environment and put the customer at their ease.

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## Labelling

Sometimes called behavior labelling, this gives the customer advanced warning of the behaviour we are about to adopt. The next stage of the questionnaire helps us to ensure that we recommend only what you are able to comfortably afford.

How much is your annual income, before tax?

In order to be able to prepare the best possible proposal to meet your needs, I need to understand your budgetary requirements. Tell me, how much have you budgeted for this project?

Labeling involves introducing a question with a statement about its content or purpose. By giving advanced warning about what might be a difficult question to answer, we achieve several advantages:

- We create trust by eliminating surprise
- We give the other party thinking time and often get more considered answers
- We soften the impact of the discussion and put the other party at their ease

There are negative examples of labelling which should be avoided:

I'm sure it is probably against company policy to give out this kind of information, but could you give me an idea of what you've got in your budget?

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## Linking

Another way to get acceptance for questions is to refer back to a previous statement made by the customer.

You mentioned before that you work at ABC Limited. Do they use these products as part of their manufacturing process?

You said that your company is expanding. How are you going to manage the extra volume of information being processed by your accounts department?

You mentioned earlier that you are launching a new product. When will the launch take place?

Feedback It is important to acknowledge the customer's response, before moving on to the next question. We see this in the use of non-verbal communication and by the use of expressions like "I see" or "That's interesting"

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Two techniques that can be used are restating what has been said, paraphrasing, or how we feel about what has been said, reflection.

Here are some examples:

**Statement:** I'm concerned I may lose my job and not be able to keep up with the payments

**Paraphrase:** So, what you are saying is that you are worried about job security and payment protection?

**Statement:** I am looking for a long-term investment that is low risk

**Paraphrase:** So you are not looking for a quick return on your investment that might prove risky? Is that correct?

**Statement:** I don't want to be forced into making a quick decision

**Reflection:** You are right. It would be better to weigh up all the pro's and con's before going ahead

**Statement:** I'm concerned about making the right decision for my company  
**Reflection:** That is very sensible. It is important to look at this decision carefully before making a long term commitment

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**Reflection can be a useful skill.**

In selling it shows we understand how the customer feels, which can create and build empathy.

It can reveal what we have not understood and encourages further feedback.

To do this well, it is important to use different words than those in the original statement and seek clarification if you don't fully understand what was said in the original statement.

**Work on your questioning skills.**

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This is a series of Training for your  
Management, Sales & Office TEAM

## Good Selling !



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