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Ask and Ye Shall Receive...the Sale!

There are a number of things that set exceptional sales people apart from their less successful peers. Generally they have a stronger work ethic, they take full responsibility for their own success or failure and they are constantly trying to improve their personal selling skills. Top sales performers also ask a lot of questions. They are very inquisitive and are always absorbing and analyzing information. High performing sales people not only ask more questions than their peers, they ask better questions. They know what they need to know in order to close a sale and ask carefully crafted questions to elicit this information from their prospects. Poorly framed questions waste the time of both parties involved in the conversation and can drive a prospect away, rather than engage them. Let's look at how great salespeople use good questions to engage their customers and close sales.

What do you want to know?

Salespeople get paid for one thing and one thing only, having good conversations with customers that lead to a sale. Customers are very busy and often have short attention spans, so the amount of time they will give us is very limited. This means we need to make the most of every customer conversation.

We need to know what we need to know and what we want to accomplish.

Here are the key types of questions to ask a prospect:

Qualifying questions – Asking “Who is responsible for your company’s marketing?” or “Do you need to get approval from anyone else?” saves time and ensures that you are talking to the real decision maker. It is still a good idea to collect information from anyone within the organization, but your conversation with a decision maker will be very different.

- ✓ Operational questions – These are questions about the prospect’s business and situation. They provide the sales person with the fundamental understanding of the customer’s business. Information you will need to develop an effective advertising program. Reps should ask questions like, “What is the most profitable part of your business?” This type of question helps the sales person to understand where their products can benefit the client the most.
- ✓ Problem questions – These are questions that reveal the sources of the customer’s “pain.” Questions like, “If you could change one thing about your business, what would it be?” or “What keeps you up at night?” can help you to offer solutions that your customer will readily embrace.

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It is also important to ask prospects about their competition and other external factors which might threaten their business. These are probably the most important questions a sales person can ask on a call.

- ✓ Goal Questions – Asking a customer about their goals or objectives for the business allows you to show the customer how your products can help them get what they want out of life. Asking, “Where do you see the business going in the next 5 years?” or “What are your goals for the business in the coming year?” allows you to frame your proposal in terms of their goals. “Mr. Customer, you said you want to increase your carry out business in the next year, so I’ve put together some ideas to promote this aspect of your business.”
- ✓ Feelings questions – Experienced sales people know that customers make buying decisions based on emotions and then justify them with the facts. It is vital that a sales person not only knows what the customer is “thinking” but also what they are “feeling”. Asking a customer, “How they feel” about their current marketing will provide significant insights into their buying process. It is also wise to try to get a handle on what they feel about your product and advertising in general.

Conversational Questioning Techniques

Questions allow you to control the direction and tenor of the conversation. They allow you to steer your prospect toward an understanding of how your products can help them solve their problems and achieve their goals. Good questioning technique also keeps the customer fully engaged in your presentation. When a sales person monopolizes the conversation, telling the prospect all about their products and how great they are, the prospect can mentally “check-out” and simply pretend to listen. Questions force the customer to give you their full attention. Knowing that they need to answer your questions means they have to follow along and be fully engaged.

As we mentioned above, time with a customer is both precious and limited. The more engaged the prospect is in your presentation, the more time they will give you. Most customers enjoy a good conversation; no customer wants to be subjected to an interrogation. The needs discovery portion of your call should have the feel of a conversation between peers and not a courtroom cross examination. Here are some techniques which will help you to accomplish this:

- ✓ Tell the customer what you are doing – Before you launch into your questions, tell the prospect what you are trying to accomplish.

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“Ms. Customer, I would like to ask you a few questions, so I can get a better understanding of your business and see if there is anything I can do to help you achieve your goals.”

- ✓ Start off easy – Many sales trainers believe salespeople should never use closed ended questions. These are questions that can be answered in one or two words such as, “How long have you been in business?” “15 years!” I feel that closed ended questions can be useful at the beginning of a call. They are easy to answer and non-threatening. They can be great “icebreakers” allowing the customer to ease into the conversation. These simple questions get the conversation started and set the stage for more difficult questions later in the call.
- ✓ Control the direction of the call – Keep your questions on point. Think about the information that you need to form a good solution and sell it to the customer. Know where you want to go and try to stay on course. Though you want to stick to your plan, do not let this prevent you from pursuing an unexpected but promising line of inquiry. If the customer mentions that they are planning an expansion that you didn’t know was coming shift gears and get the customer talking about the new opportunity.
- ✓ Volley the “ball” – The conversation should look like a tennis match, you lob a question over the net and the customer returns it. Your next ball starts from where the customer hit it. You should carefully listen to the customer and build your next question on their response. This shows respect for the client. They will know you are listening and paying attention to what they say. This also gives the interaction a conversational feeling.
- ✓ Ask one question at a time – Don’t fire a string of questions at a prospect. Feed your questions to them one at a time. Wait for the answer and then move on to your next question. Giving a prospect too many questions is stressful and confusing. This might cause the prospect to “clam up” or cut the conversation short.
- ✓ Ask “why” – When a prospect expresses a strong position on something such as, “I don’t believe print advertising is effective!” ask them to explain their feelings. “Mr. Prospect, why do you feel print doesn’t work in your industry?” Their answer may give the information you need to respond



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to them. Perhaps they have had a bad experience in the past or they are just repeating something they heard from a competitor.

- ✓ Don't answer your own questions – “Have you heard about my publication? It is the Ourtown Herald and it reaches over 50,000 readers.” Too many sales people ask and answer a question without coming up for a breath. When you ask a question, give the customer a chance to give you an answer. This is far more common that most people realize. Asking and answering a question makes the prospect feel that they do not need to be part of the conversation.
- ✓ Listen with your ears, listen with your eyes – Pay attention to the customer's reactions to your questions. Listen carefully to their answers and the tone of their answers. Also observe their body language. If they perk up when you are discussing a particular aspect of their business, you have uncovered a “hot button” issue. If they seem uncomfortable discussing something, you may have found a serious problem that they will be very anxious to resolve.

To sell or not to sell, it's all about the question

One of the popular medical shows on television was *House M.D.* Dr. House was a brilliant diagnostician who solved medical mysteries that stumped other doctors. Dr. House would ask his patients a lot of probing questions and performed a battery of tests to gather additional information. He then analyzed the information he collected to formulate a diagnosis of the patient's problem and to effect a cure for them. This is exactly what a great sales person does. The only difference is that the curmudgeonly Dr. House irritated his patients, while good sales people use their interest in their customers to build strong relationships. Doctors use x-rays, MRIs and CT scans to see inside their patients to find their problems. Questions serve the same function for sales people. Learning how to use questions effectively is critical to success in sales. What sets super star sales people apart from their peers? They ask more and better questions – NO QUESTION ABOUT IT!

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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