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A Question of Success *(Actually 5 questions)*

What is the greatest invention of mankind? Is it fire, the wheel, the Big Mac? I maintain mankind's greatest creation is the question! I think the ability to question was the spark that led to every other innovation in human history. That first person who asked, "I wonder if I could use that weird 'lightning stuff' to keep the cave warm and chase off the saber tooth tigers" got the ball rolling. Every advance since that time started with somebody saying, "I wonder if." Questions are powerful tools for stimulating creativity. Just as a farmer uses a plow to break up the hard soil so that seeds can germinate, questions stir up the mind so that new ideas can take root and grow. Good sales people have always used questions to get customers to open up and to get them to see things in a new way. Likewise skilled sales managers use "Socratic" questioning techniques to train and motivate their teams.

The most important questions we ask are the ones we ask ourselves. Good self-directed questions help us to set goals, to organize ourselves, and to develop creative solutions to the problems we encounter. The power of questions lies in their unique ability to engage the brain and force us to look at things in a different way. Good questions polish and organize our thoughts and allow us to avoid costly missteps. Asking ourselves good questions and then answering them honestly suppresses the natural human tendency toward self delusion. Questions keep us in touch with reality.

Here are five questions that I have found useful throughout my career:

Question #1: Will this action move me closer to my goal?

This assumes that you have taken the very important step to identify what you want to accomplish in your life and your career. The problem most people have with goal setting is that they write out their goals and then file them away. My father's favorite New Year's toast was, "May all your troubles last no longer than your resolutions." Most goals last about as long as the average New Year's resolution. The "out of sight—out of mind" rule applies here; goals are only effective to the extent that they impact your behavior. Most people fail to achieve their goals because they get distracted and waste their time on activities unrelated to their objectives. Asking the above question keeps your goals front and center. The poet Goethe said "The things that matter most must never

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be at the mercy of things which matter least,” Question #1 is a sure way to keep everything you do in perfect alignment with your personal goals.

Question #2: What is my first step? What is the next step I need to take?

Everyone knows the Chinese proverb, “The longest journey begins with the first step.” I want to add an addendum to this, “The journey will be even longer if the first step and the steps that follow it are pointed in the wrong direction.” We work in a high intensity, fast moving, deadline driven business. This can cause many people to take a “ready—fire—aim!” approach to organizing their time. Asking Question #2 takes the opposite course, what Coach John Wooden called “Make haste slowly.” Taking the time to think out and plan your activities will make you more efficient. Taking a second to ask this question can save you hours of time which can be used to advance you toward your goals (See Question #1).

Question #3: Is this what I get paid to do? Is this the best use of my skills?

Trust me the answer to this question isn't “DUH!” A sales person is paid to do one thing, and one thing only—to have impactful conversations about advertising with prospective advertisers. A manager is paid and promoted to recruit, develop and lead a winning team that can accomplish the goals established by the head of the company. We all have to complete paperwork, attend meetings and do a myriad of other tasks that keep us from money-making activities. To maximize our income, we must maximize the time we spend on income generating activities. If you are a sales person you were hired because you know how to persuade people to buy advertising. If you are a sales manager you were promoted because you are a leader. You were not hired for your ability to make photocopies or to file. If you have access to office staff, delegate as much as possible to them. Your time is better spent prospecting for new business than doing an ad layout that an artist is paid to do. A sales manager's time should be invested in teaching a rep to make sales rather than handling customers for them. If delegation is not an option, nonessential (i.e. stuff you don't get paid to do) should be put off and done outside of prime selling time. Asking Question #3 keeps you honest. Do these things have to be done by you and done right now or are you doing them because they are easy and painless?



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Question #4: How can I use this?

Last year the state highway department decided to widen and repave a local highway. This two-year project made shopping in the “business strip” of one of our rep’s territories a nightmare. The local businesses were justifiably concerned and planned to cut back their advertising to cut costs. Our rep put together a special “Cones and Barrels” promotion that told shoppers their wait in traffic would be rewarded by deep discounts at the local merchants (“Wait a little—save a lot!”). She used this promo to actually attract new advertisers and to help her advertisers weather the two-year construction project. When encountering a new situation or a new bit of research most people wonder if it is good news or bad news. With a little creative thought, almost any circumstance can be used to your advantage. Rather than simply reacting to a situation, Question #4 lets you respond to it in a positive manner.

Question #5: How does this sound to the other person? What’s in it for them?

Abraham Lincoln once said, “When I am getting ready to reason with a man, I spend one-third of my time thinking about myself and what I am going to say and two-thirds about him and what he is going to say.” This attitude is what made Lincoln an extremely successful attorney and a great leader. He always tried to look at the situation at hand from the other person’s point of view. This is the basis of “emotional intelligence.” Question #5 is a way to take a pause and think about the impact of words before we let them slip out. For example, if a prospect says they advertise in a competitor’s product, the sales person may respond by describing how expensive and ineffective advertising in the competitive product is. The rep thinks they are imparting simple verifiable facts. The prospect may interpret this message as, “You say advertising in that paper is stupid so you must be saying I’m stupid.” A better approach would be, “I’m glad to hear that you understand the value of advertising.” And then go on to talk about how adding your publication would benefit the customer. Customers buy for their own reasons, trying to put yourself in their shoes will help you to understand their motivations.

Conclusion and “Bonus” Question: Can I be proud of what I’ve done?

When I look back at the three decades that I’ve spent in this business, I don’t think about the paychecks that I’ve earned. I like to think about some of the tough customers I’ve sold, of the people I’ve trained and the customers I’ve helped. Though I am nearing retirement age, I still enjoy coming to work and

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doing my job. My Dad and my Grandfather taught me to “give it all you’ve got,” to be more concerned with what I could give rather than what I could get and to always be fair and honest. We spend far too much of our lives working to do something that we do not find satisfying. Satisfaction and pride both come from working hard to help our customers and to earn our pay without compromising our personal values. If you can answer the “Bonus Question” in the affirmative, you’ll not only be successful in your career but you’ll find a great deal of satisfaction in it. I’ll close with this thought from the Nobel Prize winning author Naguib Mahfouz: “You can tell if a person is clever by their answers. You can tell whether they are wise by their questions.”

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