



VALUE-ABILITY

Asking Questions and Active Listening

Asking good questions during the data gathering process of working with a client or prospect is vital. Not only does it build rapport with the client and help develop their confidence in you and your process, but the information you gather will be essential in allowing you to make appropriate and comprehensive recommendations.

There are two styles of questions - open and closed-ended. While open ended questions will likely dominate most of the data gathering process, it is important to understand both types, what they accomplish and when to use them.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Open ended questions are used to gather information about your client, their business, their clientele and the choices they make about the products and services they use. Open ended questions will also help you understand how they select their current products and services. Using open ended questions leads to more of a conversational feel to your line of questioning, allowing the client to provide information in a more relaxed and natural way. It encourages the client to provide the information that is most important to them.

A good way to remember the open-ended questions is to recall the important questions included in a news article:

Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

EXAMPLES:

Who do/have you...?	What do/have you...?	When do/have you...?
Where do/have you...?	How do/have you...?	Why do/have you...?

CLOSED-ENDED QUESTIONS

Closed ended questions ask the respondent to answer with either a "yes" or "no" response. They are used to confirm facts or to assist you in establishing if the conversation is on the right track. In addition to obtaining confirmation of facts, closed ended questions can be used to redirect the focus of your conversation to a new line of questioning. Using only close ended questions can create the feeling of a test or, even worse, an interrogation. To keep this from occurring, close ended questions should be used sparingly and for the very specific reasons mentioned - to confirm a specific fact, confirm your line of questioning is on track, or to redirect the conversation.

EXAMPLES:

Are you...?	Can you...?	Will/Would you...?
Do you...?	Could you...?	Have you...?

QUESTION EXTENSIONS

Even when using a combination of open and closed ended questions, the data gathering process can seem to the client to be less of a conversation and more of “quiz show”. In order to break up this, you can use some of the information you are getting from the client to ask question extensions. This will allow you to delve deeper into areas that are important or of specific interest to your data gathering process, while at the same time it serves as a form of active listening - confirming to the client that you are actually hearing the things they are saying. These allow you to clarify points the client has made and allow the client to elaborate further on the information they have already communicated to you.

EXAMPLES:

Tell me more about...	What else should I know about...?	Why did you say...?
Can you give me an example of...?	What did you mean when you said...?	Why is it important that...?

ACTIVE LISTENING

Body language, taking notes and the tone of your voice play a massive part in portraying to your client that you are truly listening to what they are saying, but there are also verbal skills involved. Using question extensions to allow the client to clarify and elaborate on their comments is one way of doing this, but you also can simply restate or paraphrase the information you have gathered to accomplish this.

Repeating back to the client what you have heard allows them the opportunity to confirm that you have correctly understood what they are trying to communicate, provide more information or to correct any things that they have not stated correctly or you have misunderstood.

Relying on the notes you have taken during the conversation, use one of the following phrases to repeat back to the client the key parts of the information you have heard.

EXAMPLES:

If I understand you correctly...	What you're telling me is...	In other words, what you're saying is...
Let me see if I have this correct...	I hear you saying that...	As I get this...

FOCUS ON NEED BASED LANGUAGE

In any data gathering conversation, there are certain phrases that will alert you toward an area of high importance to the client. Whenever you hear one of these phrases, this is a topic or area on which you should focus your open and closed ended questions, question extensions and active listening restatements.

EXAMPLES:

I want...	I need...	I'd like...	I hope...
I'm looking for...	It's important...	It would be helpful...	It would be nice...

EXAMPLES OF OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

BASIC INFORMATION GATHERING

What prompted you/ your company to look into this?
What are your expectations/ requirements for this product/ service?
What process did you go through to determine your needs?
How do you see this happening?
What is it that you'd like to see accomplished?
With whom have you had success in the past?
With whom have you had difficulties in the past?
Can you help me understand that a little better?
What does that mean?
How does that process work now?
What challenges does that process create?
What challenges has that created in the past?
What are the best things about that process?
What other items should we discuss?

INFORMATION QUALIFICATION

What do you see as the next action steps?
What is your timeline for implementing/ purchasing this type of service/ product?
What other data points should we know before moving forward?
What budget has been established for this?
What are your thoughts?
Who else is involved in this decision?
What could make this no longer a priority?
What's changed since we last talked?
What concerns do you have?

RAPPORT ESTABLISHMENT

How did you get involved in... ?
What kind of challenges are you facing?
What's the most important priority to you with this? Why?
What other issues are important to you?
What would you like to see improved?
How do you measure that?