

Salespeople learn when they're listening
8 Questions That Keep Prospects Talking

By
John Graham

When asked why salespeople don't close more sales, a company president answered instantly, "They don't ask enough questions." He went on to add, "They're so focused on getting prospects to buy they don't engage them. That takes asking lots of questions."

He's on to something important. We're in such a hurry to get across what we want to say to our prospects that we ignore what they want from us. As it turns out, today's prospects won't tolerate such insensitive behavior. They're gone.

So, where does this leave salespeople? What are they to do if they can't advance their agenda, how are they going to close sales? To put it bluntly, a salesperson's agenda is irrelevant; it doesn't count. It's what the prospect cares about that demands our attention.

The purpose of meeting with prospects is to recognize and understand what's going on with them. That takes getting them talking about what they know best: *themselves*. They don't get many chances to do this. Others are too busy with their own lives to listen. This gives salespeople the unique opportunity to stop talking, start asking questions—and listening.

There's irony in asking questions, in encouraging prospects to talk about themselves. When they do, they want to reciprocate, to say thank you, and to pay us back. And they do it by listening intently.

Prospects are focused when they're talking, but they get distracted when someone else is speaking. Don't fall into the trap of wanting to get your message across; the urge to tell your story kills sales. The job is creating conditions so your prospects can get their story across to you.

Since salespeople learn when they're listening, here are eight questions that get prospects talking.

1. "I'm curious. Why did you agree to meet with me today?"

Everyone in sales knows that just because they ask for a meeting doesn't mean a prospect will say yes. More often than not, they get turned down. When someone says

yes, inquisitive salespeople don't stop there. They wonder why. They want to know what's going on and why prospects are interested. The more they know from the start, the better.

2. *"What is it you would like to have happen as a result of this meeting?"*

The purpose of asking questions is gathering information. This will help you keep an open mind so you can avoid making mistakes. By filling in the picture, you will stay on track as you plan your next moves.

3. *"What are the specific issues you want to address?"*

One mistake salespeople can make is to gloss over or even avoid significant issues. They don't want to turn off prospects. What they don't realize is that digging down lets a prospect know they're serious. Follow up questions carry it another step further: How satisfied are you with your analysis? How would you feel, if someone challenged it?

4. *"As you see it, what hurdles must be overcome?"*

It's always a good idea to come at issues from various angles. It's a good way to find out the lay of the land, to better understand what's going on, and to identify others who may be involved. In other words, the answer to this question can give you a more complete picture of what is involved.

5. *"If my company offered exactly what you're looking for, how would you describe it?"*

This is a pivotal question because it offers insight into what is important to a prospect, something that's not as obvious as it may seem. It's a serious mistake to assume you're getting the message correctly. Far too frequently, words don't have the same meaning to people. This question serves as a check to be sure you and your prospect are on the same page.

6. *"How satisfied are you at this point in your decision-making process?"*

By asking where prospects are in making a decision, it's easy to put them on the defensive so they're less than candid. Instead, this question is designed to help expand the conversation, to let them know you're interested, but not nosy. If they're just getting started, you can follow up by asking about their expectations. If they're further along, you can ask how about possible concerns.

7. *"Because those in your position are cost conscious, what's your thinking as to what the right solution should cost?"*

This question avoids the old and tired "What's your budget?" question, which usually results in a useless and vague answer. A follow up question might go like this, "Can you tell me how you arrived at that figure?"

8. *"It would be helpful if you would tell me what you feel about our meeting today." You want to know if the meeting was helpful. Did it meet the person's expectations? And,*

finally, ask, “Can we talk about what should happen next?” This is the action step that establishes the agenda for the next meeting.

Unless salespeople drive the conversation with strategic questions, meeting with prospects often results in too much talking and not enough listening. This leads to prospects who are less than satisfied and salespeople who are unable to move forward with confidence.

John Graham of GrahamComm is a marketing and sales strategy consultant and business writer. He is the creator of “Magnet Marketing,” and publishes a free monthly eBulletin, “No Nonsense Marketing & Sales Ideas.” Contact him at jgraham@grahamcomm.com, 617-774-9759 or johnrgraham.com.