

The Power of Questions

Participants in my sales training workshops often ask how they can better control the sales process. Most people spend the majority of their time talking about their product or service believing that telling is selling. Although they may have been trained to do this, it is an ineffective approach. The most effective way to control the sale is to ask more questions.

Selling is like driving a car. The person who asks the questions sits in the driver's seat and controls the direction of the sale. The passenger—the person who answers the questions—goes along for the ride. Whenever the customer starts asking questions, she moves into the driver's seat and takes control of the sale and the sales person becomes the passenger. Unfortunately, many sales people feel that they are selling when they are responding to their prospect's questions. They mistakenly believe that this will demonstrate how smart or knowledgeable they are and will help the other person make a buying decision.

Many sales people have learned to ask questions but too often they sound like this:

"If I could save you money, would you be interested?"

"Is this the one you want?"

"What will it take to earn your business?"

The problem with questions like this is that they do not help you gain the knowledge you need to effectively present a solution. And they don't help you actually control the sales process. Plus, questions like this only demonstrate your lack of sales ability and skill and will quickly cause your prospect to lose interest in the call or discussion.

Instead, you need to ask high-quality questions. Questions that make your prospect or customer think. Questions that demonstrate your knowledge and expertise. Questions that your competitors are not asking.

Let's say for example, you sell advertising. Instead of asking standard questions that focus on your prospect's current advertising campaign and budget, you could focus on learning more about their goals, objectives and the challenges they are facing trying to meet those targets. This approach helps you gain more insight to your prospect's business which means you will be able to present a solution that will help that person's business.

In today's ultra-competitive business world it is actually easy to stand out from your competition because most sales people are so focused on trying to get the sale that they don't learn anything about their prospect's situation. Or, they move backwards through the sales process by starting with their presentation, pitch or demonstration followed by a Q and A session instead of asking questions

first and then adapting their presentation to address the needs of the person they are speaking to.

Several years ago, I met with a sales rep to learn more about computer-based training and how it could potentially help the company I was working for. When he entered my office he immediately fired up his laptop and began telling me everything about his company from how long they had been in business, to how well funded they were, to the organizations they had worked with. After his fifteen minute monologue, he asked me what questions I had. My immediate response was, "How can you help me?" after which he went into another ten minute pitch. By the time he was finished talking, he was also out of time because I had to attend another meeting. A few weeks later he called me and asked if I had made a decision and when I said I going with another vendor he immediately asked if price was a factor. I responded by saying that we had not even discussed price because all he did during the entire sales call was talk about his company. I also mentioned that I still had no idea of how his company could help me and shortly afterwards, I disconnected the call.

Hopefully it's obvious to you that the sales rep lost the chance to gain my business because he didn't learn anything about my specific situation. He didn't ask me what I was looking for or why I was considering computer-based learning. In all likelihood, he probably thought he was controlling the sale by talking, but in reality, all he did was waste my time and his. Unfortunately, this happens much more than people realize.

In a recent workshop I conducted, we had invested a significant amount of time discussing the importance of asking thought-provoking questions and the time had come to apply this concept in a simulation. I watched in amazement as virtually every sales person launched into a pitch without first asking their customer a series of questions.

If you truly want to control the sales process and positively influence the outcome, you must teach yourself to ask questions instead of talking. Contrary to popular belief, telling is NOT selling.

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