

Ask, Don't Tell (And More Books You'll Sell)

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Doctor asks questions to get information before making a diagnosis. Litigators ask questions of witnesses to build their cases. Journalists ask questions to generate information for their articles. Similarly, when selling to a corporate buyer, ask questions to acquire information, exchange ideas, build your case, establish rapport and trust, and uncover unforeseen pitfalls to mitigate risk. Then stop talking about your book, and ask more questions.

Dale Carnegie advised us to be a good listener in his classic book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He told us to, "Ask questions the other person will enjoy answering." Yet most people fail to use this advice when selling their books to corporate buyers.

Why? Authors and publishers try to impress the buyers with their books, the one they took years to write. You feel the necessity to describe your expertise, giving you more credibility as the author or publisher. Or, you may feel you know what the buyer wants to accomplish so you tell him or her how your content is the best or most up to date on the topic. But the buyer is thinking, "So What? What does that have to do with what I want to accomplish?" Rapport -- and most likely the sale -- is lost. "In a selling situation, the least important thing is your book," says sales pro Guy Ahtzahn

The first step in becoming a better questioner is simply to ask more questions. However, don't frontload them in the first half of the sales call. It may appear as if you are making your way through a to-do list. Scatter your questions throughout the sales call. They are more likely to be well received and lead to a conversation, a dialogue between professionals, in which you ask a question and then follow where it may lead.

In addition, not all questions are created equal. There are basically four types: introductory questions ("How are you today?"), mirror questions ("I'm fine. How are you?"), leading questions ("What types of products do you use as premiums in your marketing campaigns?") and follow-up questions ("What was your experience using them?"). Learning when and how to use these is a key to successful selling.

Begin by building rapport and trust

Your sales conversation has two main goals: impression management (rapport, trust) and information exchange (learning). When first meeting, build rapport by asking introductory questions. Set the tone of the meeting by inquiring about a diploma on their "ego wall," or about the family photo on their credenza. Don't just walk in and start bombarding your prospects with questions about their business.

Learn about their objectives and needs

As you feel an end to the "small talk," make a subtle transition to the task at hand. There may be a little uneasiness here, since each party seeks to uncover information from and about the other. As you both become more comfortable with the other's intentions, a trusting relationship begins to form.

It's time to move into the information-gathering stage. Ask questions to find out what pains the buyer before you diagnose and prescribe the dosage of your content. Ask leading ("What went right or wrong in previous campaigns?") and follow-up questions ("What do you want to accomplish in the upcoming campaign?")

Follow-up questions may have special power when selling. They signal to your prospects that you are listening, are interested in what they have to say, create an aura of conversation, and reduce tension. Follow-up questions don't require much thought or preparation, so they demonstrate that you didn't come with a

preconceived plan (although you probably did), and you want to help them solve their problems rather than just selling them books (even though that is your ultimate objective).

Ask open-ended questions.

No one likes to feel they are being interrogated, and a string of closed-ended questions (yes or no, this or that) can make people feel they are under attack. Open-ended queries can counteract that effect and are useful for learning something new. These queries begin with words like who, what, where, when, why and how. They get your prospects talking about a topic in which you are both interested - them. The bonus is that they often lead the conversations to unexpected topics, giving you more fodder for your follow-up questions and closing remarks.

It is acceptable -- even necessary -- to begin with a closed-ended question to direct the topic of discussion ("Have you ever used books as a promotional tool in your marketing campaigns?" may be answered with "yes" or "no."). Then you follow with an open-ended question ("Why not?" or "What was your experience using them?").

Two other parts of the equation.

Just as the way you ask questions can facilitate trust and the sharing of information, so too is the way you listen to the replies and answer questions that are asked of you. Actively listen to the responses when you ask a question. And when you are asked a question, reply openly and transparently, even if the answer may be detrimental to your position. For example, if your prospects ask why your book is more expensive than a competitor's book, don't deny it or get defensive. Instead, give reasons why your content is more informative, valuable and likely to achieve the prospect's goals.

A successful sales conversation is like a dance that requires partners to be in sync. It's a mutual push-and-pull that unfolds over time. Good questioning technique, active listening and thoughtful answers can foster smoother, more effective sales interactions as they strengthen rapport and trust. Ask and answer questions as if you are truly interested in creating a mutually profitable business relationship. And remember, prescription before diagnosis is malpractice.

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