Questions: The Key to Professional Sales

ere's the secret of sales that can double your income: Get information before you give it. It's that simple.

Selling isn't *convincing* anyone of anything. It's helping them get what they value.

A cab driver ask what I did for a living. After hearing the answer, he said that he couldn't sell because in a job interview he had taken a test requiring him to sell a pen to a person who already had a similar pen. He failed miserably, and asked me what kind of pitch I would have suggested.

I responded that there's no possible way I would even *consider* trying to put together a "pitch" under those circumstances because you're predestined for failure. I told him that you'd first need to find out why and how the person uses pens, what he likes and doesn't like about them, ideally what he desires most and least when it comes to pens, and what value he places on that. Only

then could you effectively tell him about your pen and have a snowball's chance of getting him to consider yours.

The Same is True With Your Calls

And that's no different than your sales calls. To enjoy gargantuan success in sales, you need to be a master questioner, able to open up your prospect and customer, unlock their needs, concerns and desires, and move them into a state of mind where they begin wanting a product or service like yours even before you begin presenting it. Think about it: offer someone a drink of water when they're not thirsty, and they decline. When they're parched, they seek out the water. Your job is to help them recognize the thirst.

Here is a very effective exercise I recommend you engage in to help your questioning be as effective as possible.

Generate Need-Development Questions

People only take action when they are dissatisfied with their present situation, or want to avoid such dissatisfaction. What dissatisfaction do you ease?

Benefits are only benefits if the person hearing them perceives them to be benefits. Therefore, I suggest you work backwards from benefits to create questions. Take a "benefit," then think of what dissatisfaction it soothes, the need it fills, or problem it solves. Then, write out the appropriate question you'd ask.

For example, an order-entry software program offers instant notification of out-of-stock merchandise, allowing you to suggest alternative items. But it's only a benefit if a listener runs into backorder situations and feels it's a hindrance because they lose sales, or have paperwork headaches, etc. Therefore an initial question would be,

"How often do you run into backorder situations?"

Followed by,

"When do you realize it?"

"Have you ever lost sales because you had to notify the customer later their item was going to be late, and they just told you to cancel it?"

Notice that technique isn't simply, "Are you having any backorder problems?" That forces them to think too much. You want to help them recall and feel the dissatisfaction.

Begin each call thinking of the dissatisfaction you can fill, and what questions you'll need to ask to determine if it exists, and to what extent, or how you'll help them recognize any latent dissatisfaction.

After you've accomplished this on a call, then and only then are you in a favorable position to begin presenting what you offer.

More Tips

Here are additional questioning tips.

Prepare your questioning plan. You are not adequately prepared if you prepare only for the questions you'll ask. The real pros know what they'll do with the answers—all possible answers. That's how you become smooooth. You can't script out an entire call; there are too many possible ways the conversation could branch. But you can be totally prepared for whichever artery it travels. As part of your preparation, take just one path at a time and brainstorm every possibility. Just as a road is more familiar the second time you take it, so too will be your responses to questions, since you've already traveled that path in your mind.

Embellish needs. Again, people only take action when the dissatisfaction is strong enough. You probably have some needs right now, but they are not major, so you let them slide... you know, those "I'll get around to it," kind of things. With prospects and customers, you need to compound their perception of these needs. If they tell you they waste time now, ask how much. If they think sales are lower than they could be, ask how much lower. If they're losing money, find out how much. This gets them thinking about and feeling the pain.

Clarify the "Fuzzy Phrases." Don't get put off by an abstract phrase like, "We might do something next quarter. We'll take a look at it. Let's stay in touch." What does THAT mean?

"When you say 'do something', does that mean you'll go with it?"
"What exactly will you be looking at?"
"Does 'stay in touch' mean I should call at a certain time?"

Help Them Shop Around

When your prospect or customer is shopping, ask,

- who else they'll talk to,
- · what they'll look for, and,
- · how they'll make their final decision.

With this information in hand you can also help them judge the competitors. Give them additional questions to ask. If you know the other contender is weak in quality, and that's your strong suit, tell the prospect to be sure they collect the quality control facts and figures. And if they're fuzzy on how they'll make their final decision, help them set the criteria. This way, they'll know specifically how to evaluate the other players as they're shopping.

Sell More to Existing Customers

Would you say that you have customers who buy some of the same things you sell, from your competitors? This is true for most sales reps. Especially those who have large customers representing significant revenue, but yet buy only one or two products in large quantities to generate that revenue. Some reps have told me they don't want to jeopardize the existing business by going after more.

NONSENSE! *Not* building on the relationship is doing a disservice to the customers. Approach them by saying,

"We really appreciate the opportunity to work with you, and given the fact you've been satisfied with the you've been getting from us, we might have several others ways we could work with you and provide the same quality, service, and competitive pricing you're getting now. I'd like to find out more about what you do/use/buy to determine how else we might be of service."

Questions to Use

Here are questions you can adapt or use as-is on your calls.

"What are some of your responsibilities in this position?" (Helps you understand how they are evaluated in their job, and how you can help them)

"What process did you go through in selecting your present vendor?" (Gives you an idea of how difficult it might be to win the business?)

"How are you handling_____now?"
(Fill in with a problem they likely are experiencing, or one you think they might encounter.)

"What are you doing about it?" (If they say, "Nothing," ask the next questions.)

- "What effect is that having on your business, and other departments?"
- "What is it costing you?"
- "What will happen if you do nothing?"
- "What is keeping you from solving the problem?"

(These are all designed to help embellish and magnify the problem so they see it as being severe enough to do something about.)

- "What do you see as possible solutions?" (To get their idea of what they'd like to do.)
- "What do you think is the best solution?" (Narrows it down.)
- "Why is that one most important to you?" (Gives their emotional reason. Helps them sell themselves.)
- "If you decided to go that route, what is the overall decision making process?" (Gives you an idea of what channels you might have to go through.)
- "Who else might be involved?" (Gives you the names of other players.)
- "Will they go along with your decision or recommendation?"
- "What will you need to do to win their support?" (Uncovers the degree of difficulty of getting the decision passed.)

WHY are They Interested?

In dissecting every potential sale I've lost over the past couple of years, I can always point my finger at one reason: I either didn't learn enough about the need/problem/interest, or I didn't develop it enough. Quite often we think that just because someone has voiced an interest, we should shift into presentation mode.

Don't. Dig deeper, like an archaeologist mining for fossils. Most importantly, discover what's behind their interest. Ask,

"What prompted your decision to expand?"

"What were some of the considerations that led you to search for a new machine?"

"Is this decision part of a new direction for the company?" "How did you arrive at this decision?"

The more you know about the core reasons behind a need or problem the better able you are to deliver results that satisfy them precisely.

How to Be a Problem-Solver

You'll sell more if you're a problem solver than if you're a sales person. And you'll build stronger customer relationships.

"Telemanaging," a publication for newspaper classified advertising sales managers, listed the following problem-solving model, adapted from a workshop given by Anne Antony.

Help Identify the Problem

"What is happening?"

"What is not happening?"

"What happens as a result of the problem?"

"Where does it happen?"

"Where does it not happen?"

"When does it happen?"

"When does it not happen?"

Investigating the Causes

"What are the possible causes?"

"What are the most probable causes?"

"What cause is most likely the real one?"

Envisioning the Desired Result

"What do you want things to be like?"

"What do you want to fix?"

"Are you after short- or long-term effects?"

Choosing a Course of Action

"What possible actions could be taken?"

"Which actions are most likely to lead to your vision of the solution?"

"Which course of action is the best?"

Take this model, and adapt the questions to your own selling situation. Apply them to the very real problems your prospects and customers experience, the ones you help solve.

If I Could Share Just One Idea With You...

A middle-aged man approached me at a presentation and said, "I'm moving into a sales position, and I'm a bit fearful of it because I'm not sure I can be a typical salesperson. What one piece of advice could you give me that would help me be successful?"

I first asked him what he considered a typical salesperson to be, and he described a slick-talking pitchman who has all the answers and often pushes people into decisions.

My answer didn't require a lot of thought:

"Don't be a 'typical' salesperson. Instead, be certain you get a lot of information before you make any type of recommendation. That will ensure success."

It really is that simple. Brain strain isn't required to understand that you couldn't fit a person with the right pair of shoes unless you knew his size. A doctor couldn't write the appropriate prescription

until he knew the patient's symptoms. Why "typical" salespeople "pitch" product and service data before knowing anything about the listener is beyond me. Yet, it happens more often than not.

Pitching (I hate that word used in a sales, rather than a baseball context) product details without understanding the listener's needs, problems, concerns, desires, and interests is like throwing a handful of pebbles from 50 yards through a wedding ring. The pebbles scatter haphazardly, and just maybe one finds its way through the target.

When a salesperson launches into a data-dump monologue,

- people view the product pitch skeptically, actually looking for faults in what the speaker presents. We do that instinctively because of a natural resistance to being sold or pushed, and,
- they are passive, not really into two-way communication.

On the other hand, questioning not only serves to provide us with great information,

- · prospects become participants in the interaction,
- initial resistance is diffused because they are talking about themselves, and what they want and need, and,
- they become mentally and emotionally moved into a state of mind where they are now thinking about their pains, problems or desires, and are more open-minded to hearing the recommendation. As the saying goes, "No one likes unsolicited advice," which is exactly what a pitch is without prior questioning. Conversely, again using the doctor example, think of how receptive you were of the prescription your doctor gave you for that nagging ailment.

Here are a couple of simple ideas that I know will help you to be more effective.

1. Instead of making a statement, or giving an instruction, try to think of a question which would help the listener reach the same conclusion. Use it with prospects and customers, and make it a life long habit. Do it with friends, coworkers, spouses, and children. For example, in place of, "You should enter the data first, then you wouldn't have the extra work," consider,

"How would first entering the data affect your workload?"

2. Never, ever, present until you've asked questions first. Make it a policy. Before presenting, simply ask yourself, "Do I know if they're interested in what I'm about to say?" Do you think these ideas would work for you? I do.

More Dumb Questions And Vague Statements

As I've said before, there are dumb questions in sales; those questions that give you virtually worthless information and require another question to clarify the answer.

Dumb question: "Will you be using the program for a long time?" Better: "How long will you use the program?"

Dumb question: "Does that happen often?"

Better: "How often per day, approximately, does that happen?"

Dumb question: "Do you anticipate getting approval soon?"

Better: "When do you anticipate getting approval?"

Dumb question: "Do you use quite a bit of that chemical?" Better: "How much of that chemical do you use per week?"

Dumb question: "Should I check back with you later?"

Better: "When do you anticipate finishing the evaluation so I can check back with you?"

Vague Statements

Likewise, there are statements that also communicate vague information to your prospects and customers.

Vague: "I'll be back in the office later."

Better: "I'll be at my desk and available after 2:30."

Vague: "We'll get the proposal out as soon as we can."

Better: "You'll have the proposal no later than Friday's FedEx

delivery."

Asking About Money Makes You Money

Asking money-related questions can clear the fog in the sales process. You can quickly qualify your prospect, plus get a feel for what you will recommend during the presentation stage of the call, plus you can get a feel for where you are competitively.

Sadly, though, many sales reps neglect this all-important question. And it usually hurts them later by causing them to waste time with people who ultimately turn out to be nonbuyers, are unqualified, or don't have the amount of cash it takes to buy from you.

Keep one thing in mind: real, serious prospects don't mind hearing money questions. Pretenders, however, are wounded by money questions because it exposes them.

When you do ask money questions be sure you position them in terms of how they'll help the buyer. For example,

"I want to make sure we're in the same ballpark here..."

"I'm asking the next question because it will help me determine exactly what I'll recommend..."

"Just to be sure we don't invest a lot of time up front needlessly, I want to be sure that our price ranges are compatible with what you're looking for..."

Then ask the question,

"Approximately what were you looking to spend?" "About how much has been set aside for this project?"

"What budget range were you thinking about?"

Notice that these don't ask for a specific amount... just a range or approximation. That way you leave room for negotiating them up by positioning your value—if you're close.

Don't Sell; Be a Problem Solver

Reviewing the newsletter my son's school sent home, I saw a wise piece of advice, that, although basic, again should be a staple for what we do by phone. It was about solving problems. I'll adapt it for phone use.

1. Gather Data. Collect information about events and feelings:

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"What do you do when...?"
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Restate the situation clearly. It's easier to solve a problem when the other person has a clear understanding of it. For example,

"What you want to do is	•	. Is that rig	ht?"

[&]quot;What happened?" "How did you feel?"

[&]quot;What did you do next?"

[&]quot;What are the implications of that?"

2. Generate Ideas. Encourage them to state a solution.

"What ideally would you like to see?"

Evaluate Ideas. Examine the consequences of their ideas (but don't criticize bad ones). Help them tell the difference between good and bad ones.

"What might happen if?"

4. **Ask for a Decision.** Ask them to take action. Help them make the choice.

"Is this what you'd like to do?"

Finish With This Question

As you conclude your fact-finding phase of your call, conclude with a question which may provide information you might have overlooked. For example,

"Karen, before I make my recommendations, what else should I be asking you about how you're now handling this situation?"

Let Them Tell You Their Problems

When a prospect says, "This is what we're doing now a salesperson's instinctive tendency might be to attack their present system or vendor, and fire off the "benefits" of what they sell. Instead, let the prospect tell you his problems. Consider asking,

"Have you thought of any disadvantages to doing it that way?"

"What's the downside of that?"

"In what ways does that not meet your expectations?"

"What would you change about that if you could?"

Use Trial and Direct Commitment Questions To Move the Sales Process Forward

During the presentation/recommendation phase of your call you want to get feedback to learn how they're reacting to your statements. Since you can't see their expressions, we must ask for them with trial commitment questions. For example,

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"Is there anything I've covered so far that I can explain more fully?"

"How would that work for you?"

"How does it sound so far?"
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After you've made your recommendation, and you've heard statements of agreement from them, it's time to move the process forward. Here are ideas for direct commitment questions to move them towards action.

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"I'm ready to talk terms if you are."
"I'm reading the feeling that you're ready to schedule delivery.
Is that accurate?"
"Shall we iron out the details right now?"
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Sales Training Lesson From The OJ. Trial

When I wrote the first edition of this book it was shortly after the O.J. Simpson murder trial. Like many other people I was captivated by the circus of events. Of course, I looked for sales angles as well. I observed a great one. One of defense attorneys was questioning the curbside baggage check-in guy from L.A. International airport. The lawyer confidently stated, "And of course you didn't see Mr. Simpson anywhere near that trash can, did you?"

[&]quot;Uh, as a matter of fact, I did," responded the witness.

OOOPPS! The lawyer violated a cardinal rule of cross-examination, according to one of the TV network attorney/analysts: asking a question when you don't already know the answer.

Applies to Sales Also

The rule for salespeople is similar: Don't ask a question unless you know how you'll respond to the answer. Any possible answer.

When a rep says to a prospect, "Tell me about the service you're getting with your present vendor," I guess they're hoping the prospect will say, "Service! It's non-existent. They couldn't even spell it, let alone deliver it!" In actuality, though, when they hear the more likely answer, "Service is fine," they're stumped, not sure what to say next other than, "OK, keep us in mind."

The well-prepared rep confidently responds with a question designed to get the prospect visualizing an occurrence of inadequate service he likely has experienced:

"I see. What do you do when you need to get technical questions answered quickly, and you reach a recording asking you to leave your name and number so they can call you back?"

Or, let's say their answer truly leads this branch of questioning down a dead end. No problem. The prepared caller smoothly shifts the questioning in another direction:

"What do you do when you need an item that is either discontinued or back-ordered?"

More Tips

Here are a collection of tips and ideas to use.

Have a strong belief system regarding questioning. I've seen timid reps carrying a preconceived notion that people are offended by qualifying questions. Nonsense. This is business! They're actually more offended when salespeople don't get to the point. Project a self-assured image and tone... one that says questioning is a necessary part of your process (it is!) in order to determine how you can help them. Let your demeanor indicate you expect an answer.

If you must ask for what really is touchy or private information, don't apologize. "I hope you're not thinking I'm getting too personal here, I know this is normally confidential." Instead, preface your remarks with your justification for asking, which puts the answerer more at ease:

"The reason for the next question is that it will help me identify the best recommendation for your company's size range."

Use "Assumptive Problem" open-ended questions. Instead of saying, "Do you have any problems with defects now?", say,

"How are you handling defects in the manufacturing process."

If you know your industry well enough, you're aware of problems everyone has. You're asking them to quantify and explain the implications of the problems.

Use "Parrot" questions. Repeating back what the person just said. For example, when they say, "We haven't had much luck finding the right system to track our process," you could parrot back,

[&]quot;You haven't had much luck?"

Their comment is just the tip of the iceberg. By repeating a part of their comment, you encourage them to continue.

Use "Instructional Statements." Don't ask for information. *Tell them* to give it to you. Use phrases like,

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"Tell me a little about...,"

"Share with me...,"

"Fill me in on...,"

"Give me some idea of...,"

"Detail the ways that...,"

"Let's go over the reasons for..."
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Remember that some of your "benefits" are actually liabilities to others. Your benefits are not universal. Some people could actually say, "We don't need that, and we don't want to pay extra for it!" Therefore, for each benefit you have, make sure you ask a question to determine if it's really perceived as one by your prospect. For example, if the laser printer you sell races through at 20 pages per minute, you might ask,

"For what types of jobs do you use your printer?"

And depending on their response,

"How much of an issue is speed?"

Ask yourself questions before calls in order to develop the best prospect/customer questions. Ask, "What do I want them to do as a result of this call?" This gives you your primary call objective. Then ask, "What information do I need from them?" This provides whatever qualifying or data-gathering questions you must ask. Finally, ask, "What do I need them to think and believe in order to take the action I desire?" The answer to this question provides the

points you'd ideally like to get across... without actually making the points yourself. They are ideas you want them to discover through your questions. The reasoning is that people always believe more of what they say and think than of what you say. For example, let's say you need them to believe that they are missing sales opportunities because their incoming business reply card leads age too long before their sales people unenthusiastically call on them, and, that their salespeople would be much better off calling on hot leads that had already been qualified. You could develop questions such as,

"How long do your leads normally set before your reps get to them?"
"Have they ever had situations where the prospect already purchased before the rep got around to calling?"

"How often do your reps complain about the quality of the leads?"

"Do you think they might even avoid calling them sometimes because they perceive them as bad?"

"If so, do you think they might miss a few of the good ones that undoubtedly are still in there?"

After these questions the prospect would be much more favorably conditioned to hear a presentation on your lead-qualification service.

Get Examples of the Problem

When you uncover a need or problem, ask the prospect to give you examples of the situation. This way they relive the pain of the problem, plus it gives you something concrete to deal with.

Prospect: "We have noticed a tardiness problem here lately." Sales Rep: "I see. What speci fically have you noticed?"

Prospect: "There have been a few times when their service hasn't met our expectations."

Sales Rep: "Oh? What are some examples?"

Prospect: "We used their service before, and the result wasn't what we were looking for."

Sales Rep: "What did you get, and what speci fically did you want?"

It's Just Like Shopping for a Gift

Let's pretend for a moment that upon arriving at work tomorrow you read a note telling you that your task for the day is to go out and buy the boss' daughter a birthday gift with the \$100 enclosed in the envelope. You'd likely have all kinds of questions, wouldn't you? How old is she? What does she like? What does she want? What doesn't she want? What does she have already?

Logical questions, to be sure. We'd all ask them. But why, then, do some salespeople not even flinch when it comes to pitching their product/service without knowing diddly about the other person? Without this information we have the same chance of satisfying them as we would buying a present for someone we didn't know. Be certain that you always question before you present.

Listen for the Word, "Problem"

Whenever a prospect uses the word "problem" to describe their experiences with their situation or another vendor, read that as an opportunity to further explore their comments, and even more so, the emotions and reasons behind them.

What you're hearing is just the surface level. They might have much more bugging them. Do not jump in with a presentation, thinking that you have just what they need to solve their problem. You need details so you can present your solution in the best light.

Layer your questions and dig deeper. Since they might not yet fully realize the magnitude of the situation, embellish and enhance it.

For example,

Prospect: "We've had a problem with the quality of the workers provided by the other agencies."

Premature Response: "Well let me tell you how we train our workers here..."

Better Response: "Tell me about the workers they provided you..."

Another:

Prospect: "My main problem is trying to figure out these complex reports the service provides us."

Premature Response: "Our reporting is very detailed and it..."

Better Response: "What information do you use from reports, and in what form do you need it?"

Listen With Your Mind, Not Just With Your Actions

Some sales reps feign listening by pausing to let the other person talk for awhile. To truly listen, you need get emotionally involved, and react to what the speaker says, understanding why they say what they do.

Get Agreement on What They Mean

A critical part of listening is ensuring you understand what the speaker said. If you are a bit cloudy, try saying,

"Let me see if I understand what you're saying..."

"So if I'm following you, you're saying that..."

"What I'm hearing is that you..."

"It appears that what you want is..."

When you're more certain, paraphrase with,

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"As you see it..."
"It seems to you that..."
"What you feel, then, is..."
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Give Choices of the Problems They're Experiencing

Don't say, "So, what are your needs?" early in a call. That asks them to do your job, which is to uncover those needs. One way to get them to tell you about their real problems, is to help them.

For example, you might say,

"Pat, quite often I hear the same things from people in your business: that they can't find good people, the ones they do hire don't stay it's difficult to keep them motivated, or they don't feel they get maximum production from them. Which of those hit home with you?"

The key here, of course, is to provide choices that most likely are experienced by everyone you'll speak with, concerns and problems you're able to address and solve. If, however, they respond negatively, perhaps you don't have a qualified person on the phone. At that point you have nothing to lose by saying,

"What are your biggest challenges?"

Questioning Tips

Here are effective questioning tips you can use.

Weak: "Is your present vendor doing a good job for you?"

Stronger: "What do you like about your present vendor, and what would you like to get if you could?"

Confrontational: "Why did you choose them?"

Non-Adversarial: "What was the process used to make that choice?"

Invasive: "So, what's your budget?"

Justified: "The reason for the next question is that my recommendation will be based on what's best for the amount of money you have to work with. Can you give me an idea of what your budget is for this project?"

Keep in mind also that every answer your hear is perceived as correct in the mind of the person giving it. Respect them, even if you don't agree.

What Do They Really Want?

Needs are the bare minimums we must have. Wants and values unlatch emotions, bringing more creative—even impulsive—thinking to the forefront of their minds. After all, needs for the most part are pretty mundane... the wants and values get us dreaming, thinking more creatively.

And when we want something passionately enough we typically connive a way to get it. Your prospects and customers will do the same. Ask questions to free up their emotional thinking:

"What's on your wish list for what you'd ideally like for your department this year?"

"If you had no internal restraints, what would you get?"

"OK, you've told me what you need, now let's talk about what you really want."

Learn Their Buying Criteria

When you're working with commodity-type products in bidding situations, such as with governments, the contract doesn't always go to the lowest bidder. Marceline Rogers, with ASAP Software Express likes to ask this question:

"How will you award the contract if pricing is tight?"

By learning the selection criteria, you can maintain margins, and get the business.

More Questions to Use

Gene Foster sells electronic components to manufacturers who use the parts in their final product. Here are a few of Gene's ideas.

Instead of "Do you have any other projects that I could look at?", ask instead,

"What other projects are you working on that could use the cost saving, space saving features of the new Bourns switch?"

"If all restrictions of cost and time were removed, what would you like to add to the design?"

"Who else at ABC Co. would you suggest I work with? What is his position? What project is he working on?"

"To Buy, You Need to..."

I saw a rerun of an old Saturday Night Live routine where David Spade plays the annoying reception person, and communicates primarily through fill-in-the-blank questions.

"And your name is...?"

"And your purpose for being here is...?"

When used at the right time, in moderation, this is an effective technique. For example, you might say,

"So, your main goal for this project would be...?"

Use Statements to Question

You can use statements to probe. For example,

"Steve, your thoughts on what you'd like to see in a landscape plan will help me provide you with the best information."

DO Ask a Question They Can Answer "No" To

One of those old-school sales myths passed through the generations is, "Never ask a question the person can answer 'no' to." What a joke! This assumes that if we don't give the prospect an opportunity to verbally express resistance, that means it doesn't exist.

The opposite is true: if you don't give the person a chance to vent a problem or disagreement, it will grow and ultimately appear at the end of a conversation—as an objection. And by this time it's tougher to deal with.

Use what some people call "trial closing" questions. I prefer to term them "temperature checking" questions. Use them strategically between your presentation points.

"How would that work for you?"

"Would that option be of value?"

"Do you feel this would solve your problem?"

"Sound good so far?"

A Question To Wrap Up With

As you finish your questioning, ask a final general one to uncover any important points not yet discussed:

"Is there anything of importance to you regarding this issue that I haven't asked you yet?"

YOUR ACTION STEPS			