

Asking the Tough Questions

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Exclusively for Software Sales People

As seen in the April 2007 Newsletter



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The best salespeople know their clients. They know more about clients than their competitors know. They know how to ask questions that go beyond product needs. They know how to listen and drill down. They ask questions that allow them to understand their clients' strategic objectives and personal needs and aspirations.

Gaining this kind of client information requires the ability to ask questions that can be challenging to ask. For example, questions about the decision-making process, budgets, how the client feels about your solution, organization, and you, how they feel you stack up to the competition, and 'sensitive' questions that have the potential, if asked in the wrong way, to offend the client.

Knowing how to finesse potentially intrusive questions so that you are comfortable asking them and clients feel good about answering is an invaluable skill. You not only gain critical information your competitors won't have that will help you close, but you also further connect with your clients and strengthen the relationship.

How you phrase these questions can be as important as the questions themselves. Clients don't have to answer your questions and they don't want to be grilled or insulted. The three key elements of how you phrase questions are how you position the questions, the tone, and the word choice.

Positioning

By using questioning skills such as prefacing your question with a benefit, acknowledgment, empathy, or trading information as you lead into your questions, you can position questions in a way that you are more comfortable asking the questions and the client is more cooperative in answering. For example, to learn about the client's budget, you can preface your question with a client benefit - "So that I am

sure I am working in the parameters that will meet your expectations, what is the budget?"

One salesperson offended his prospect when he asked, "You are holding a significant position in X stock that seems out of character with the rest of your portfolio. Why is that?" On the surface, the question may seem reasonable and appropriate. But prospects (or clients for that matter) don't like questions that seem critical or that put them on the spot. The combination of the salesperson not positioning the question by giving the client a reason to want to answer, as well as the interrogatory tone and demanding wording caused the client to curtly respond, "It is perfectly suited!"

The salesperson's next two questions got him into more trouble.

When the salesperson asked, "What's your success ratio?" and "Tell me about a mistake you have made in your portfolio?" the prospect again replied abruptly and soon the meeting ended. Instead, had the salesperson said, "Thank you for letting me review your portfolio. In reviewing the material you shared with me, I noticed that you are holding a significant position in X stock. I see the majority of your portfolio is more ... So I can understand your objectives and to enable me to add value, may I ask about your thinking on including X stock?" it is likely the client would have answered and rapport would have been built. Or had he asked, "What kind of situations, based on your experience, are you trying to avoid?" he possibly could have got the information he needed and moved the dialogue forward.

By positioning your questions with a lead-in, you can make tough questions client-friendly.

Tone

The tone of voice used when asking a question has a lot to do with how the question is received, but a collaborative, respectful, confident tone alone is not enough. Positioning and word choice are also critical.

The tone with which a question is asked can jolt rapport. For example, one salesperson was selling to two clients. After one of the clients answered his question, the salesperson turned to the more senior client and said (or should I say demanded), "Bill, what do you have to add to that?" The senior, not willing to be 'called on', firmly said, "Nothing." Had the salesperson asked, "Bill, I know this project is important to you. Is there anything you'd like to add to what Karen has described?" Bill likely would have answered and rapport could have been preserved.

Choice of Words

Some salespeople totally lack tact when they ask questions. One of the worst examples of asking an offensive question I know of was asked by a salesperson who used graphic language to make an important point. When he asked, "How will you feel 'going hat in hand' to your board when that solution doesn't work?" he seriously offended the client, who said, "Well, you'll never be here to see that!" The salesperson's graphic and negative language would long be remembered by the client.

Certainly, clients are busy and they want clear, direct dialogue. No one wants a lot of wishy-washy beating around the bush, but you can be clear and direct and also be skillful and tactful and take into consideration the effect a question will have.

Clients have egos and feelings. To foster cooperation and openness, think about how you position your questions, and watch your tone and choice of words.

As for your questioning strategy, don't begin with the 'sensitive' question(s) as the first question(s). Instead, warm into them. Questions are the key to gaining the information you must have to make sales. Questions are your tools for creating a rich dialogue, building rapport, and strengthening relationships.