

The Single, Greatest Sales Skill Ever!

By Bill Brooks

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ryan@thebrooksgroup.com

The Brooks Group <http://www.thebrooksgroup.com>

The ability to ask the right questions at the right time is a priceless skill for any sales professional. Unfortunately, sometimes the way to asking the right questions can become clouded for one of any number of reasons. Here are ten principles that I guarantee you will find helpful when you try to understand your prospect's buying agenda.

Advance preparation is the first element of asking the right questions. You should already know exactly what you plan to ask your prospect before you get in front of him or her. You should make sure, however, that your questions do not sound canned in the way that you phrase them. This invaluable knowledge is gathered through successful, in-depth pre-call planning.

Most of your questions should be open-ended and indirect ones. When your prospect is expected to answer only "yes" or "no," he or she is discouraged from giving more information. This not only hinders your ability to get extensive information from your prospect, but it also sets a negative tone. Open-ended questions help prospects tell you how they feel, what they want, or what they think. Basic sales skills here—but something that should be practiced over and over again.

Strategically phrasing questions so as to get the prospect to relate how he or she perceives his or her problems, needs, or value-added expectations can help you to improve the chances of closing the sale. Get the prospect to do more than talk. When the prospect is asked the right questions, he or she will provide you invaluable answers in terms of how your product or service can be sold.

The fourth principle involves the identification of the one dominant drive that the prospect has. When you begin to notice a common thread that courses throughout your prospect's answers, you are usually homing in on the prospect's dominant need, problem or expectation. Once you are able to identify this thread, you should aim your questions in its direction in order to further your understanding of the way that your product or service can satisfy what the prospect is trying to accomplish.

You should attempt to ask several questions that will help you understand the prospect's buying motivations. These motivations are important, because if you focus on the motivations as well as the agenda of your prospect, you will stand a much better chance of finalizing a transaction.

The sixth principle, and a very important one, is to avoid offensive or insensitive questions. While you might think that this goes without saying, perhaps you should think again. Sometimes sales professionals fail to evaluate the way that they ask questions. What they might see as being polite may be overbearing to others. So, be sure to ask questions in a polite and inoffensive manner if you

hope to earn trust from your prospect.

Starting with broad questions, then moving towards more narrow ones is another principle that is extremely useful. Broad questions tend to be less threatening than narrow questions, so start with these more general questions in order to produce more general information. After you have gained a basic understanding of your prospect's situation, you should move into more detailed questions which will allow you to point to the detailed ways that your product or service can aid the prospect.

Easy-to-answer questions will encourage your prospect to open up to you. People tend to avoid anything that they do not understand, and your prospect is no different. Trying to prove your intelligence and ability through questions with an extensive or specialized vocabulary will completely damage your chances of making a sale. You should stick to easy-to-comprehend questions in order to keep your prospect on the same level with you.

Asking the right questions will help you to guide the interview and to keep the tone positive. Some prospects might tend to continually stray away from the subject at hand—your sale—but if you know what you're doing when you ask our questions, you can avoid this time consuming practice. You can keep the tone of your interview positive by asking questions in a way that allows your prospect to agree with you. Studies have shown that most people prefer to agree than to assert themselves and disagree.

Finally, but most importantly, you should ask your questions, but be quiet and listen as the prospect attempts to answer these questions. Interruptions will, without a doubt, turn your prospect off to you. This may seem obvious to most, but you cannot listen to the prospect's needs as long as you are talking. Therefore, let your prospect do most of the talking as you are interviewing him or her. This will surely increase your chances of finalizing the transaction.

By keeping these ten tips in mind as you question your prospect, you will greatly increase your chances of finalizing any transaction. Asking the right questions is an essential component of selling, so in order to sell, you must master the art of asking the right questions. As long as you understand the prospect's situation, you can most effectively demonstrate the ways that your product or service can satisfy their problems be a solution to their situation, satisfy a need or help them achieve a goal. It's just that simple.

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