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MAGAZINE

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Asking the Right Questions, At the Right Time

The Secret To Great Negotiation? Add Value But Ditch The Discount...

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Asking the Right Questions (and more)

The ability to ask the right questions, in the right way, at the right time, has always been one of those critical sales skills that separate the best salespeople from the rest.

In a SPIN? "SPIN® Selling" by Neil Rackham - based on a huge volume of original research - identified four different key question types and proved that top-performing salespeople use them in ways that drive very different outcomes. Here are Rackham's 4 original questions, which I have redefined to reflect today's sales environment:

1. The first type, situational questions, involve gathering important information about our prospective customer's current situation, circumstances, environment, and future trends

2. Problem questions are about uncovering our customer's current and potential business issues - the things they need to fix, avoid, or achieve

3. Implication questions are about exploring the impact and consequences at an organisational and personal level of the issues they have acknowledged

4. Need-payoff (also called need-value) questions are about confirming the value of dealing decisively with the issues as well as the distinctively superior outcomes that our approach can deliver

The SPIN® Selling book implied, but did not explicitly name, a fifth question type that has also proved to be very important:

5. Commitment questions, which allow us to establish whether our prospect is ready to make a significant commitment that will advance their buying decision journey (and our sales process)

These commitment questions are, I believe, the axis around which all the other question types revolve - and are key to qualifying the opportunity, moving it forwards, and measuring our progress.

Rackham's research showed that less effective salespeople tended to ask a disproportionate number of situational questions, whereas top-performing salespeople are much more aware of the role and power of the different question types and make particularly effective use of implication, need-value, and commitment questions.

Top-performing salespeople also recognize that these question types also need to be used in a non-linear fashion - for example asking fresh situational questions to clarify some new discovery - and so implement an iterative "SPIN+Cycle" approach.

But an awareness of the nature and importance of the different question types (and the ability to ask them well) is only one part of the story. Customers resent being asked an unbroken string of "discovery questions" - particularly when they relate to things that could easily have been uncovered through research, and which benefit the salesperson without delivering any value to the prospect.

The power of insight and anecdote

So - if we are to get the information we need, and if we are to build the sort of mutually respectful relationships that lead to successful sales, we need to ensure that our prospective customer also derives significant benefit from every conversation. And that requires that they learn something valuable from the interaction.

We always need to leave our prospective customer thinking "that was a valuable use of my time". It turns out that questions that stimulate them to think - and in particular implication questions - are highly regarded by prospects - but that's not enough.

We need to lubricate the conversation by interweaving insights and anecdotes with our well-chosen, respectful, and thoughtful questions. These insights and anecdotes need to introduce relevant information that serve to support our prospect's buying decision journey.

They might take the form of information our prospect was previously unaware of, but which they now come to recognise as important, or fresh implications of a known issue that our prospect had not previously considered. Or they can take the form of well-chosen stories about similar customers that had faced similar situations.

Whatever we choose to share, the result must be that we achieve a give-get balance in terms of information exchanged - and that both parties are happy to either move forward or agree that there simply isn't a good mutual fit.

Active listening

Of course, if we want to achieve that all-important give-get balance and mutual exchange of value, then our thoughtful questions, insights and anecdotes need to be supported by active listening and ensuring that we respond to what the prospect actually said (or meant to say) rather than what we thought we heard - or wanted to hear.

It requires that we reflect on what we believe we just heard from the prospect. Sometimes, we'll want to pause and share our understanding back to the prospect rather than just carrying on with a predetermined line of questioning. And whatever plan we started the conversation with (and we certainly need to go into every conversation with a plan or objective), we need to adapt quickly according to how things actually pan out.

Great questions are just part

I hope that you'll agree that asking great questions are only part of what makes for great sales conversations, and that effective communication involves a two-way dialogue from which all participants emerge having learned something valuable.

Rather than going into a conversation thinking primarily about "what do I want to learn from my prospect", I'm going to suggest that you turn this traditional perspective on its head, and that you think about "what could I teach my prospect" instead.

By sharing relevant and valuable insights and anecdotes that are appreciated by the customer, we earn the right to ask thoughtful, well-chosen questions - and we are far more likely to get the valuable answers we are looking for.

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Find out more here