



Are Your Sales Questions Holding You Back?

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Recently, I read this advice about using questions in the sales process:

Each time the customer makes a statement, always take the time to ask a follow-up question on what they [sic] just said.

Key to remember: Never move on in your presentation until you have asked a follow-up question on each comment the customer has made. This is an important aspect of consultative selling.

I don't know about you, but I've had to endure too many sellers peppering me with mindless questions every time I said a word. What galls me is that the question-after-every-comment seller seldom demonstrates how such questions help anyone.

That's not consultative selling, but blind adherence to some generic formula for sales meetings.

Of course, I ask lots of questions in sales meetings and so should you. But you should be sure that the questions you ask move the sale *forward* in some way.

How Many Dumb Questions Do You Get?

Conventional wisdom holds that the only dumb question is the one you don't ask. By this logic, you might think it's a great idea to ask a question after every client comment. If you try to do that, though, you will probably end up asking some truly dumb questions.

In sales meetings, clients expect some elementary or "dumb" questions as you fill in the blanks. But you'd better show that you're ascending the learning curve quickly or you'll be out of the running.

Rote questions don't demonstrate your attention to the issues or your value to the client. Remember, clients will be as interested in what you *do* with the answers they give you as they are in the questions you ask.

If the depth of your questions doesn't increase with each new question asked, you're probably resorting to throw-aways that can do more harm than good. You have to ask the basic questions about the client's situation, but try to limit them to as few as possible.

The Perfect Questions to Ask

Even just one perfect question, posed at the right moment, can instantly change the course of a sale. The best sales questions do three things well:

Improve Your Sales Conversations

[Mastering Cold Sales Meetings: How to Turn Cold Prospects into Clients](#)

[True Confessions of a Sales Expert: One Really Bad Sales Call Worth Learning From](#)

[Scrap Your Elevator Speech: How to Create High-Credibility Conversations](#)

1. A perfect question is highly focused and relevant to the topic, proving that you're fully engaged in the conversation.
2. Perfect sales questions make clients reflect on their assumptions and conclusions. Often, that new thought process leads to ideas and approaches they hadn't thought of before.
3. A perfect question demonstrates your relevant insights. When you frame a question using your experience and expertise, you illustrate how you think and work. For example, you may preface a question with current market intelligence and say, "Others in your industry have made the move to continuous strategic planning, though the results are mixed. Is it your sense that a continuous program could work for you?"

Rarely is a perfect sales question actually a single query. Instead, it is a series of well-conceived questions that meet all three of the criteria above.

Nothing Stands Without a Foundation

You can design perfect sales questions every time with the right advance preparation. The quality of the work you do *before* a sales meeting determines the quality of your questions during the meeting. Great preparation will free up the mental bandwidth you need to focus on nuances about the client's needs that will elude the less-prepared seller.

Before heading into any sales meeting, take these three simple actions to prepare: get a solid understanding of the client's business, develop some preliminary hypotheses, and then generate potential questions to test those hypotheses.

Obviously, an orientation to the client's business includes the basics, such as the company's profile, its offerings, key competitors, customers, financial performance, and present and future challenges. As you undertake this research, be careful not to go overboard.

Your goal is to understand the essentials, not become an expert on the organization. Resist the urge to read everything you can find about the client. Not only will that take too much of your time, but it will also clutter your mind with trivia. If you're reasonably competent at analyzing an organization using secondary data sources, you should be well-prepared in an hour or two.

What's Your Theory?

After you do the background work, turn your attention to the specific reason for the meeting. It's crucial to have an easy method for keeping the sales conversation on track. If you develop a set of hypotheses about the client's issue, you will have an excellent initial framework for the meeting—and the sales process.

Assume, for example, you are meeting to discuss ways to help the client reduce spending on corporate travel. Based on your research, you might come up with five to eight possible reasons why expenses for corporate travel are on the rise. Your list won't be complete, or always right, but it's a good start.

Then, for each hypothesis, think about a question or two that will help you confirm its validity or suggest another path of inquiry. Don't expect to test every hypothesis during a single meeting, and don't worry if you have more questions than you can ask. You're likely to discover the heart of the matter before you get to all of those questions.

The benefit of hypotheses is that they fuel your thinking in a structured way about the issues clients will throw at you. Your what-ifs and maybes might turn out to be off base, but thinking about them is rarely wasted effort.

Moving the Sale Forward

Armed with a fundamental understanding of the client's organization, a set of preliminary hypotheses, and a series of questions to explore those theories, you're ready to ask questions that matter—to you, the client, and the sale.

As clients talk about their business, their comments will be review (and confirmation) for you, so you can digest the information more readily. When you hear about the problem, you're ready to discuss it in-depth instead of asking inane questions. And when the client asks you what questions you have, you're ready with insightful ones.

Now, *that's* consultative selling.

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