

How To Ask QUESTIONS THAT CLOSE THE SALE

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Sales training often focuses on teaching the rep to present more effectively. For many reps, however, the skill most in need of improvement is asking the effective, compelling questions that identify the customer's needs and business issues. It's essential that you understand the needs and business issues in order to propose an ideal "no surprises" solution.

Learning them doesn't happen by asking random questions, however. You have to get the customer to open up, to trust you, to express personal as well as business motivators, to clarify objections and to contribute toward crafting the appropriate solution. Increasingly, this is being accomplished with a modern-day take on the centuries-old teachings of Socrates.

The Ancient Greek philosopher taught his students to ask a series of easily answered questions that inevitably lead the answerer to a logical conclusion. Socratic Selling applies this principle in the sales call setting.

Among the many users of Socratic Selling is David A. Scribner, a training director at a large regional bank. He reports that salespeople from a wide range of business units have increased their sales results with this approach. Scribner conducted a test that compared the sales of trained salespeople against those who didn't get the training. The trained group

increased sales by 73% while the other group had a 28% sales increase during the two-month test.

One salesperson at the bank closed a \$2.7 million piece of investment management business two days after the training. The salesperson had identified the customer's situation in the pre-workshop assignment and created the call plan during the workshop. Scribner says he uses Socratic Selling himself when he's working with internal colleagues and is consulting with a manager about what kind of training should be provided. He supplements the information in the project's specs by asking questions that clearly establish what the objective is, why it's important and other critical facts.

Typically, in the beginning of a sales call the salesperson does most of the talking. The salesperson doesn't actively engage the customer or prospect. In the Socratic Selling process you begin with what is called the Socratic Opener, or how you move beyond the small talk to engage the customer in the business part of the meeting. You share how you're prepared to discuss the topic the customer expressed interest in but you first want to learn what's most critical in regards to the topic for the customer right now because you want to make the best use of the customer's time. Here, as in all stages of the Socratic Selling process, the star of

the show is the customer, not the salesperson or the offering.

When you let the customer begin this part of the meeting you'll zero in on the customer's current concerns, which may not be the same as they were during your last conversation. You'll show you're prepared to talk about what is most relevant to the customer. You'll also demonstrate that you recognize these concerns and care about them, understand the customer's way of thinking, and value the customer's time. You'll begin building the trust that's essential for making the sale.

Throughout the conversation, keep asking questions that will help you understand the organization's current state; desired state; what's standing in the way of achieving the desired state; the business and personal motivators involved; the qualifying issues including resources, authority and probability; and possible solutions -- those that have been tried and those the customer is considering.

Listen intently and assure the customer that you're listening by playing back or rephrasing what the customer said. Doing this also confirms that you understood accurately and encourages the customer to continue giving more information.

At some point, the customer will start asking questions about your capabilities. Resist the temptation to get into the product's advantages because the customer might

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not be interested in or need a lot of information. Quite often questions are asked to introduce the topic of discussion rather than to get information. If you've misunderstood the question's meaning you could steer the conversation in an unproductive direction. The best way to respond to a question is to give a short, non-committal answer (words like "may" or "usually" are useful here), then say something like, "I'm curious. Why do you ask that?"

Use Socratic Probes to persuade the customer to open up further. You can say "Tell me more" or "What else should I know?" Encourage the customer to get into specifics about the issue being discussed by asking questions that will reveal the issue's implications -- for both the customer and the organization. You can ask questions like "Why is this important now?" and "What else is at stake?"

When you begin presenting your solution, assure the customer that you've listened carefully to the stated needs and motivators. Be explicit about how they're addressed in your solution. Track the customer's reaction to what

you're saying by asking questions like "How does that sound?" Use the same kind of questions to explore what the next step(s) should be and to confirm your understanding.

Dave Scribner reports that Socratic Selling training is valuable for both experienced salespeople and new ones. It gives everyone a new appreciation of the need to focus on the customer. When he makes coaching calls with a rep

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who took the training he sees the rep talking less than the customer is, a sure sign that the rep has internalized Socratic Selling.

It's essential to reinforce the training, Scribner says. I like to collaborate with regional sales managers to conduct reinforcement activities. Reps are told that their progress will be measured after the training and that each rep is required to send in a success story describing how a Socratic skill

advanced or closed a sale. Upon receiving a success story the regional sales manager gives the rep a graduation certificate.

It may not seem natural at first for a salesperson to focus on listening rather than talking. It's understandable for a salesperson to want to control the meeting and get into a description of the offering's value. It's more productive to make the customer rather than the product or service the focus of attention. You'll learn what it is about the offering that the client will value. At the same time you'll build trust and make the customer a partner in identifying the solution.

Carol Burke is Regional Vice President, Central Region, for Communispond, Inc. the communications skills training company. Communispond has trained over 500,000 managers at more than 300 of the Fortune 500 companies. Its sales training programs include Socratic Selling, Business Negotiating Skills, Sales Presentation Skills, Coaching for Improved Sales Performance, Hiring the Right Salesperson, and Selling on Paper.