

## Five Fundamental Questions

I have long believed that the best selling is *interrogatory* rather than *declaratory*. In other words, it's more about questions than statements. Yes, there comes a point where you have to tell someone why you think they should buy from you, but the great salespeople get to that point by asking questions to identify needs and wants. To put that another way, they ask questions to identify hot buttons, and then make statements that push those specific buttons.

What I have found even more interesting is that great salespeople question *themselves* as part of the process. In fact, of the five most fundamental questions a salesperson should be asking, only one of them is directed to the buyer. Here are those five questions:

1. How can I bring value to this situation?
2. What do you want your counterpart to say yes to today?
3. Is there anything you would change if you could?
4. What do I do next?
5. When do I do it?

### The One You Ask The Buyer

The question you ask the buyer is pretty straightforward: *Is there anything you would change if you could?* As I hope you'll remember, in last month's column I wrote that being willing to meet with you is often a long way from being ready to buy from you, so the first meeting with a prospect is your opportunity to learn *exactly* how you can differentiate yourself from the printer-in-place. And that leads to another important understanding, there is *always* a printer-in-place!

OK, maybe not always, because there are new businesses opening up, but will you agree that anyone who is currently buying enough printing to make them a desirable customer for you is currently buying it from someone other than you? Your challenge is to displace that other printer, and the best way to do that is to identify something they're not doing well and convince the prospect that you can do it better! (Either that, or compete only on price. Do you really want to do that?)

The great salespeople know that you can't just walk in and ask the question, no matter how straightforward it may be. But they understand the importance of the question. As one very talented and successful printing salesperson once told me, "I don't start with that question, but it is the end that I work toward."

### The Ones You Ask Yourself

To a large degree, the answer to *Is there anything you would change if you could?* is also the answer to *How can I bring value to this situation?* Obviously, you can bring value by solving a problem or eliminating pain. The problem for you, though, is connected to the likelihood that your prospect may have only minor issues with the printer-in-place, maybe "luke-warm" buttons as opposed to hot buttons. If that's the case, you may have to suggest points of value. The key point is this, it's all about value! So keep asking yourself how you can bring it!

Now here's a question for you. Do you set goals for each sales call? You should. You should have a specific objective whenever you interact with a customer or prospect, in person, or by phone or even via e-mail. It's been my experience that most salespeople don't think that way, and because their goals are vague, their results tend to be vague too. So to help you frame your goal, I'm suggesting a question that many salespeople have found helpful: *What do I want this person to say yes to today?* Once you know that, you can start thinking about strategy for making it happen.

The other two questions you ask yourself come after the interaction. *What do I do next?* and *When do I do it?* This is another missing piece for most salespeople. What I'm really suggesting is an individual marketing plan for each customer or prospect. Think of it this way, no matter what you accomplish with today's interaction, there is probably a "next level" you want to get to. That may involve winning a specific order. It might also involve building or broadening a relationship. What happened today hopefully represents progress, but until you reach the "maximized customer" stage, there will always be a next level.

Now let's tie this all together. The two questions you ask at the end of the interaction must be connected to the question about bringing value — because it's always about value or else you're letting it be about price! And what you do next must be connected to what you want your counterpart to say yes to in the future!

And here's one more thing to consider. It's a good idea to ask your customers every once in a while if there's something they'd change about their relationship with you. If there's something *you're* not doing well, I think you want to learn about that and fix it before some competitor finds out that your customer has pain or problems!