

7 (More) Pretty Good Questions

I was reminded recently of a column I wrote more than 15 years ago, titled “15 Pretty Good Questions.” (QP, September 1993) This was a list of questions that make up a very good first conversation with a prospect—a needs/wants analysis as opposed to a canned presentation. The printer who reminded me had a specific request: a list of questions to ask a *customer* as opposed to a prospect, for the purpose of gaining more business from that customer.

That sounded like a pretty reasonable request, so here we go.

First and Foremost

1. Is there anything about our relationship, the way we service and support you, or the way we do business together, that you would change if you could? You may remember this question from the original column, although it came quite a bit further down that list. With a prospect, I think it’s important to build some rapport before asking the critical questions, (You may also remember that this question referred to the printer-in-place in the original column.) With a customer, the first and foremost issue is their level of satisfaction. If it’s low, you probably don’t have much chance of gaining more business from them in the first place, so let’s see if the relationship needs repair before trying to expand it!

2. What are the/your plans for the business over the next six months or so? First, note the distinction between *the* plans and *your* plans. It makes a difference whether you’re talking to an owner or an employee. For example, let’s say your customer is a veterinary clinic, and you currently get orders for forms and other internal documents from an office manager. In this case, your phrasing would be *the* plans, and you might be hoping to learn that the plans include new customer acquisition—which would allow you to suggest a direct mail program in support of those plans. An office manager, however, may not know that the vet/owner has growth objectives, and if that’s the case, talking about direct mail would be meaningless, or least directed at the wrong ears. Whenever you get to talk to an owner—or to any of the most senior managers—you can ask about *your* plans.

The key point here is that you ask about business plans, *not* about printing. If you were to ask just about printing plans, you might only hear about the sort of printing they’re already planning on buying from you. (“We’ll probably need some more letterhead in a couple of months.”) By asking about business plans, you set up the possibility of educating your customer, and also the possibility of being a greater consultative resource.

I was out on a sales call with a client recently and we learned that the customer was planning their first National Sales Meeting. She told us that she’d be ordering program books from us, but probably not until pretty close to the event. My client asked if she meant binders or bound books, and that launched us into a discussion of the benefits of ring binders vs. wire-bound books vs. perfect bound books for an application like this. The customer had been thinking in terms of ring binders and black/white pages. By the end of the discussion, she was thinking about a wire-bound book with a mixture of color and black/white pages.

Then I piped up with this question: “Are you planning any large-format graphics for the meeting, like posters or banners?”

“Yes,” she said. “We get those from (a local sign shop). Why do you ask?”

“Because we have pretty extensive large-format graphics capabilities,” I answered. “Any reason why we can’t be involved in that part of the project?”

“No, of course not,” she said, “and that’s really great to know, because I like you guys a lot better than I like those guys.”

“How about ad specialty items?” my client asked. “Are you planning for anything like that, imprinted pens or attaches or maybe embroidered polo shirts?”

“Can I get all of that from you?” she asked. “That’s really cool!”

I hope the moral of this part of the story is obvious, but just in case, let me spell it out for you. If you leave it up to them to define your product line, you’ll probably get a minimum share of their business. Sure, you might get all the letterhead, but how much more could you be selling them? The key is simply to ask better questions!

3. Is there anything else that you wish you could buy from us? The previous question will hopefully result in some education of your customer. This one could very well result in some further education—for your customer and for you! You may be able to respond to an answer by saying: “Gee, you can already buy that from us.” Beyond that, you may get some insight into new products and/or services that you should consider adding.

4. Is there anyone else here at your company that I should be talking to? This is the classic referral question, but it may not be the best way to ask it. Here's the problem: The bigger the company, the less likely it is that a right hand will know what a left hand is doing. Your current contact in a big company may not know of all the people who are buying what you sell.

A better approach might be to look at your customer's organization as a collection of business functions—Marketing, Operations, Human Resources, etc. Let's say that your contact is in Marketing, and you're not doing anything that might be classified as Human Resources printing. Do you see how a better question would be: "Who's in charge of Human Resources?"

5. Is there anyone outside of your company that I could be talking to? I think your first target for referrals should always be *internal*. That's because the relationship you already have with a company can eliminate some obstacles—for example, the company may already have an open account with you. After that, though, let's go looking for *external* referrals.

6. Would you be willing/able to introduce me to (that person), or at least let them know that I'll be calling? If there's anything better than a referral for starting a new relationship, it's an introduction!

7. If you were me, what would you do next in terms of keeping what we've started today moving along? The more involved your customer or prospect is in the process, the more likely it is that you'll both get the result you're hoping for. You don't have to guess at what to do next. You can ask!

Closing Thoughts

As I come to the end of this, I'm reminded of something else—a statement I used to make pretty frequently in seminars: *You probably have all of the customers you need, right now, to double your sales.* What that will require, of course, is for you to sell them twice as much as you're currently selling them, and the key to *that* probably involves expanding what they buy from you.

I hope these 7 (More) Pretty Good Questions will help you to do that!