

## Good Questions and The Basics of Selling

*by Dave Kahle*

Sales is, at its most basic level, a relatively simple process. I recall one of my clients showing me the flow-chart of his sales process. Twenty six steps. That level of detail may be appropriate for that specific situation, but it is an overkill when we are talking about the application for a typical professional salesperson.

The job of the salesperson is much like playing golf. In a four-hour round of golf, the club hitting the ball only takes about three minutes. Everything else is prelude or postlude. The essence of the game is, of course, to hit the ball correctly.

The same thing is true of sales. The essence is to interact with the customer effectively. Everything else is prelude or postlude. The best golfers execute the essentials with excellence. They focus on the three minutes. The best salespeople execute the essentials with excellence. They focus on the quantity and quality of their interactions with their customers.

So, regardless of the intricacies of the customer, the product and the setting, the job of the salesperson can be reduced to these basic elements:

- Engage with the right people.
- Make them feel comfortable with you.
- Find out what they want.
- Show them how what you have provides them what they want.
- Gain agreement on the next step.
- Insure that they are satisfied, and leverage that satisfaction to other opportunities.

### **1. Engage with the right people.**

You can be the most trained, thoroughly equipped salesperson, with the best questions, the most powerful presentations and the gift of a good sense of humor. However, if you waste all this on the wrong people, you'll never be successful.

Engaging with the right people is an absolute essential. However, it is far more difficult today than ever before. And it is growing more difficult, as more of your customers find themselves in overstressed situations where they have too much to do and not enough time in which to do it. Which puts meeting with you at the bottom of their "to do" list.

In order to be successful at this, you must identify all the key people, prioritize them, and then develop a series of practices that will allow you to regularly gain an audience with them. No small task. In fact, you'll need to work at this, constantly improving, for the rest of your career. It's that big of a challenge.

A good series of questions is your major tool to help you do this. It is a series of good questions that provide you the information on who are the important people to see. It's a series of questions that allow you to collect and then prioritize the potential in every opportunity. It's a series of questions, asked about the customer, that provide you the information to sculpt your approach. And, it's a series of good questions that allow you to turn the first encounter into a full scale engagement.

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## **2. Make them feel comfortable with you.**

If they aren't comfortable with you, they won't spend much time with you, and the time that they do spend will be guarded and tentative. They may be convinced to do business with you because of the fundamental attractiveness of your offer, but it will be action taken against the grain. They will be forever uncomfortable and eager to find a replacement.

On the other hand, if they are comfortable with you, they won't mind spending time with you. They'll be much more open to sharing the information that is necessary for you to do a good job of crafting a solution. They'll be eager to share future opportunities with you and will be much easier to deal with.

Using a series of perceptive questions develops the perception of your competence within the customer, leading him to sense that you are competent and trustworthy. A series of personal questions leads the customer to perceive that you are interested in him, a necessary step to him feeling comfortable with you.

A series of good questions uncovers areas that you and your customer may have in common; another important aspect of creating a feeling of comfort in them.

## **3. Find out what they want.**

I believe this step is the heart of selling the essence of what a salesperson is all about. I know that flies in the face of the routine practices of multitudes of salespeople, who believe that the end all of their focus is to push their product. While it is certainly true that the company expects you to sell your product, how you sell it is really the issue.

You can proclaim the merits of your product to willing and unwilling listeners far and wide, attempting to sway them with the powerful features and advantages that your product offers over the competition. Or, you can focus on the customer, finding out what motivates him, what issues are important to him, what problems he has, what objectives he is trying to solve, what he looks for in a vendor, etc.

I call the sum total of the customer's needs the gap. Having fully understood the gap or what he wants -- you can then present your product as a means of filling that vacuum, of giving him what he wants.

This is true tactically, in an immediate sense, as well as strategically, over time. For example, if you ask the customer for an appointment, and in so doing mention a question that the customer may have, or a problem that the customer may be experiencing that you can solve, and if your assumption is accurate, then your request for the customer's time will be far more effective than if you just talk about your product. I remember one somewhat defensive salesperson telling me, at one of my seminars, that he Just tells them that I want to talk to them about my company and my products. Needless to say, his approach wasn't very effective.

It would be far more effective to say something like this: "Because you are this kind of company, I believe you have this issue, and we can help you with that." The conversation here is about 'what the customer wants,' not your product.

Strategically, the same is true. You may make five or six sales calls on a nice sized account, specifically for the purpose of discovering, in depth and detail, what the customer wants. Everything that comes before is designed to get to this understanding. And everything that you do after is based on this step. It is the fulcrum upon which the entire sales process pivots.

Needless to say, the primary way that you learn, with depth and detail, what the customer wants is to ask good questions.

#### **4. Show them how what you have gives them what they want.**

Sooner or later you have to make an offer to your customer. In order for you to sell anything, they must decide to buy it. And if they are going to buy it, you need to make them aware of it.

You can go about your territory, loudly proclaiming the features of your product to whoever will listen. Or, you can craft your offer in such a way as to begin with "what they want" and show them how your offer "gives them what they want."

Proclaiming your product's features is the preferred routine of the mediocre salesperson. Personally and individually crafting your presentation to show the customer how what you have gives him what he wants is the mindset that, in part, defines the master salespeople.

But a presentation isn't a static thing. The best salespeople finely tune their presentations to the signals they receive from the customer, making mid-term, and in some cases, mid-sentence changes to reflect their perceptions of how the customer is receiving their communications.

Thus, a series of well planned, appropriately placed questions spread throughout the presentation is an effective way to add power to your presentations.

#### **5. Gain agreement on the next step.**

Every sales interaction has an assumed next step. If you call someone for an appointment, the next step is the appointment. If you present your solution to a decision-maker, the next step is the order. In between, there are thousands of potentially different sales calls, and thousands of potential action steps that follow the sales call.

The agreement is the ultimate rationale for the sales call and the aspect that makes it a 'sales' call. If you aren't expecting to gain any agreement, then why are you making the call? It's not a sales call. It may be a public relations call, or a something-to-do call, but it's not a sales call. A sales call is set apart from the rest of the interactions in this world by the fact that it anticipates an agreement.

Without an agreement, the process has been a waste of time. It is the ultimate goal of every salesperson, and of every sales process, and of every sales call.

Clearly, you generally don't gain agreement without asking for it. There's that question, again.

#### **6. Insure that they are satisfied, and leverage that satisfaction to other opportunities.**

This is the one step in the sales process that is most commonly neglected. Most salespeople are so focused on making the sale that they neglect to consider that their real purpose is to satisfy the customer. And that extends beyond just the sale itself.

The sales call on the customer, made after the sales is complete, delivered and implemented by the customer, is one of the most powerful sales calls available. In it, the salesperson seeks assurance that the customer is satisfied, and then leverages that affirmation to uncover additional opportunities within the customer and/or referrals to people in other organizations.

And, clearly, how would you find out if the customer is satisfied without asking? And, how would you uncover additional opportunities, other than to ask? And, how would you gain referrals if you did not ask? Questions, once again, are the key tool to this and every step in the sales process.

**About the Author**

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