

By Jason Kleid, Executive Coach, Sales Strategist, Trainer

Using Open-Ended Questions to Gather Information

Recently, I was asked to coach a woman, named Jane, on the world of sales. Jane works for an insurance company and made the change from a support role to an inside sales position. She was eager and a quick learner. We moved from discussing how important trust was in building new relationships to qualification, the next step in the sales process. She understood how important having a clear understanding of prospects' needs is, and how that understanding influences the way a salesperson articulates a solution to a problem and frames the value proposition from the prospect's viewpoint.

Jane's assignment was to use open-ended questions and listen. She was to do this exercise both at home, with her family, and at work for a period of two weeks, until our next coaching session.

This is how she began our discussion.

Jane: I have to tell you what happened to me yesterday morning.

Me: Go ahead.

Jane: My six-year old came up to me and told me that I was the best mommy in the world because I ask her all those questions and listen to her.

After a reflective pause, she then continued . . . "I had to ask myself; what was I doing before?"

Wow, what a great way for me to start the day! More importantly, what a wonderful thing this was to happen to a mother. I knew, from that point forward, her life and her relationships with others would change for the better. Jane discovered the power of asking open-ended questions and how to be a great listener.

The Power of Questions

Albert Einstein once said "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious." That curiosity caused him to continually question things until his need to know and understand was satisfied.

If you are a professional salesperson, leader of an organization, or serve as a coach and mentor, you should understand the power of questions. Powerful questions stir people's memories and stimulate them to think differently. They also have the potential to provoke insight and positive change. Questions that are meaningful will cause individuals to examine their aspirations, motivations, and choices. Furthermore, powerful questions can cause one to examine his or her assumptions, priorities, and—hopefully—behaviors.

This is why *questions are more powerful than statements*.

Your Insurance World

If you tell a doctor that tail coverage is important, it's just your opinion. However, through a series of thought-provoking and educational questions, if a doctor tells you that tail coverage is an important coverage to have, then it has become a fact. Why? It's simply because they said it and you didn't.

Therefore, it follows that telling... is not selling. Not surprisingly, though, salespeople and many of the rest of us do more telling than we should.

Types of Questions

Let's examine the difference between an open-ended question and a closed-ended question.

- Do you have a good relationship with your staff?
- How would you describe your relationship with your staff?

Both are similar questions. However, the first question is closed-ended. It will result in a "yes" or "no" answer which causes you to find out more by asking the second, open-ended question. Why not save time and just ask the second question first? The point of keeping most of your questions open-ended is to allow the person to express themselves in as many words as they choose.

Here are examples of how the ever-popular closed-ended questioning technique has a negative impact on communication. Closed-ended questions start with "did you," "didn't you," "do you," "don't you," "could you," "would you," "should you," etc.

Envision a salesperson on his or her first sales call with a prospect. At some point, the producer enters the business discussion and asks the prospect a closed-ended question. The prospect responds by saying "yes" or "no". Now the ball bounces back into the producer's court, making a subsequent question necessary. But it, too, is a closed-ended question. The salesperson begins to sense a slightly irritated feeling from the prospect. The tension builds as the salesperson's palms begin to sweat and his or her heart starts to race.

Once again, the salesperson poses a question. Since the salesperson trained himself or herself to ask close-ended questions, that's what he or she continues to do. The volley continues and the prospect may begin to feel like he or she is on the witness stand, being cross-examined by a prosecuting attorney.

If the salesperson's intentions were to create an antagonistic atmosphere, he or she has done a brilliant job. However, if the goal was to have an open, safe atmosphere and induce confidence in the prospect, he or she has failed miserably. Therefore, the salesperson must change the way he or she conducts an interview.

Prior to engaging in any conversation, ask yourself: What is my intention? What am I trying to accomplish or what's my objective in this conversation? If you are trying to understand the person's viewpoint, their feelings, how important something is or the status or quality of their relationships, you need to ask open-ended questions to get the outcome you really want.

It's Not About You

If you are trying to sell a product, concept or service, the following simple truth is important to understand. People buy for their own reasons . . . not yours.

Consider the last large purchase you made, such as a boat, car, or a house. For whose reasons did you buy it? Did you buy it for the salesperson's reasons or your own? Of course you bought it for your reasons. That's how people buy. And that's why salespeople who sell for the right reasons—the prospect's reasons—are much more successful than those who sell for self-serving reasons. For those of you who are salespeople or sales managers, it is essential to understand that you don't sell products. You influence people. This is an important distinction.

The goal of any professional salesperson is to accurately determine *why* the prospect wants to buy. Once you know the "why", influencing or selling becomes so much easier because you are able to frame your words in terms of your prospect's feelings and concerns. By communicating in this manner, you are helping your prospect realize how your recommendation will help them overcome a problem or address a concern.

Open ended questions start with "Who," "What," "Where," "When," "Why," and "How." Questions of this type invite and allow a person to explain how they feel, and why they feel that way.

The first rule of communication is *people prefer talking to listening*. By asking open-ended questions, you're following that rule naturally.

Some examples of open-ended questions:

- Who, besides yourself, is involved in the decision making process?
- What type of risk management service do you feel would help you the most?
- Where do you go to find information pertinent to your specialty?
- How important is the financial stability of your insurer when you need them the most?
- Why is it important that a medical professional liability company focus on the insurance needs of your specialty?
- If you're served with a claim, what becomes most important to you?
- How happy are you with the level and quality of risk management communications you are currently receiving?
- Why would it be important to your staff to know that they are covered by a ProAssurance Group company policy?

Reflective Questions

There is another type of question that may be deemed open-ended, as well. It is a reflective question. Here's how it works.

As you listen carefully to your communication partner, they may say something you feel is important to explore further. Pick up on a specific word or phrase you just heard them say and reflect it back to them.

Here is an example:

Prospect: I'm concerned about your company's stability.

Salesperson: Stability?

There are two things that happen when this is done. First, the prospect will know you are listening to what they are saying—a very good thing. Why? Because *people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care*. You demonstrate you care by *listening*.

Secondly, if the prospect feels like expanding on what concerns him or her about the company's stability, the conversation will continue and get more interesting and honest. You will receive all of the information needed to thoroughly understand the concerns and views of that person.

Communication is about listening and framing your ideas based on how your partner sees the world. If you position yourself to learn what is important to your partner and what they are telling you, if you read between the lines to hear what isn't being said as well as what is being said, you have differentiated yourself from the crowd. This advantage comes about because you are seeing things through the prospect's eyes and, in some cases, are listening to their heart.

What is the most important part of communication? It's listening—not talking. By asking open-ended questions you make that possible.

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