

ENTERPRISE

From the July 15, 2005 print edition

Sales Solutions

Asking your sales prospect the correct questions

[Andrea Sittig-Rolf](#)

Question: I'm fairly new to sales and have been told it's important to ask questions during the first meeting with a prospect to gather information so that I can offer a solution based on the products and services my company provides. I find myself struggling for the right kind of questions to ask in order to engage the prospect so the first meeting feels more like a conversation, and less like an interview. What types of questions I should be asking to engage the prospect in conversation?

Answer: The question-answer game in sales is vital to not only finding, qualifying, and closing deals, but offering the best possible solutions to your prospects and customers. The key in asking the right questions is to keep them open-ended. Questions you ask your prospect should begin with the words who, what, why, when, where and how.

Statements that begin with tell me about or please describe work well in allowing the prospect to describe in detail his or her needs in regards to the solutions you provide. Try to limit questions that begin with are you, do you, will you, would you, could you, should you, etc. as they are close-ended in nature and encourage yes or no answers from your prospect.

Sales legend Tom Hopkins says, "If you're telling, you're not selling." Rather than you doing most of the talking, you want your prospect to do most of the talking during your initial meeting. Asking open-ended questions will allow that to happen naturally. After the initial rapport-building portion of the meeting, ask some of these open-ended questions to learn as much as possible about the challenge your prospect is having, engage in a conversation, and ultimately understand what solution you can provide to best solve their problem.

- Please describe the challenge you're having now.
- Please tell me about what you're doing now in order to try to resolve the problem.
- How does this challenge affect your overall business strategy?
- Who is affected the most by the challenge you are experiencing? (Customers? Internal employees or departments?)
- How are they affected?
- What will happen if you don't solve this problem?
- Who else are you considering to provide a solution?
- Why are you considering my company to provide a solution?
- What criteria are you considering in order to make your final decision?
- How will the vendor be chosen?
- What is the process you will follow in order to determine the best provider of the solution needed?

- Who in your company is involved in making the final decision for vendor selection?
- How much budget have you allowed for the project regarding the solution to this problem?
- When would you like to have the solution in place? (Or, what is the timeline for making your decision?)
- What will a successful solution look like to you?
- How will you know the solution provided is working?

The best way to start the conversation is to use the tell me about or please describe phrases since they are the most open of all the questions and statements provided above. Sometimes, by beginning the conversation this way, it is unnecessary to go on with the rest of your line of questioning. You may get all of the information you need by using one of these two key phrases: tell me about, or, please describe.

By allowing your prospect to answer open-ended questions, you do three things. First, you will ensure the prospect is able to tell you in his own words the challenge he is having, allowing him to focus on the key points that are important to him. Second, you will begin to understand the solution you will need to provide. Third, you allow the rapport- building process to happen naturally by engaging the prospect in conversation.

ANDREA SITTIG-ROLF is a public speaker, author, and president of Sittig Northwest, Inc., a sales training and consulting firm. Her new book, "Business-to-Business Prospecting: Innovative Techniques to Get Your Foot in the Door with Any Prospect" (Aspatore Books) is available on Amazon.com. Reach her at 206-769-4886 or www.sittignw.com, and send your "Sales Solutions" questions to info@sittignw.com.