



## WhitePaper

# 117 Best Questions to Close More Business

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**H**ave you ever faced a situation where the sale seemed to be just about sealed, only to stall at the last minute? Or you had great rapport with your contact, but at the last minute another influence came in and derailed the whole thing? Or your prospects decide they simply don't need change right now? How do you make them see the value of your service, not just the price tag? You do it by asking questions that lead prospective customers to think along those lines—but how will you know what to ask?

Why do we ask questions, anyway? More to the point, why don't we ask enough questions—important questions? Asking the right questions at the right time is crucial to establish rapport with your prospective customers. Good rapport eases you into learning your prospects' needs, goals, and plenty of other important information.

Like many salespeople, you may be nervous about asking questions for fear of asking the wrong ones, or worse, getting answers you don't want to hear. You don't always know what to ask, and silence makes you even more nervous. Then you worry that if you ask the wrong questions, you'll come across as intrusive—after all, customers don't want to feel like they're being interrogated. Perhaps you even feel like you're imposing on customers, as if you should already know the answer (why, are you a mind-reader?). This kind of thinking actually does more harm than good, disempowering both you and your customer, who'll end up feeling misunderstood, un-listened to, and unimportant. A customer who feels ignored by the vendor from whom she's seeking help is a customer who feels powerless, and therefore resentful. These are *not* feelings that lead to a happy business relationship!

Instead of feeling powerless when it comes time to ask questions, consider this: when you ask questions, you're actually *controlling* the conversation. That's right, questions mean power! Questions make customers think and respond, and asking the right questions will give you the responses you need to provide customers with the right guidance. Even if you don't get the answer you hoped for, you're nevertheless engaging customers' emotions, and that's half the battle. Customers may justify their actions with logic, but deep down, it's their emotions that motivate them.

It's not enough just to give your prospect the facts and features of why to buy—it's important to give her a chance to respond, and to listen carefully and caringly to her responses. When you're the one doing all the talking, there's an emotional disconnect because the longer you talk, the more likely it is that your customer is tuning out. She may be politely nodding and mmm-hmming, but the fewer opportunities you give her to respond, the more likely it is that she's really off in her own world thinking her own thoughts. But if you ask the right questions, you'll engage her emotionally, snapping her out of her half-listening haze and motivating her to respond in ways that will lead to meaningful dialogue between the two of you.

Like all good salespeople, you want to understand your customer's vulnerability, her need to control her own fate. You also want to stroke your customer's ego by connecting emotionally, responding to the specific concerns she expresses. That's why you have to really listen to your customer; her responses are crucial to helping you tailor your questions to her needs and goals. Don't confuse this with manipulation! If you care about your customer as a person and not just as a source of



revenue, it will show in the way you ask your questions. The key is to help your customer find her vulnerability and tap into it while at the same time reinforcing her strength, clarity, and focus. The most effective questions can help bring out the positives. You can help your customer feel positive by talking about her strengths, which in turn kick-starts her subconscious into thinking about the specifics of what she needs to do to achieve her goals.

We also ask questions to force people to think, therefore tapping into their needs, wants, and desires, getting them on your wavelength, leading you and your customer to think in unison. This process helps you diagnose the problem and break it down. Only then can you grasp the magnitude of the issue in question and the potential ripple effect of the problem the customer wants you to solve.

### EXAMPLES OF WARM-UP QUESTIONS

Remember that before you can work with your customer on a solution to his problem, you need to get to know him. While you can't hurry trust or manipulate a business relationship into a specific time frame, you'll find it's worthwhile to invest time in the relationship-forming process by asking the right questions about the customer's past and present—and, equally important, being patient and listening to their answers. If you really listen to what your customers have to say, you'll instill confidence in them, forming the foundation upon which to build a powerful business relationship.

- *How long have you been with this organization? How has your job (or responsibilities) evolved since you started with the company?*
- *What would you say you like most about your work? Least?*
- *If your employees (team, coworkers, boss, etc.) were to describe your organization in five words or less, what words would come to mind? (Listen to the words given and respond: The word \_\_\_\_\_ is a good one; could you elaborate on that for me?)*

- *What would your best customers say are the reasons they enjoy doing business with you?*
- *What would you say is different about your organization today from when you began with this company?*
- *What originally led you to work for this company? What were your expectations when you came on board, and how have they changed since you've been here?*
- *What have been some of your likes and dislikes with past vendors?*
- *Since you've been with the company, what have been some of the biggest hurdles you've faced?*
- *As you look back on your career, what has given you the greatest sense of accomplishment?*

### QUESTIONS TO DISRUPT EXISTING VENDOR RELATIONSHIPS

Phrase your questions in ways that won't end up undermining your efforts to win your customer's business. For example, don't just ask your customer, "What do you like about your current supplier?" If she's fairly content with the status quo, she just might start talking about all the positive qualities of that relationship...and if things are going just dandy between them, what does she need you for? Here are better ways to get that information without undermining what you have to offer.

- *"Would you share with me the ideal qualities you look for in a vendor?"*
- *"How does your ideal situation compare to your current situation?"*
- *"When you originally selected this vendor, what were your selection criteria? In what ways have your criteria changed as you evaluate your needs today? What would you like to see happen in the future?"*
- *"If you could enhance one thing about your vendor's qualities, what would that be?"*



- *How would you rate your current vendor relationship on a scale of 1 to 10? (When your customer states a number, urge her to elaborate.)*

It's all too easy for salespeople to take their customers for granted, or vice-versa. These questions work best when you already have a relationship in place, but you'd like to take it to a higher level in order to capture more business. If you wait for your customer to affirm your relationship status, you'll probably hear about it after she's taken her business somewhere else. Instead, be proactive and uncover her true feelings by asking the following...

### QUESTIONS TO STRENGTHEN EXISTING CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

- *What do you feel we are/I am doing right to sustain our business relationship?*
- *What could we be doing differently in order to ensure that you achieve your goals? What should we do more of? Less of?*
- *What's most important to you for us to keep focused on your objectives?*
- *If you could enhance one thing about our business relationship, what might that be?*
- *How can I make your life easier?*
- *If a prospective customer were to ask you to explain why you do business with us, in 10 words or less, how would you respond?*

### QUESTIONS TO UNCOVER PROBLEMS, PAST AND PRESENT

What's missing in the present is the promise of the future. People always project into what they want down the line, rather than what they have now. For example, in the acclaimed film *Hollywoodland*, it's suggested that the late actor George Reeves' fatal flaw was in not

appreciating his success as the wildly popular star of TV's *The Adventures Of Superman*, but instead being too fixated on grasping for movie success, which always seemed to elude him due to typecasting, among other factors. In contrast, the private detective investigating Reeves' mysterious death learns from the doomed actor's mistakes; as the film ends, the detective takes steps to improve his strained relationships, reaching out to his estranged family for a fresh start. You, too, need to make your customers see how their present impacts on their future. When we assess common questions, 85% of them address the present:

- *What are you currently doing?*
- *How many \_\_\_\_\_ are you producing?*
- *How do you use this product/application?*
- *Who are you using now?*
- *What do you like about them?*
- *Are you the decision-maker in your company?*
- *What are your challenges?*
- *What are your needs?*
- *What do you want?*
- *What can I do for you?*

Addressing present questions is great—it helps people see where they are now—but don't forget to use them to segue into the future. Perhaps 4% of those aforementioned common questions cover the future, such as "What are your goals?" The trouble is, those kind of questions often sound canned and superficial—and they're the kind of questions almost every salesperson asks, so your customer has undoubtedly heard them all before, and she's probably bored as soon as the question leaves your lips. In fact, she probably already has a canned response of her own: "To make more money!" The right questions crystallize for the customer what steps she should take.



Sometimes a prospective client will come to me, lamenting, “Our team needs sales training. Our people don’t get enough orders!” Dig deeper, like our *Hollywoodland* detective, and find out exactly why. It might turn out it’s because your customers don’t have the right people on their team, or their people aren’t asking the right questions, or they’re not mining the right territory, or they’re simply not on their customers’ wavelength. Many factors can come into play. It’s like losing weight: it’s not just a matter of following a diet and exercise regimen, but also taking into account each dieter’s individual issues. Maybe they’re emotional eaters who deal with stress by sitting down with their friends “Ben & Jerry”, or maybe they really do have a sluggish metabolism. Find out what factors are disrupting your customer’s business regimen.

Even when your sales go well, the pressure is still on: “This month went great—but how do we keep it up *next* month?” Your mind gallops ahead, thinking about the future and all the wave-a-magic-wand, “wouldn’t-it-be-nice-if...” questions that go with it. Daydreaming about what’ll happen once you reach your goals is always fun, but taking action towards your goals is even better, and certainly more productive. As Dr. Phil McGraw says, “The universe rewards action. You’ve got to put verbs in your sentences and do something about your dreams.” Nothing puts verbs in your sentences like the consultative approach. This approach results in the kind of questions that will lead your customers to action, positioning you as their trusted confidant who’ll help them make their dreams of business success come true.

Have you ever called on a prospect who was clueless about the problem he was facing? Or a prospect who’d become utterly complacent about his problems? Or one in survival mode? Or one who hoped if he waited it out long enough, the problem would eventually fix itself? Finding problems means uncovering opportunities!

Customers are more motivated to fix their problems than to pursue pleasure, but they’re so caught up in their day-to-day struggles, they haven’t got the time or energy to

step back and assess their situation. You can help them by digging for problems whenever you can, transforming yourself into a business advisor your customers will know they can rely on, helping them evaluate their current situation and act on it before potential problems erupt. Here are questions to help uncover and crystallize the issues your prospect needs to work on:

- *What exactly is the problem?*
- *What’s causing the problem? Can you give me an example?*
- *How long has it been going on?*
- *If left alone, what are the possible ramifications?*
- *What barriers stand in your way?*
- *What methods are working? What methods aren’t? Why?*
- *On a scale from 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your current product/vendor/situation? (Based on the answer, you respond, You mentioned the number \_\_\_\_\_. What would you like to see the product/vendor/situation do/deliver/accomplish in order to achieve a 10?)*

## GO FURTHER AND EXPLORE THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

- *Think back to when you originally implemented this process. What were your expectations? What results are you getting now? What kind of results would you like to get in the future?*
- *To what extent is your current situation meeting your expectations?*
- *So how does your current situation compare to what you would like to be doing?*
- *How do you envision your future three years from today? In other words, what would you like to be doing more of...? Less of...?*
- *What steps will you have to take in order to make that happen?*



- *What are the benchmarks that will tell you that you achieved your goal?*

## QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR CUSTOMERS' CUSTOMERS

Surprisingly, not every customer you contact is focused on external customers. Unless your clients have direct contact with external customers, too often you will discover how insensitive or ignorant they are of their external customers' needs. Under these circumstances, it is likely that internal customers will have greater influence. This makes your job even more challenging, because you need to convince your customers that their customers are important! The key is to uncover the wants and needs of those external customers.

- *Who are your most valuable customers?*
- *Can you give me a profile of your typical client?*
- *How do your customers measure success as a result of doing business with you?*
- *What do your customers expect from you as a vendor or supplier?*
- *How have your customers' expectations changed over the last 10 years? The last 5 years? How do you see those expectations changing in the next 3 to 5 years?*
- *What steps do you take to ensure your customers' needs are met?*
- *Why do customers buy from you?*
- *What would your customers say your strengths are as a company?*
- *What do your customers complain to you about?*
- *What do customers like most about doing business with your company? What do they like least? What steps are you taking to improve in this area?*
- *Would you explain the difference between a profitable customer and an unprofitable one?*

Be careful who you direct these questions to. If, say, you ask these questions of a purchasing agent, you'll get a blank stare. That's because purchasing has little, if any, interaction with your customer's customers. Make sure you direct these questions to people who have significant contact with the company's external customers.

## WHY ASK "WHY?" QUESTIONS TO UNCOVER HIDDEN NEEDS

"Why" questions allow you to understand your customers' motives, which, in turn, brings their hidden needs to light. Some customers act out of fear, others out of self-interest, and still others out of a desire to increase profits. Your ability to uncover motives will bring you invaluable insight into how your customers operate. This knowledge then allows you to provide individualized service for your customers. But getting info on motives is tricky. If you simply ask, "Why?" over and over again, your customers will probably become annoyed or offended. The examples below give you the chance to delve deeper and to better understand what's motivating your customers:

- *Tell me, what is prompting your interest in \_\_\_\_\_?*
- *What's causing this to happen?*
- *What's driving the need for change?*
- *What originally led you to this decision?*
- *Walk me through the steps that led you to this conclusion.*
- *What do you hope to accomplish?*
- *Share with me what is motivating your decision to \_\_\_\_\_.*
- *Why is this important to you?*
- *What is prompting you to consider taking action?*
- *What's in it for you to implement this \_\_\_\_\_?*
- *If you can achieve this result, what will it mean to you?*



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- *What concerns do you have if you are unable to achieve this result? How might failing to achieve it personally affect you?*

### **QUESTIONS ABOUT WHO ELSE IS INVOLVED**

It's not enough to get to know your customer; you also need to find out about his colleagues and superiors. These people impact how purchasing decisions are made; how the employees feel about the company; what the relationships are between different departments or between headquarters and its subsidiaries; the relationships your contact has with others on her team, with her boss, and with all of the other departments in the company; and how changes are proposed and implemented.

Questions about the company's culture allow you to become a "fly on the wall" in your customer's boardroom. They give you access to the organization's inner workings, allowing you to anticipate problems before they crop up. Remember, employees are competing for a fixed amount of resources within a company. So your plan to overhaul their delivery system, for instance, might run into a brick wall if you're not sensitive to the fact that other employees have input into the decision regarding whether or not to implement that plan.

It's like talking to a married couple and discovering that each spouse has a different philosophy about spending money or running the household. Maybe the wife is bent on saving money for their retirement and their children's future education, while the husband can't resist impulse purchases of the latest toy, game, or gadget the kids beg for—after all, they're only young once. The point is: each member of a team, whether that team is a family or a business, has a different set of important criteria. Everybody's coming from a different set of experiences.

Here are examples of questions about who else is involved:

- *Can you walk me through your decision-making process?*
- *Who else in addition to yourself is involved in this process?*
- *What exactly is his/her perspective on this issue? In what ways are they receptive to addressing the issue? In what ways may they look at it differently than you?*
- *What are the steps your organization has to take to reach a decision on this type of purchase?*
- *How can we best present this solution so that everyone will see it as a win instead of a loss?*
- *Can you walk me through your decision-making process?*
- *What are the steps that your organization has to take to reach a decision on this type of purchase?*
- *How do you see the decision-making process going?*
- *Do you anticipate problems in this decision-making process?*
- *Tell me your thoughts on this upcoming project. How does your boss feel about it? Your peers? Others on your team? The committee?*
- *Are there some people within your company who will resist this change?*
- *How can we tailor this message so everyone sees it as a win instead of a loss?*
- *How do people feel about working for your company?*
- *How would people working for your company describe the atmosphere to outsiders?*
- *Do people working for you resist change, or embrace it?*
- *When making a change, how do you introduce it to your employees?*
- *What plans does your organization have for cutting costs in the future?*
- *How do the departments in your company interact?*
- *Have there been any recent changes in your company's organizational structure?*



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- *Can you tell me about those organizational changes—for example, why were the changes orchestrated? How smoothly were the changes made?*
- *How would you describe the relationship between your corporate headquarters and your subsidiaries?*
- *Does one department (for example, marketing, personnel, or research and development) lead the way in innovation?*
- *Is there a single department that makes more of the company's decisions than any other?*
- *How does your company deal with staffing issues?*
- *Does your company feel challenged by the problem of high turnover?*
- *How does high turnover affect your profitability?*
- *How does high turnover affect training costs and hiring costs?*
- *How important is price compared to service? Compared to quality? Compared to availability? Compared to 'time to market'?*
- *How important is quality compared to availability?*
- *Which is most important to you: price, quality, service, delivery, customer support, and/or ease of use? Which of these is the least important?*
- *You mentioned that quality is important to you. Would you share with me your definition of quality?*
- *Can you give me an example of when your standards for quality were not met?*
- *Can you rank the criteria you shared with me, from most important to least important?*
- *How would others on your team rank this criteria? In what ways might their ranking be different from yours?*

### QUESTIONS ON CREATING VALUE

Questions about value help customers shift from the “lowest price” mentality to a discussion of true value. Different people have different definitions of value, so be sure to ask your customers what's most important to them. That way, you'll be able to effectively position your solution as a smarter investment over lower-priced alternatives.

You cannot sell value until you understand what your customer values. Value is unique to the eye of the beholder. For instance, value to a purchasing agent is about getting the lowest price. Value to an engineer is all about quality. Value to a CEO is about increasing market share and satisfying shareholder needs. Value to a salesperson is keeping current customers happy and attracting new ones.

- *How do you measure success with a current vendor?*
- *What alternatives will you be considering? Share with me the criteria you use when selecting a \_\_\_\_\_.*

### QUESTIONS ABOUT COMPETITION, TRENDS, AND MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

Assessing the competition periodically is a matter of survival for any business. Similarly, no business can thrive without keeping its finger on the pulse of the trends affecting its industry—effective marketing depends on such awareness. Questions about these aspects of business compel your customers to focus on the future while critically analyzing their present situation; they'll have to ask themselves, “Can I get where I want to go with what I have now?” Whatever the answer, you'll have provided a valuable service by motivating them to answer that question.

- *How do you differentiate yourself from your competitors?*
- *Which of your product's/service's strengths will allow you to continue your success? How does the aging of the baby boomer generation (or any applicable trend) affect your share of the market?*
- *How does your company measure progress?*



- *Are you planning on initiating any integration with other companies?*
- *How does your company see itself today? How has it changed over the last 5 years? Where would it like to be in the next 5 years?*

## IMPACT AND IMPLICATION QUESTIONS

These are questions used at the tail end of your discovery phase, to size up if you have a legitimate opportunity and a sense of urgency on your customer's part. Everybody has an excuse for why they do things! For example, let's say you ask your customer, "What's the implication for you and your family if you don't begin a savings plan now for your retirement?" He could reply, "I don't know, I guess the government will take care of me," or "My children will take care of me." Taking your cues from his answers, you can follow up with something like, "Do you feel your Social Security check will cover your living expenses?" or "No doubt your children will do everything they can to help you, but are you sure they really have the money and resources to support you while keeping their own households afloat?" After you go through the implications with your customer, his next response might well be: "Gee, that's a bigger concern than I realized. I could end up in a nursing home... I have to take care of this!" Other such questions include:

- *How does this problem affect sales? Profitability? Scheduling? On-time deliveries? Quality? Production?*
- *What do you think these problems are costing you?*
- *How is this problem impacting the bottom line?*
- *Let's assume you decide not to address this problem immediately. What will that cost you this year? If you don't fix this problem, what is the potential impact on your business? Can you afford to take that risk?*

## VISION QUESTIONS

With vision questions, you ask your customer to look towards the future, presenting him with a picture of how much brighter the future could be with the positive changes resulting from him doing business with you. Once you get your customer to the point at which you'll use a vision question, you've earned the right to convince him how your product or service will help him achieve that goal. Examples of vision questions include:

- *If we could eliminate that problem you are currently experiencing—for instance, that problem that's costing you \$1 million per year—what benefit do you think that would have on your company?*
- *If we could implement that change, what would that enable you to do or achieve?*
- *How would implementing this change affect you personally? What would you be able to do differently?*  
*If those changes could get implemented, how do you think your job (or career) would look 5 years from now?*

By asking questions like those in the preceding examples, you'll establish a true rapport with your customers, leading you to the information you need to position yourself as an advisor they can trust. Once that happens, you'll have opened their eyes to the value of your service, not just the price tag.



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