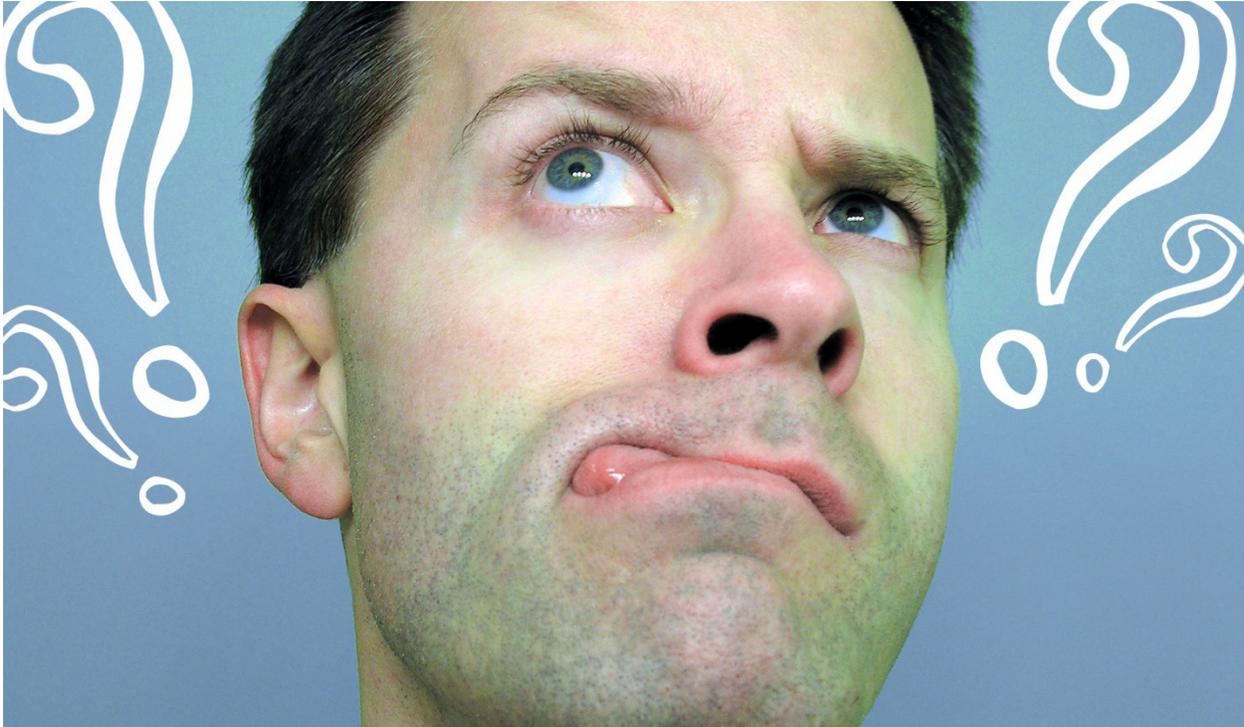


Do the Questions Asked in a Sales Call Make You Memorable or Forgettable?

By Thomas Williams & Tom Saine



Recently we had the opportunity to lead a round table discussion with several sales professionals from diverse industries. One of the questions we posed to them was “Do the questions Sellers ask a Buyer during a sales call differentiate them?” In other words, does the questioning process alter a Buyer’s perception of the Seller?

As Sellers, our intuition tells us that the answer is a resounding “yes.” Most of us would argue that the quality and flow of our questions matter. Unfortunately, if we were honest with ourselves, we would also probably acknowledge that we don’t spend enough time developing good thought provoking questions to ask during a sales call--especially during an initial sales call where discovery is a vital part of the sales process.

A thought provoking, insightful question is one that causes the Buyer to pause and think, “That’s a great question. I need to think about how I want to answer it.” Thought provoking, insightful questions create “aha moments” for the Buyer.

Research shows that when Buyers are asked about the effectiveness of the sales professionals that call on them only 36% rate the sales calls as effective.¹

So why is there often a disparity between a Seller’s and Buyer’s view of a sales call? The primary source of the disparity lies in two areas: a failure to plan and a failure to probe.

Here are our takeaways from our two-hour session with a panel of sales experts on the value of developing good questions. We hope that their insights will aid in your ability to plan and probe during sales calls.

Developing & Asking Questions: A Few Gentle Reminders

1. In selling it's not enough to have a good strategy to win new business; Sellers must be able to execute effectively on each and every sales call. The questions you ask are important in building your image and gaining valuable information.
2. Every sales call is a live performance. Your company, product or service may have gotten you in the door but it's your preparation, persona, questions you ask and perspective that you provide that is a measure of your effectiveness and value to the Buyer.
3. Preparing great questions helps you direct your thinking in a manner that shapes the conversation to uncover the Buyer's needs.
4. Asking great questions energizes the conversation and makes the Buyer think carefully and thoughtfully before they offer a point of view.
5. Highly productive Sellers prepare for every sales call by developing 8-12 great questions. These generally come from a reference list of questions that have proven to work effectively for them in the past. These are the tried and true questions that create those "aha moments" for the Buyer.
6. Great questions should help uncover vital business interests, scope or size the threat or opportunity and identify essential benefits for the Buyer.
7. Great questions uncover a wealth of information and provide you with the quantity and quality of information that can position you to win the sale or uncover new opportunities within the account.
8. All Sellers control the questions they ask. It's their most powerful sales tool. It's what sets them apart from all other Sellers. It either distinguishes them as memorable or forgettable.
9. If you don't ask insightful and thought provoking questions then you are lengthening the sales cycle and decreasing your potential for a positive outcome.
10. Great questions help the Buyer define the costs of doing nothing and what the payoff will be to them and their organization.

Questioning Strategies: Best Practices

1. **Focus on the Buyer:** Great questions are focused on what the Buyer wants to accomplish, fix or avoid. It's not about what the Seller wishes to sell. While it's natural to want to ask situation questions to determine the current state; these questions must be used judiciously. Buyers expect Sellers to do their homework prior to a call and not ask questions that could be answered by reviewing their website, annual report etc.
2. **Conversation Not Interrogation:** Buyers don't want to be asked questions in a rapid fire manner that gives the appearance that the Seller has a checklist they must complete. The most successful sales calls are ones that are comfortable and conversational for the Buyer and where there is an open and honest exchange of information.

3. **Listening is an Art:** Sellers have two ears and one mouth for a reason. Asking great questions keeps the Seller from being a talking leaflet and it reminds you to listen!
4. **Ask One Question Not Two:** If it takes two questions to get the answers ask two separate questions. Buyers don't like answering two questions simultaneously. An example is "Are you happy with your current vendor and who is it?"
5. **Dig Deeper:** There is a natural tendency to stop asking questions after you have heard a problem you can solve. Resist that tendency and ask several more follow-up questions. The analogy we use is digging a hole with a shovel. You don't stop digging until the hole is big enough. An example of digging deeper is as follows: "Ease of use is important to us". Resist the urge to explain how your product makes it easy for them to use. Instead ask a few follow-up questions such as "Explain to me why ease of use is important"? "Describe for me how you measure ease of use"? "Tell me what problems you encounter when ease of use is less than desired etc.?"
6. **Every Call Ends with a Commitment Question:** If Sellers don't end with a measurable next step they have made a visit and not a sales call. Sellers should keep in mind the best and minimum actions that the Buyer can take in order to justify a Seller's investment of time and resources.
7. **Ask Good-Better-Great Questions:** Oftentimes, Sellers think they are asking great questions when they are really asking "good" or "better questions." Sellers should take the time to think through each question and revise the wording to achieve the "best" impact.
 - A Good question may uncover some basic information. An example is "Are you the individual that will approve the final PO?" The Buyer's response will give you a simple yes or no but nothing else.
 - A Better question is "Who besides you will approve the final PO?" This response will provide some additional useful information because it tells the Seller who else besides the Buyer is involved in the final approval.
 - A Great question is "Would you please walk me through the process to gain approval for a purchase order?" This question gives you their process for reviewing and approving the PO and who is the final "yes".

Parting Thoughts

The development of great questions takes practice and preparation. Consider developing a reference list of questions from which you can select the best ones for your upcoming call. Then role play the call with an observer. The feedback you receive will be informational and unbiased. It's also useful if during the role play you tape record the call. Listening to the call, provides a different perspective and allows you to analyze the call from the Buyer's perspective. Voice inflections, pauses, responses and timing provides additional insight that will improve your performance.

When all else fails remember the words of Albert Einstein *"It's not that I am so smart but I stay with the questions longer."*

As always we welcome your thoughts and input. Let's start a discussion and elevate the sales profession with a thoughtful, civil and informative discourse.

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