

Questioning – The Foundation of Selling

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As sales people we can learn much from doctors' questioning skills. For example you may have a minor flu symptom but will still be asked a series of logical questions such as, "*Have you travelled overseas recently...Stress at work...What about your diet?*" When the doctor thinks (s)he has pinpointed the problem you will then be asked specific questions relating to the illness to confirm the diagnosis. A doctor will question you to reach a clear understanding of your symptoms. This process precedes any diagnosis and enables the doctor to talk to you about what your symptoms mean and what can be done to relieve your pain or discomfort.

Yet there are sales people who, through ignorance or arrogance, will try to 'wing' questioning. Getting back to the doctor metaphor how would you feel if the doctor asked a very few questions and immediately started writing a script and telling you what to do? You would be in and out of the surgery feeling as though you had been pushed. Would you feel a bit apprehensive?

Sales people can be guilty of a similar offence by asking one or two questions and then assuming they know what the client needs and going straight into presenting their product or service. The questioning phase of their sales process has taken but a moment and the presentation from the client's perspective seems never to end. As sales people we have all at one time been guilty of this mistake. Not asking enough of the right questions often leads to sales objections. The sales person then wonders what (s)he did wrong.

The skill of asking questions is one of the most powerful skills a sales person can develop because questioning directs the thinking of the client. The language you use when you are asking a question will impact on how the client feels, thinks and responds to you. If your questioning is done well and is integrated with the sales process a positive outcome is likely.

Questioning can be used to build rapport. Questions such as "*How did you get involved in the coaching of the under 10 football team?*" differentiate you from your competitors in that this is a way of showing a genuine interest in the client's current situation and the effect it has on their company and the people who work there. Example "*What effect has losing your warehouse manager had on the business...How has his leaving impacted on the workload of other employees?*" And finally questioning can be to qualify. This is to:

- uncover what the client needs are
- understand if other people need to be involved in the decision making process
- clarify why the client will or will not buy your product or service.

Needs can be:

1. To avoid a loss or pain

2. To gain pleasure, feel good

These two types of needs lie at the heart of what motivates people. Your job through questioning is to find out what the prospect or client's pain is or the pleasure they are seeking so you can show them the appropriate product or service and how it will relieve the pain or gain pleasure.

Good questioning can uncover problems that are current or have been ignored for some time and may evoke an emotional reaction in some clients. This is referred to as a client being in pain. The problems are usually centred on operational costs that have had an effect on the profitability of the organisation.

The PIE method of questioning, an acronym for Profile Issue and Effect, is designed to uncover specific needs that will motivate a client to buy.

Profile Questions

Potential sources for profile questions are in the client's organisation and of an operational and /or personal nature. Profile questions provide a broad factual framework of the client's current situation and are used to probe for potential problems and dissatisfaction. For example: *"How many company reports are printed annually?"* Profile questions are like a flat rock skimming across a lake and can cover a lot of distance. Be careful not to ask too many profile questions because this can irritate the client and possibly compromise the sale.

To keep on track:

- Have a definable sales purpose
- Search for basic information from other sources
- Ask questions directly linked to the potential problem or dissatisfaction

Issue Questions

These questions are asked directly about the client's current problems and take the profile question to a deeper level. Experienced salespeople tend to ask more of these types of questions. Examples in keeping with the profile question could be: *"What are the main obstacles to getting the reports printed on time...Do you know how much capital is tied up in your machines?"*

Issue Questions can:

- Narrow the breadth of questions you need to ask
- Create greater understanding of the problem
- Provide input for your presentation

Effect Questions

Effect questions are about the effects, ramifications or outcomes of the client's current situation and drill down to specifics. Again in keeping with the previous profile and issue examples: *"What are the ramifications for late delivery...How does having your capital tied up in machines affect funds for cash flow?"* Effect questions can confirm the client's thoughts about the need to take action. If the client response is lukewarm they won't be motivated to change, so go back to asking more profile questions or refer to dormant pain in this article.

Effect questions:

- Can show the ramifications of the problem
- Build the complete picture including the effect on other departments
- Can show cause and effect to other potential problems or difficulties
- Can lead to articulation of a specific need

Client Need and Questioning

It is a natural part of our being to want to feel good and to avoid pain. Pain will motivate the client to action and begin the buying process. Their driving force will be to eliminate the pain.

Client pain can be categorised as follows:

1. Dormant Pain

The client isn't aware of or denies there is a problem and so they don't see a need for change. This happens because of a lack of knowledge or the client rationalises the need by convincing themselves for example that the current supplier's performance isn't that bad. Prospective clients can often be in the dormant pain category.

If a client is genuinely satisfied with a competitor's product or service you will be wasting your time continuing the sales interview. In this situation a sales person is limited in what (s)he can do when a client is in dormant pain. If there is a legitimate future sales opportunity, keep in touch because when the client realises they have been unaware of a better alternative they will go straight to acknowledging their pain.

2. Acknowledged Pain

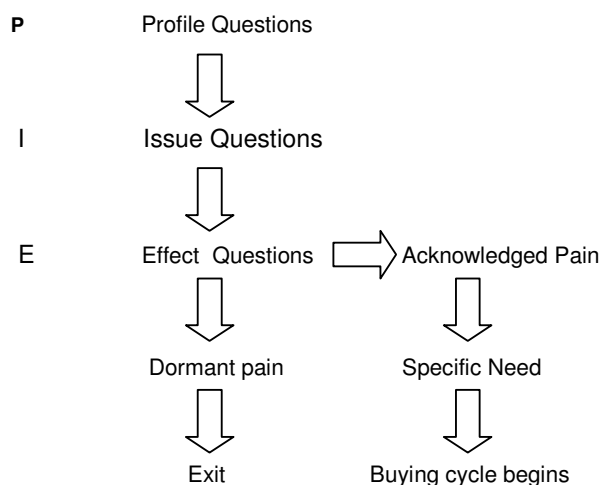
This is when the client has admitted to a problem or a need and is looking for a solution. Acknowledged pain can be fear- driven and in these situations can have twice the motivating power for the client to act compared to the motivating power of desire. Example statements can be, "*I have a problem with...*" and "*I am looking for a better way to...*" This is when effect questions are used to uncover the full extent of the problem and to establish specific needs. A specific need is a statement made by the client that expresses a want or a need. This leads to the beginning of the buying cycle.

3. Visualising the future

This category is when the client can clearly see that by taking action they will not only relieve their acknowledged pain but will be in a far better situation. For example: lower costs and recognition for a job well done. For the client's vision to be confirmed it needs to be expressed verbally or in writing by them.

Using PIE isn't a linear process, so it is common to move up and down the 3 categories as you uncover more or relevant problems.

The PIE Questioning Method



The quality of your result is directly proportional to how you ask questions. A good question needs to gain more than information. Using PIE will help you to differentiate yourself from competitor sales people, understand the full extent of the client's problem which in turn allows you to recommend the right product or service and close the sale.



Kurt's expertise is in sales strategy, sales management development; group structured sales training and infield sales coaching. As a sales person he has successfully sold products and services in 4 major market/product segments: new product sales, consultative sales, relationship sales and retail. During his selling career he created sales records for three companies in two industries and won many other sales awards for outstanding performance.