

This is an actual chapter from *“How to Sell More in Less Time With No Rejection, Using Common Sense Telephone Techniques, Volume 1,”* by Art Sobczak.

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Chapter 13

Scrap the Benefit Lists; Prepare Question Lists Instead

If you've gone through any corporate sales training, or training developed and delivered by your company you've probably been exposed to benefit lists. These are lists of all the wondrous attributes of your products or services you're supposed to present on your calls.

Every time I see one of these goofy things I think of one of my favorite sayings,

“A benefit is only a benefit if the person hearing it perceives it to be a benefit . . . at that very instant.”

Otherwise, a “benefit” is nothing more than something you *think* they should be interested in. And what you think is worthless, without their concurrence. Therefore, if you're presenting these “benefits” without knowing for certain they truly are of interest to the listener, you run the risk of creating resistance.

Instead, grab your benefit list, and use it to compile a “Question List,” which determines if the benefit indeed is meaningful. For example,

the so-called benefit of “saving time on all your stapling and folding” is meaningful only if the customer feels he’s spending too much time on the task, therefore perceiving it as a problem. You’d create a question to determine if that problem existed, brainstorm for the possible answers, think of your replies, and *then* present the “benefit” if appropriate. The first question could be,

“How much time is your staff now spending on folding and stapling?”

If they say, “None,” you would be prepared to follow another line of questioning without skipping a beat, as opposed to sitting there with your mouth agape, figuring out what you’ll say next.

Conversely, if they admit they’re paying a person to do nothing but fold and staple all day long, you would be prepared to follow with need-embellishment questions such as,

“What does the labor cost for that?”

“Are there other tasks they could perform if they didn’t have to spend so much time folding and stapling?”

Help Them Feel the Problem

Driving in to the office this morning I heard a radio commercial that used the questioning technique I favor to help prospects visualize and feel a need or problem—even if they didn’t realize they had one. The commercial asked,

“Remember the last time a big ol’ truck went by you on the highway and splashed gunk all over your windshield? And how about the frustration you feel when that happens and you’re out of windshield washer fluid?”

“Oh, I hate that”, I yelled back, realizing I was talking to a car radio. But the questions did a very effective job of helping me think of the pain I dreaded. And I was certainly receptive to hearing about the wiper fluid sale.

After brainstorming for the needs you can fill and the problems you solve, consider starting questions with phrases such as,

“How often do you notice that you are . . . ?”

“When was the last time you needed to . . . ?”

“What do you do when . . . ?”

“Remember the last time you had a situation where . . . ?”

“What if . . . ?”

“How would you handle . . . ?”

“What happens when . . . ?”

“What problems does it cause you when . . . ?”

“How often . . . ?”

Frame your questions so they get the listener thinking about a possible need they have (one you can fill!). For example,

“What happens when you need a part right away and your supplier on the East Coast has left for the day?”

The key here is being prepared for what you’ll say next. Sounding smooth doesn’t come naturally. Sounding foolish does; it’s a direct result of unpreparedness. For example, the finalists in the 1994 Miss America pageant were asked whether or not Tonya Harding should be allowed to compete in the Olympics. One contestant bumbled through her answer, while another deftly replied, “We really have two questions here: a legal one, and a moral issue . . .” Guess which woman won. And I highly doubt that she formed that response off the top of her head as she was delivering it.

Use benefit lists to create questions, the answers to which will tell you if the “benefit” truly is one. And be certain you’re prepared like a chessmaster for the way you’ll go regardless of what is thrown at you.

Absolutely Question, And Question Absolutes

You’ve probably heard the sayings such as, “Never is a long time,” and, “There’s no such thing as can’t.”

Essentially, what these refer to is the use of absolutes. And very few things are absolute

So, when you hear an absolute, question it, as there might be more to the story.

For example,

“We always get our supplies from the same source.”

“Always?”

“There’s no way we could consider another bid.”

“There’s no way?”

“It would be virtually impossible to get that in the budget.”

“Impossible?”

And it doesn’t take a nuclear engineer to figure out how to ask these questions. It’s simply repeating back the absolute. It’s interesting how people have a tendency to explain themselves when even questioned slightly about something that might be suspect.

What Route Will the Buying Process Take?

Determining if your prospect is indeed a key decision maker is only one step in what I call the “Authority” category. In addition, you need to know how your contact fits within the big scheme: the decision making and buying process.

This process specifically consists of the channels which the discussions, paperwork, and side decisions will take in order for them to ultimately write your company a check.

Questions To Ask

“What’s the procedure at your company for making a decision like this?”

“Assuming you wanted to do this, what would you have to do there?”

“If you decide to move forward, what channels will you need to go through?”

“How long does it typically take for this to move through the typical company chain-of-command for an approval on something like this?”

“Once you decide you want it, will you have to run it by any other department to get financial approval for it?”

Every buying decision follows a “decision tree” flow chart-type process. In the simplest cases, it’s only one step; your contact wants what you have, and gives you a credit card number or purchase order. For other products and companies it’s like traveling a suburban housing subdivision, full of pretzel-like crooked streets, cul-de-sacs, and dead ends. The more you know about the route, the better equipped you are to influence it, and shorten the duration of the journey.

Who?

Here’s a subtle, transparent way to learn of the key players at your prospect’s company. Whenever they mention a name of someone you’re not familiar with, jot it down, and then question them about that person in a subtle way. For example, if they said, “And I’ll talk this over with Jan, and we’ll have to get back with you,” you could respond with,

“Ok. Does Jan also work in this area.” Or,

“Does Jan work for you?” (Normally, your contact will work for Jan, but this is a more complimentary way to get the same information.)

What you’re ultimately trying to figure out is what role Jan plays in this decision. Listening is the key, and reacting accordingly.

How to Differentiate Yourself From the Competition

Mark O’Laughlin with ASAP Software Express shared an outstanding questioning tip during a training session. This is applicable to any business selling a “commodity” type item, where competitors sell similar—or the same—products or services:

“If the price is the same, what will cause you to choose one vendor over another?”

The answer lets you know what will set you apart from the competition.

When They Complain About Their Vendor

When you hear a prospect give even the slightest hint of dissatisfaction with his vendor, resist the tendency to leap in with your cavalcade of benefits. Instead, get him to fully expand on the problem. For example,

“That’s interesting, tell me more about how they’ve been lax in supporting the installation.”

This helps you in two ways:

(1) By talking more about their problem, he’s reinforcing his dissatisfaction, and,

(2) You’re learning key information you can use with other customers who use the same vendor.

You could say to another prospect using the same vendor,

“What have you noticed regarding the level of support you’re getting on your installation?”

Ask Them Easier Questions

A go-nowhere question I hear often is,

“What do you look for in a vendor?”

Theoretically, this should provoke a geyser of information from the prospect, with them telling you exactly what it will take to get them to buy from you.

Fat chance.

Usually it elicits a response of, “Uh, I dunno. Price and service.” A lot of good that does you.

This question forces them to think too much. It's designed to get them to extemporaneously produce their buying criteria. More often than not, though, it results in mental grid lock. Instead, ask something easier . . . a history question for example.

“What was the criteria you used when you chose your present supplier?”

“What were the determining factors in selecting the company you're now using?”

Don't Sound Like A Survey

While questioning, be sure that you're responding in a conversational manner—not like you're filling out an opinion survey at the mall. I've noticed reps who ask a question, repeat the person's answer, and then write down the response in excruciatingly painful detail—in silence—while the listener's patience burns to the end of the wick. The problem is clear: a lack of preparation by the rep of what to do with the answers to questions. Take the time—hours if you need to (even on your own)—to walk through all the questions you ask, and the possible responses you could receive. Be like a chess master, and plan several moves in advance.

One of my favorite quotes applies nicely here:

“The best time to think of what you're going to say is not the instant before you say it.”

Help Them Feel the Results in Advance

People buy because they picture themselves already enjoying the results of your product or service. Your questions help them do this. Here are some ideas.

“How much do you think you’d save if your waste percentage dropped by 15% yearly?”

“How would this machine help you if you had it?”

“What types of documents would you create with the new software?”

“What comments do you think you’d hear from your customer?”

“Donna, let’s project into the future here, if you had this where would you put it?”

“What are some of the ways you thought you’d use it?”

“Can you think of any past expenses this would have helped you avoid?”

Use the “Alternate-Choice Answer” to Get Sensitive Information

When you need sensitive information from your prospects to qualify them early in a call, it is sometimes awkward to ask directly for the facts.

Since you might not have established buddy-buddy rapport yet, a useful tactic is the “alternate-choice answer.” Similar to the alternate-choice close, you don’t ask directly for the information. Instead, you ask a question by offering two choices.

For example,

“Mr. Bejeeber, would you say your monthly production is about 2,000 units, or would 6,000 be closer?”

“Are you getting your supplies now from TNT Inc., or are you buying from Dienomite Co.?”

“Have you budgeted more or less than \$10 million for this project?”

The alternate-choice answer is a nonthreatening way to sniff out the valuable information you need to determine if you have a live one on the line. They will normally pick one of your alternatives. Better yet, they might blurt out the precise answer. If it's one of your two choices you can probe further until the answer is as specific as you require. Try the alternate-choice answer when you need to learn some guarded information from your prospect.

Find Out Exactly What They Want

Make it easy for prospects to think beyond any objections that might be tucked in the back of their mind, gnawing away at the possibility of doing business with you. Get them thinking emotionally and creatively. For example,

“Given the ideal situation, what would you want?”

“If you could get exactly what you want, what would that be?”

“If you were able to design the perfect program, what would it have?”

Do You Suffer from Premature Presentation?

Some salespeople are afflicted with Premature Presentation: spouting a presentation much too early.

The symptoms are objections, since the prospects don't yet see

the value in what the sales rep has.

It is curable, though. The prescription is to ask more questions.

For example,

Prospect: “I don’t know if it would be right for us. What do you have?”

The Premature Presenter would begin “pitching” at this point. The astute professional would say,

“Well, let me find out more about your situation so that I can tailor my remarks to what would work best for you.”

Don't Always Answer a Question With a Question

A piece of nonsense taught in some sales training circles is “Always answer a question with a question,” as in,

Prospect: “Does the carpet come in blue?”

Salesperson: “*Do you want it in blue?*”

And then the prospect is likely thinking, “What kind of moron am I dealing with here?”

A better, non salesy approach is to answer their question, and *then* follow immediately with a question regarding their needs. For example,

“Yes, it does come in blue. Is that the color scheme you’ve decided on for the interior of lobby?”

Another,

Prospect: “Do you have next day delivery?”

“Yes we do. How often do you anticipate needing rush shipments?”

Use Results-Oriented Questions

Keep in mind that buyers don't care about your products/services—they only are concerned about the results they get by using them. And that should be the focus of your questioning.

For example,

“What kind of turnaround time do you really want, and what do you get now?”

“How do you measure a good, quality job?”

“How do you know when you've achieved it?”

“What, ideally, would the software do for you?”

“How would you define a good value for your money?”

“What functions do you need the machine to perform?”

“What would you want the people doing differently after the training?”

“How do you measure good service?”

“What, ultimately, do you want?”

Be Prepared With Questions

The key to understanding your customers has more to do with the questions you ask than the answers you have, says Jim Meisenheimer in his book, ***“47 WAYS TO SELL SMARTER.”***

Jim lists some of his favorite, prepared, questions:

“Tell me about your business.”

“What are your priorities?”

“What's your criteria for evaluating new prod-

ucts?”

“How would you like to improve the product you’re using?”

“Describe your responsibilities.”

“How do you define service?”

“What does quality specifically mean to you?”

“How will you measure the success of using our product?”

“What happens when your product lets you down?”

“How can we improve our service?”

If you’re not asking enough questions, ask yourself why not.

(Get Jim Meisenheimer's book by contacting him at 824 Paddock Lane, Libertyville, IL, 60048)

What to Do When You Hear Nothing

Ok, you’re to the point where you’re eloquently presenting results that are sure to perfectly match what the prospect just told you he needed—or so you think. The silence is deafening at the other end. What should you do, keep talking? No way! Ask a question. Leave no doubt where their mind is.

“How does this sound so far?”, or

“Am I on track with what you’re looking for?”

If they concur, great. Continue on. But if they’re resisting, the worst thing you can do is pile on more of the same. You’ll just have to dig out of it later.

Just Ask the Question!

Some people have the habit of muddying up their questioning with “qualifiers” like,

“May I ask if...?”

“Do you mind if I ask how many....?”, and,

“Would it be OK if I asked....?”

Upon hearing these, many people would love to react like Larry King did on his former radio talk show when he got long-winded callers who circled completely around the issue like a plane in a holding pattern. He often snapped, “WHAT’S THE QUESTION.”

Using qualifiers intimates the questioner is insecure in asking, therefore signaling that the listener might not need to respond, or at least answer directly and fully.

Let Them Finish, Even If They Didn’t Understand the Question

You’ve probably experienced this before. You ask a question, the person answers, but they obviously either didn’t understand the question, or they didn’t hear it completely since their answer is way out in left field.

So what do you do? Many people interrupt and correct the person, restating the question again. But . . . by listening to the answer, as off the wall as it might be, you could gain potentially valuable information.

I remember asking a prospect, “Where do your sales reps get their leads?” Apparently he thought I said, ‘What are your sales reps’ needs?’ because he said, “Our main need is to ask more questions. If you can help them do that, you get the business.” Now that was some great information, and it was a result of him not hearing my question!

Remember, the reason you’re talking to the person is to gather information so you can help them do something. The more insight you

have on their feelings and beliefs—on any subject—the better off you are.

Let them finish, then say,

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I stated my question properly, what I meant was . . .”

Your Action Steps: