

Positively Influence With Questions

by Alice Wheaton

When salespeople are faced with clients' problems, they are so intent on doing a great job and solving the problems that they do themselves, and their clients, a disservice by jumping in with an answer or a solution. You cannot sell by telling; you sell with questions where you find the obstacles between you and the deal.

Let me give you an example. Recently I went on a sales call with a commercial real estate salesperson. During the call, the prospect indicated he wanted to move to a new space with at least 24 parking stalls. The salesperson immediately exclaimed, "I can think of three locations with enough parking stalls!" Before he could continue, I interrupted and asked if I could ask the client a few questions. The conversation went something like this:

Alice: "Martin, may I ask why you need 24 parking spots?"

Martin: "Well, I have 24 key employees and I want them to keep all of them, with as many perks as I can offer. Moving is stressful. I don't want them considering better offers."

Alice: "Of the 24 key employees, how many do you believe are at risk of leaving?"

Martin: "I'm not totally sure, but maybe eight."

(By this answer, another problem became clear to me: Martin is a business owner who values his employees but has not communicated well enough with them to know if they are dealing with any contentious issues.)

Alice: "If eight key people leave, how much would it cost to replace each one and bring a new person up to speed?"

Martin: "About \$250,000"

Alice: "That's \$2 million, isn't it? Tell me, how would this loss affect your competitive positioning?"

Martin: "It would set us back because those departing employees would all go to the competition in one function or another and our intellectual capital would be diluted. And of course we would also lose some of our client base to the competition."

Alice: "Can you place a cost around this?"

Martin: "Another \$5 million ... but that's a guess."

Alice: “Martin, it appears one of your key issues is retention of key employees. Are there any other issues that exist under the surface that you are unaware of?”

Martin: “Yes, there probably are but I’m just not sure what they could be.”

Alice: “I think I can help. Why don’t you organize a meeting with all key employees and I will conduct a focus group where I’ll ask six key questions, designed by both of us, to elicit issues and needs of the group. You and I will obtain a great deal of information that we can use to find you the space they need, instead of what *you* think they need. An added bonus is that we’ll likely uncover operational and employee issues that exist, but you are unaware of.”

We conducted the focus group and both the employees and the client reflected on the value of the meeting. As for the broker, his proposal addressed 100% of the issues, not just the initial 20% that stated: *We want a location with 24 parking spaces*. My client did get the mandate (exclusive agreement between client and commercial real estate broker) because his proposal reflected the real needs and issues of the client.

Here are three quick steps that you can use to have your clients (or anyone) tell you more than they intended.

Step One:

When they present a problem, instead of giving advice, simply ask, “Can you tell me more about that?” Ask three more questions based on the additional information divulged by your client. Only when you fully understand the problem, and its far-reaching consequences, have you earned a right to offer a solution.

Step Two:

When a client makes a statement, instead of responding with your point of view, simply ask, “Because...?”

For example, if someone were to say, “If there was one famous person I could have dinner with tonight, it would be Nelson Mandela,” and you, the excellent communicator, would respond, “Because...?”

(NOTE: Continue to ask three more questions based on the answer to your previous question!)

Step Three:

When a client (or anyone) asks a question, you will double the information you gain by saying, “Great question! I’m curious, why do you ask?” When you monitor and decrease your own need to be heard, you cultivate a space for the other to be heard. You will become someone who can fast forward trust and respect. Consequently, you will create new sales opportunities and close more sales.