

How Good Questions Make Prospects Into Solution Partners

Podcast #27 – Phyllis Mikolaitis

Hi, it's Phyllis Mikolaitis with something you think you may know but what I have to say may surprise you. As a good salesperson, you may have become skilled at asking questions to guide your prospect to your solution. But you may be losing deals that could have been made or you're are closing a deal that is for less revenue than it could be. Salespeople, I am one of you so don't discount this discussion until you hear what I have to say. It is based on years of research that proves it can make a big difference in your wallet. Good questions are part of developing relationships based on mutual trust and respect. Developing what Edgar Schein calls Humble Inquiry is not a new process to replace your current sales process. And, it isn't a program to change your sales personality. It is a way of enhancing your sales process, including your CRM program to help you make your prospects into solutions partners.

Asking the right questions at the right time and with the right attitude are keys to building a partnership. I have trained thousands of salespeople and found, sales reps typically ask questions to which they know the answer or form a direct path to their solution. But you will learn so much more, and you will build trust if you are curious and are willing to ask questions to which you don't know the answer. Sales is a profession that is interdependent on prospects, customers, and co-workers. To obtain a positive outcome, you must have trust and a positive relationship with everyone with whom you work. We salespeople depend on our prospects and customers for information, support and co-operation to achieve the goal of solving their problem. We salespeople are also dependent on our co-workers such as technicians, customer service, finance, and shipping or delivery for a successful sale.

It is critical to your success not only to ask good questions but also to do more listening and acknowledging. Good questions empower the buyer to provide more in-depth information and insight into their issues and desires. It also allows you to position yourself in the right step in the sales process.

As I mentioned in previous podcasts and blog posts, there is a wealth of information on the Internet. Just ask Alexa or search on Google to find something about your topic. An article in 2015 in Forbes magazine stated that data is growing faster than ever before and by the year 2020, about 1.7 megabytes of new information will be created every second for every human being on the planet. That is a mind-boggling fact. As a result, buyers are more knowledgeable. In the past, your job was to educate the buyer. Now you must get in step with the buyer and work to create a relationship in which you are solution partners. A relationship with your prospect or customer must be balanced and equitable. The buyer must sense that you respect their knowledge.

We salespeople are not alone in wanting to feel in control in conversations. It is part of the Western culture to tell rather than ask. So, we find it especially difficult to ask questions to which we don't know the answer. However, these questions can provide all kinds of wonderful information and build solid relationships. Trusting conversations are an exchange of information. That is true of conversations with co-workers and with prospects or customers. I learned so much about the value of the products I sold by asking questions of the technicians that installed and serviced my products. And, other sales reps gave me great tips and advice when I asked good questions.

People buy from people they trust. Therefore, if a salesperson sells something the buyer doesn't need or provides wrong information, the buyer won't do business with him in the future. That is why it's critical to ask great questions. They not only build trust and move you forward in the sales cycle, but they also help you learn to appreciate new things and to think creatively. So be curious and ask questions not just enough to propose a product but to learn more about the prospect and their situation. Don't think you can fake curiosity when asking questions. Body language and expressions will give you away. They are stronger communicators of intent than the words you say. Building trust is the objective as it leads to the sale.

So, by now you are wondering, so Phyl, "What is a good question and what is a bad question?". Let's start with a discussion of what is a good question. Good questions are open-ended questions. They allow the person to expand their response. In my sales training classes, I always said invite the W family and their cousin How to the conversation. By that I meant to ask questions that began with a W such as who, what, when, where, why and how. These questions are diagnostic and help you get to the prospects objective. I suggest you begin with broad, open-ended questions such as "What is your view of the current situation?" Some customers will open-up and provide a wealth of information. But it is not usually that easy. Some customers are not will to share much information until trust begins to develop.

You can show interest leading to trust by asking specific open-ended questions such as, "Where has the current process in this area fallen short?" or "How is the current process impacting your ability to make on-time deliveries?"

Another type of question is the feelings and reactions questions. These questions will give you insight into the prospect's willingness and apprehensions regarding making a change. Make a note of the responses as they will help you craft your solution proposition. Be careful here not to push too hard as you don't want to go deeper than the customer is willing to go. The level to which they are willing to reveal their feelings depends upon the level you have achieved in your relationship and the trust you have earned.

Good questions also include those that reveal the prospect's motivation for having the conversation or making a change. You can ask, "Why are you trying to make this change?" "What do you think is causing this problem?" or "What changes in the industry are causing you to want to implement this type of solution?"

Questions about what they've tried or what they're thinking about trying will reveal their past experiences and their plans. These questions are great for helping you position yourself at the right step in the sales cycle. They help you understand the culture and uncover the prospect's thought processes. The information gained with those questions can help you position your solution as well as your approach to the delivery of it.

In many sales, there are multiple people involved in the agreement to make the purchase. For example, finance, IT, administration, HR, and operations. Diagnostic questions can help you understand the total situation and the other people involved. Questions like, "What ROI do you think finance is looking for?" or "What will HR need to know about training?" What do you think Bob in operations will think about the transition activities during the change-over?" True you can get Bob's opinion, but another view from say your contact in IT or administration will give you another perspective to get the total picture of the situation and the relationships.

Some salespeople believe in confrontational questions to make the prospect look at the situation from a different angle. However, I find these questions can only be helpful if you have indeed built a strong enough relationship and developed enough trust to venture into this area. Otherwise, these questions can arouse resistance, and the prospect can become defensive if there is not the right level of trust.

So now what are some bad questions? Questions built on assumptions about the prospect and his company. These can cause things to go down the wrong track to can end a conversation. Don't assume. You know what people say that does. Instead, ask good questions to test your understanding and validate information.

Questions about things you should already know from your pre-calling planning and research frustrate the prospect. He will consider them a waste of his time and will also think that you did not respect him enough to do some investigation and planning before the conversation.

Rhetorical questions that tell rather than ask can also be problematic. Our Western culture is all about one person winning and one-upmanship. But a conversation with a prospect is not about that. It about creating a relationship that builds trust and leads not only to a sale but also to future business and referrals.

Finally, questions that underestimate the buyer's knowledge. You may know your product and your company as well as many other topics. But the customer knows her

business and may have done a lot of research on the situation before agreeing to a meeting with you. So, don't ask questions that infer the customer isn't knowledgeable.

Although you want to streamline your sales process, it is essential to slow down and note what information you need before you open the gate that leads to the next step in the sales process. Make a list of the information you need and then craft questions designed to uncover that information.

When you ask good questions, the prospect will expand and provide more useful information. As you develop a relationship and build trust, the prospect will become a solution partner. Then the prospect becomes a customer owning and supporting the success of the solution.

Developing your skill at asking good questions takes some time, and it can cause you to feel uncomfortable and experience some anxiety. But it has a payoff in developing and closing sales faster in the future as well as creating opportunities for future business and for referrals.

We learn and develop skills in four stages. First, you are unconsciously incompetent. You don't know what you don't know. Then you become aware of the need for improvement, and you are consciously incompetent. As you develop the skill, you become consciously competent. It means you think about what you are going to do or say in planning and execution. Finally, your performance becomes automatic, and you are unconsciously competent. Practice, support, and coaching are beneficial in developing a new skill. If you have a manager, mentor or friend who can help, you will progress quickly. Also, webinars or classes that include practice are very beneficial.

The challenge with this information is to evaluate your situations and the quality of your questions. So, where are you in the process of developing and asking good questions to build strong relationships and trust? Research shows that anything of value is worth the time and effort. I am confident you will benefit from developing good questions and making your customers into solution partners.

Well, that wraps up our podcast for today. Thanks to my producer and audio engineer John Switzer, for his great work with me on today's podcast. Join me next time when I'll share more hints and tips. I appreciate your feedback so please send your questions, comments or topic suggestions to me at Phyllis@salestraining.com.

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