

# Questions Are the Answer

By Bruce Carter

I just returned from conducting a full day of sales training for an outstanding fire protection company in central Florida. Although I was well rested, well prepared, and keenly interested in the subject matter, I learned absolutely nothing in that full eight-hour training session. Not a single tip, technique, or selling strategy did I walk away with from the entire full day session. Was I disappointed and disillusioned? No, not at all.

The reason I failed to gain a single shred of knowledge that day is because I was doing all of the talking. No listening, just talking! Obviously my role as sales trainer and motivational speaker is to get the information and content from my head into my audience's. I was not there to listen and learn but rather to tell and teach.

What is the point? The point is simple. As long as we are running our gums, we are not learning. Your response may well be, "So what?" I tend to agree that it is a big "so what," unless of course your mission happens to be getting prospective buyers involved in your products or services—unless your job is to sell. In the profession of selling, speaking without listening is a habit that is sure to stifle your sales effectiveness while significantly reducing the size of your commission checks! Now that is a big deal! Allow me to explain.

## Questions with a Purpose

Professional selling has been defined as the process of leading people to making a decision that is right for them. It is not pushing people to buy things they either do not need or honestly cannot afford. That is not selling at all but manipulation. Professional and ethical sales people first identify their buyer's needs by asking (and I love this term) questions with a purpose...then they listen to the answers.



Picture this. After four days of trying to ignore a sharp pain in your lower back, you decide reluctantly it is time to pay your doctor a visit. After waiting patiently in the doctor's office for over forty-five minutes, the nurse finally appears at the lobby doorway inviting you to follow her. Struggling to your feet, you pathetically shuffle to the examination room where the nurse assures you the doctor will be with you momentarily. A mere thirty-five moments later the doctor finally appears.

"Oh, Doc, am I glad to see you!" you announce with a tone of obvious relief while wincing from the relentless throbbing in your lower left side. "The pain is right over..." Abruptly Dr. Medquack interrupts your description of the ailment with a curt: "I don't need to hear that." After sauntering over to his examination table, the doctor grabs a small tablet from the middle drawer and proceeds to scribble a prescription

for your excruciating medical malady.

Now I do not know about you. Perhaps you are more tolerant than most of such bizarre behavior. I, on the other hand, would grab my wallet with one hand and my aching back with other and proceed to find another doctor! The medical practitioner who prescribes without diagnosis is begging for a malpractice suit! An attorney that prepares a courtroom argument without first probing the details of his client's case is an incompetent lawyer. Any fire protection professional who recommends a clean agent suppression system, proposes an addressable alarm system, or quotes type, size, and quantity of extinguisher protection for a particular hazard application without asking the buyer a series of meaningful questions with a purpose can hardly be considered a professional fire protection consultant at all.

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### Three Reasons for Questions

Questions are essential to the selling process for three important reasons. First, the use of questions allows the seller to maintain control of the sales process. Control, you say? What gives me the right to control my prospective buyers? You are the expert in fire protection, are you not? Have you ever noticed that in situations where an individual is out of their field of expertise, they are more than willing to relinquish the control of the situation to the person that is the expert? The medical doctor who happens upon the site of an automobile accident is given immediate control of the situation by the crowd of helpless onlookers at the scene. It is the use of pertinent questions that helps the seller maintain necessary control of the sales process.

Secondly, asking questions helps to identify the prospective buyer's "hot buttons." Hot buttons are the things about you, your company, your service, or your product that the buyer likes and appreciates. Sadly, not all prospects will voluntarily tell you what they like about your offering unless you draw their feelings out. Again, that is best accomplished by the use of appropriate questions.

Third, the identification of specific buyer objections is also essential to the sale. Objections are the things about the seller, his company, his service, or product that the buyer may not like. Perhaps the prospect's objection is price-related. Maybe the buyer has had an unfavorable service experience with the seller in the past. The objection may pertain to the location or size of service capabilities of the seller. Whatever the prospective buyer's objection, it is crucial to the sale



that any and all objections be drawn out, addressed, and overcome by the sales person. A series of carefully composed questions will go far in identifying potential objections.

### Ask, Don't Tell!

Some specific questions with a purpose that can be most revealing in the selling process are:

- What do you like most about your present supplier and his service?
- How would you change or improve upon the service if you could?
- Do you have any particular loyalty to your present supplier?
- How will the buying decision be made?
- Is there anyone else in addition to yourself that would need to be involved in making the decision?

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- Is price a primary concern? What else will be considered?
- When will the final buying decision be made?
- If you were ever going to use our service, what would prompt you to do so?

Selling is not telling. Professional selling involves asking questions with a purpose then listening carefully to the answers. Prospective buyers will tell you how to sell them if you listen carefully enough. It is true that in the world of selling, from computers and cars to software and sailboats to fitness clubs and fire protection... Questions are the answer! ♦

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