

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Step 2: The Discovery Process

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When you were young and easily amused, did you ever play a game of Twenty Questions? For professional sales people who are trying to sell a product, a service or even an idea, Twenty Questions isn't a game, it's an essential part of the selling process. Call it "The Discovery Process." But why is asking questions so important? What do we need to know? What are we trying to discover?

What we need to discover is the wants, needs, dreams and desires of our target audience. And to discover that kind of information, we must ask a lot of questions. When you can match up your customer's needs with a product, service or idea, you're offering a solution ... people don't want products or services, they want solutions!

Trust me: If you skip over The Discovery Process when dealing with people, you're limiting your chances for success. I learned this first-hand ... and in my case, it was downright dangerous! Here's my story:

I was hired as an internal marketing consultant to eight different divisions of a company. Each division was run by a department manager who had complete autonomy in managing his or her business.

Everything was going smoothly with seven of the eight department managers—they seemed eager to entertain and implement new marketing programs. But one of the managers didn't seem to have much time for me or my ideas. However, being persistent, I doubled-down on this particular manager and kept presenting a steady barrage of marketing ideas for him to consider.

On one visit to his office, he was evidently having a bad day. I had begun detailing yet another new marketing proposal when he shouted, "Stop! If you have one more of your brainy marketing ideas for me, I'll knock you down where you stand!"

Needless to say, I beat a hasty and humbled retreat to the safety of my office.

The next day, I invited this manager to lunch to discuss the future of our relationship. I began by asking him some questions. Very quickly I discovered that he was overwhelmed with his job and he didn't have a clue how to manage his department. He said, "I feel like I'm in a sinking rowboat, bailing water out as fast as I can ... then you show up and throw me an anchor. What I need is for you to show up and help me bail water out of my boat!"

The moral of the story is, I never bothered to ask him enough questions at the beginning of our relationship to find out what he really needed. From that moment on, we only discussed the issues he had with his department. He began to trust me and felt safe talking about departmental issues; in the process, he solved most of his own problems.

As you might guess, there are a variety of questions you can use to uncover people's needs. But uncovering needs becomes easier when you use two basic types of questions: Commodity questions and exploratory questions.

Commodity questions

Commodity questions are questions that can usually be answered with a simple yes, no or perhaps with a number. In that respect, commodity questions are closed-ended, because they limit the array of answers a person can give. Commodity questions can be used to uncover facts, but they don't tell you much about what a person thinks or feels. Be careful if you open a conversation with a series of commodity questions ... the person you're talking to may feel like they're being interrogated.

Since nobody likes the feeling of being interrogated, how should you use commodity questions? They should be used to "drill-down" on information uncovered by using exploratory questions. Here are some examples of commodity questions:

- Do you grow poinsettias?
- How many plugs do you purchase?
- Which geranium do you use for 4-in. production?

Exploratory questions

Exploratory questions are open-ended because they encourage people to give a wider range of answers. This type of question challenges people to think, and consequently, they often tell you what they want, need or feel. Exploratory questions are harder to develop than commodity questions and often take some pre-planning. Keep in mind that you're trying to find out as much as you can about what's important to this person. Some examples of exploratory questions are:

- What kind of problems did you have with your mum crop?
- Can you tell me about your best-selling spring annuals?
- You mentioned pansy problems ... can you tell me more about the issues you encountered?

The importance of asking the right questions can be illustrated by the following experience I had while making calls with a new sales representative:

On our first sales call, almost immediately after introducing ourselves, my sales person rips into a full-blown product presentation. His presentation was among the best I'd ever seen, combining the use of color brochures and his own photos. I could tell that he had carefully rehearsed every part of his presentation.

The customer, looking confused, said, "I tried that last year. They didn't sell."

The sales rep was deflated, but continued presenting one product after another until the customer said he had to leave. This scenario was replayed all day long.

At dinner, we had a long discussion about asking the right questions, uncovering needs and matching up product solutions to the customer's needs. The next day, the calls were much improved; but after asking three or four questions, he ran out of questions. The silence that followed signaled customers that the call was over ... and we went on to our next sales call.

At dinner that night, I gave our sales rep a homework assignment: He was to write 10 exploratory questions that could be used on any sales call and we would try them out tomorrow.

The next day, he used those questions on every call and uncovered lots of information he could use then and in the future. To this day, he says he writes and rewrites exploratory questions before each call. He also claims his questions are even more relevant today because he's learned so much about each key account.

Exploratory questions can uncover your customer's wants, needs and desires; commodity questions allow you to uncover additional details. When you match a customer's need with the proper product or service solution, you both get what you want! **GT**

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