

# Asking The Right Questions

**By Maile Foster**

*Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers. -  
Voltaire (François Marie Arouet)*

Have you ever come back to the office after meeting with a potential customer only to realize you didn't get all the information you needed to prepare a strong, responsive proposal? Or perhaps you lost a sale because you didn't communicate that one piece of crucial information that would make all the difference.

A new sales representative approached me one day with such a crestfallen look that I prepared myself for the worst. It seemed the potential customer he'd been working with for some time had chosen a competitor's solution. Worse yet, the reason they went with the competitor was to get a key feature they thought only the competitor could provide. Why didn't they know our package could provide that feature, too? "I asked them a million questions, but they never mentioned that was their secret hot button! What else could I have done?" he moaned. This young man had not yet perfected the critical consultative skill of questioning. Fortunately, as with most skills, the knack for asking consequential questions can be learned fairly quickly.



## *When Questions Have Power*

"Most successful leaders invariably ask the best questions. Effective questioners demonstrate both mastery over their jobs and consideration for other people, a highly desirable combination in modern business," states Dorothy Leeds, in her book *Smart Questions: A New Strategy for Successful Managers*. There's a multitude of situations in which well crafted questions can be powerful tools for getting results.

Here are a few samples:

Gathering Information - "Is there anything else I should know?"  
"Can I go over it with you one more time and clarify any miscommunication on my part?"

Planting Your Own Ideas - "What do you think about A and B?"

Making Criticism More Acceptable - "How do you feel your tardiness is effecting the department?"

Overcoming Objections - "What are your major concerns about this project?"

"What other choices do you see?"

Defusing Explosive Situations - "Can you tell me more about what you're feeling?"

### *The Two Types Of Questions*

Essentially there are two types of questions, closed and open. The type you choose can have a major impact on the effectiveness of your questions. Closed questions can be answered with a simple statement of fact, or with a "yes" or "no." "Is this the right address?" "Do you agree?" These are best used for getting information in a hurry.

Open questions call for a much more in-depth response and gain more than just the facts. You'll glean impressions, thoughts, attitudes, and emotions that could influence a person's reactions. Also, open questions help the other person organize their thoughts and objectives as they prepare their answers. The following is an example of a consultant that uses closed questions to get information from a customer.

Consultant: Is your company using Windows-based tools like Access and Excel?

Client: Yes.

Consultant: Who uses these tools?

Client: Almost everyone.

Consultant: Do you have data in your business application that has to be keyed into these tools?

Client: Yes.

Consultant: Are you satisfied with the results?

Client: They're okay.

Here, the consultant gained some specific information, but the conversation was stilted and rudimentary. He's still a long way from getting any new business. Suppose he had asked one open question instead.

Consultant: How do you provide special management reports and decision support information to the rest of the company now?

Client: Well, we've installed PC tools like Excel, Access, and Crystal Reports on most of the desktops in the company. The various departments take the reports from our business application, such as Order Entry/Invoicing, Inventory Control, etc. and key the relevant information into the desktop programs. That way, with a little effort, they're able to get whatever reports and graphs they need, without putting more demands on the programmers.

From this one question, the consultant has acquired considerable useful information. Out of the customer's own mouth came the answers that allowed the consultant to make a strong case for using the BASIS ODBC Driver™. It's easy to turn a closed question into an open one by adding one or two key words like "what," "how," and "could."

### *Dangerous Questions*

When asking questions, keep in mind that the other person will almost always be defensive if asked, "why?" Consider as some alternatives, "Can you tell me more about why you want to do it this way?" Or, "How did you arrive at that method? Can you give me some examples?" Too many, "why, why, why" questions can be just plain annoying, too. To look smart, ask judicious, sharp, and open questions.

### *Putting It Into Practice*

One of the best ways to start improving your questioning skills is to make a list of astute, open questions to file away for future use in almost any situation. For example, try asking, "What can I do to help you?" "Can you explain that further?" "What can we change to make this work better?" I'd also like to add my favorites for solving business problems: "What are the issues?...the environment?...the strategy?" The next time you have a closed question at the tip of your tongue, turn it into an open question.

As with any skill, good questioning takes practice. I suggest that salespeople write down good, open questions the night before an important sales call. The act of writing helps burn it into your memory, and you'll be able to use the questions more easily the next day, even without notes. Don't limit your practice to the workplace either. Almost any situation can benefit from improved communication skills. Finally, don't forget to LISTEN to the answer. Listening takes concentration and effort. It just may be the most important skill you learn.