

CHAPTER 10



How to Answer Questions with More Questions

Thus far, we've shown that giving good (accurate, complete, technically competent, clever, thorough, informed) answers to prospects'/clients' questions may feel, in the short term, like it gets a salesperson's own needs met, but in fact it significantly works against the salesperson. Sure, it may make the salesperson feel clever and special in the moment, but it has the opposite impact in the longer term.

This brings us to an important issue: How should a salesperson react when a question is asked?*

- Answer it? No.
- Ignore it? No.
- Mislead? No.

* I'm talking about a significant question that affects your business relationship, of course, not questions like, "How are you today?," or, "Did you see the game last night?"

I do hope that by this point the right answer is second nature to you:

- You reply with another question.

Adherents of the Sandler Selling System start by learning a few basic questioning strategies and responses in their initial Sandler Foundations training. These question classifications are designed specifically to help sales professionals to dig beneath the prospect's question in order to establish what's really going on: what's really being asked and why.

Let's take a look at these question types in their very simplest form. A little later on in the book, we will move on to more sophisticated questioning techniques designed to drive the prospect further down the road to truth.

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

Let's imagine that you work for a logistics company that ships across the United States. You're with the buyer of a local manufacturer on the lookout for a new logistics supplier. You're about 20 minutes into the sales interview, when your prospect asks you a fairly innocuous question:

"So, tell me. Do you ship overnight to Richmond, and can you collect directly from the dockside at Baltimore harbor?"

Let's imagine that you can in fact do both of these things. In fact, let's imagine that you do it often and with some skill. Great! This is exactly the kind of question that you hope for all day. Perfect.

Scenario 1: Answer It

"Why, yes! Yes, we can. We run to Richmond daily, and we collect from Baltimore every other day!"

Beaming smile from you.

Big pat on the back for clever ol' you.

Cookie anyone?

Good answer?

No! It's entirely the wrong, completely wrong, definitely 100% wrong answer.

It's a terrible answer because it dead-ends the entire conversation.

By answering the question (albeit 100% truthfully), you did not learn anything. Why did the prospect ask that specific question?

Why ask it now—specifically? What's going on—specifically?

What has happened in the past—specifically?

By answering the question as it was presented, nothing new is learned by the salesperson.

NOTE: An infinitely worse answer would be to say something like this: "Why, yes! Yes, we can. We run to Richmond daily, and we collect from Baltimore harbor every other day. We've just taken delivery of three of the latest state-of-the-art Volvo FH Series trucks, and our brand-new computer software system was developed by NASA, and was commissioned by Bill Gates himself. Our latest award-winning warehouse has a chocolate river running through it based on Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, and all of the Oompa Loompas pack our crates..."

Resist the temptation to show off. It can only hurt you.

- What if the prospect thinks having a state-of-the-art facility means you're making too much money? Maybe you're overcharging?
- What if the prospect thinks you're being just a little too clever?
- What if the prospect thinks you're trying to close right now?

No one likes that feeling.

- What if the prospect thinks you're showing off? (Which you are.)
- What if the prospect doesn't want to be a very small fish in your very big pond?
- What if [insert a million, billion other things the prospect might think that can hurt you]?

Don't answer, don't ignore, don't mislead—ask!

Scenario 2: Answer with a Question

The correct Sandler response to the prospect's question could take the form of any one of the following basic approaches.

The Reverse

"I'm glad you asked me that. Do we expedite to Richmond, and can we collect directly from the dock at Baltimore? Of all the questions you could have asked me, tell me, why are these particular two things important to you right now?"

Easy right? Super doable? It could easily become a habit. Do you see the difference? If not, put the book down and go have a nap. But if you're still with me, and I assume you are, read on. You are going to love these variations too.

The Negative Reverse

"Good question: Do we regularly haul to Richmond, and can we collect directly from the Baltimore dock? I don't suppose you'd want to share with me why those two things are important to you at this moment, would you?"

Nice. Gentle, supportive, subtle, interesting, warm, unpressured—like a brand new pair of fluffy slippers.

NOTE: You can usually tell when you're in negative-reverse-land. If your question starts with the words, "I don't suppose..."

you're there. Basically, you position the question negatively by declaring up front that you don't expect the other person to answer, help, step in, or save you. Human beings like to help out the most when it is not assumed that they will. Negative reverses are an extremely powerful questioning technique and should be used often.

The Start-Stop Reverse

"Glad you asked me that. In actual fact, we do collect every day from...wait, hold on a second. Tell me, why do you ask?"

Lovely. It feels and sounds natural; it gets the prospect talking, not you, and you learn something new. Marvelous.

The Strip-Line Reverse

"Everyone seems to be asking me that these days—Baltimore to Richmond overnight. What is it about Baltimore to Richmond that everyone's so excited about?"

Bang! You stop talking. The prospect gets to explain what's so exciting. The prospect hears himself telling you the real story behind the question.

NOTE: If you're a keen angler, you'll be familiar with strip-lining; it's the practice of letting the fish take the bait and, instead of yanking on the line too quickly and risk the fish getting free, you let it swim off with the hook allowing it to become fully engaged. That way, when you do eventually tug on the line, the hook becomes deeply embedded, and it's curtains for poor ol' Moby Dick.

The Presumptive-Question Reverse

"We get asked that a lot: Do we ship to Richmond overnight, and can we collect from the harbor? I'm guessing that you are asking me specifically because most of your customers are in

Richmond and most of your freight comes into the States in Baltimore. Is that about right, or am I missing something?”

Boom! You stop talking. The prospect either validates your version of reality or gives you a better explanation.

The Most-Important Reverse

“That’s a super two-part question: Baltimore to Richmond, and overnight. I imagine that both elements are pretty important, but let me ask you this. Which is most important of the two, and why?”

Go to the head of the class!

The Multiple-Choice Reverse

“That’s a great question: Do we overnight to Richmond, and can we collect from dockside? I usually get asked these types of questions when there’s maybe a penalty for late deliveries, or when the customer doesn’t want to even touch the product because he doesn’t have adequate storage facilities, or maybe when the ultimate customer is in a rush—are any of these the case here?”

The prospect has the option of picking one of your good explanations, or offering another one. You shoot—you score!

The Dummy-Up Reverse

“Can we ship to Richmond, and can we collect directly from Baltimore? OK, I wasn’t quite expecting that question. I’m not sure, but I’d be happy to go check. Why’d you ask? Is it really important to you that we maybe can?”

In this reverse, you pretend to know somewhat less about all this than you actually do. No problem—as long as it improves the informational quality of the conversation. Yes, I know that you are entirely sure that you can do exactly what the prospect is asking for, but just try to act a bit dumb for me for a minute and see what

happens. The prospect gets to put on the know-it-all hat and starts opening up to you. It all works for your own good.

The Rule-of-Three Reverse

“So, great question: from Baltimore to Richmond overnight. You know, when I get asked something like that, it’s usually for one of three reasons. Either: 1) we have to haul really perishable cargo, and speed is the top, top priority, 2) you’ve maybe had problems in the past collecting from dockside in Baltimore, or 3) you have to send out of Richmond first thing in the morning for a further delivery, maybe through the airport over there. Am I on the right track, or have I completely missed the mark?”

Genius!

The Let’s-Pretend Reverse

“Nice question: Baltimore to Richmond overnight. OK, let’s pretend for a second that we could do those things. I’m not saying we can, but what might that mean to you if we could or couldn’t?”

Brilliant!

The Off-the-Record Reverse

“What an interesting question. Look, off the record, which of these two concerns you most right now: Baltimore or Richmond?”

Lovely. Remember to reward yourself with a celebratory crumpet and a nice steaming hot mug of tea as soon as you get home.

The Competitive-Edge Reverse

“That’s such a super question. Before I answer it, tell me, are these two things—Baltimore collections and overnight to Richmond—key to your own competitive edge at the moment? I’m guessing you asked for a reason—if so, why?”

The prospect cannot answer this without thinking. Thinking is good.

The Key-Strategy Reverse

“That’s a great question, and I guess it’s important to ship to Richmond overnight and collect from Baltimore too. Why are those two specific things tied to your key business strategy going forward?”

Smashing.

Summary of the Reverse Strategy

Why are these questions (reverses) so much better than puffing out your chest and saying, “Yes, yes we do! We are the local Baltimore and Richmond overnight shipping experts, ask anyone?”

It’s because that sort of answer offers you no more knowledge or understanding. The information exchange is one-way. You don’t discover why the prospect asked the question in the first place. In fact, you learn nothing by simply waiting to answer more questions—no matter how clever or accurate your answers may be.

Imagine that the buyer in Scenario 1 says, “OK, then.” After you have answered the question just as asked, where would that leave you? Nowhere, that’s where! You’ve just been dead-ended.

The buyer cannot respond, “OK, then,” to any of your Scenario 2 responses. The prospect has to divulge something more—the conversation and the exchange must continue along a more informative path—and this is infinitely better for you.

Notice the framework of all of the Scenario 2 responses: stroke; repeat; reverse. This is one of the Sandler salesperson’s most basic questioning/discovery techniques.

1. **Stroke**—Most people didn’t get enough hugs as babies, after all. Make prospects feel good about themselves—a very positive and developmental OK-ness approach.
2. **Repeat**—Rephrase/restate. Prospects recognize that you’re listening and understanding them.

3. **Reverse**—Find out why the prospects are asking what they’re asking. Answering the question at face value does not get you to the truth.

We call this sequence “SRR” for short. Now here’s a question: How many times during a sales interview should you SRR or ask another question in response to a question asked of you? Let me answer that by asking you a question of my own. (Clever.) If I told you that the prospect/client should be talking at least 70% of the entire sales conversation, how many times would you think you need to SRR? Yes—that many. Gulp. You’d better put on your biggest and best practicing pants.

HOMEWORK

Write down a list of the 20 most common questions/statements/objections that you run into in your average work week. If you can’t think of 20 right now, over the next month, every time a prospect, client, work colleague, or manager asks you a question, write it down. Then:

- Write down the question/statement/objection/demand.
- Write down what the person might be really asking/saying.
- Write down a good (conversational/nurturing) reverse question that helps you get to a hidden truth below the surface of the question—the question that helps you get to the reason that particular question was asked, and why now.

When the person gives you that answer, figure out what question to ask next. Keep the question types rotating so that you don’t sound like some sort of manic parrot. It might look something like:

Prospect: Question

You: Stroke, reverse question

Prospect: Statement

You: Strip-line question

Prospect: Question

You: Stroke. Restate, rule-of-three question

Prospect: Statement

You: Presumptive question

Prospect: Statement

You: Stroke, repeat, reverse

Without wanting to suggest in any way that the buyer-seller interaction is the least bit aggressive, confrontational, or acrimonious, let me ask you to think of yourself as a boxer, sparring in the center of the ring with the prospect. You wouldn't simply stand still in the middle of the ring and jab, jab, jab, jab, jab, would you?

If you did, you'd be back in the dressing room feeling rather sorry for yourself and reaching for the headache tablets pretty quickly. No, you'd move forward, you'd press, jab, fall back, upper cut, duck, roundhouse, one-two, dodge, weave, jab, cross, uppercut, counter, crouch, duck, cross, hook, and so on. You'd mix it up. You'd vary speed, rhythm, tempo, punches, and movement.

Well, your questioning strategy should be exactly the same. Mix it up, don't always do the same thing, and don't always be mechanical or predictable; otherwise, the next thing you'll be looking at is the ceiling, and the next voice you hear will be the referee shouting, "...9...and 10, you're out!"

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Factual responses to the prospect's question—very bad!
- Varied questioning responses—very good!
- Stroke. Repeat. Reverse.
- Mix it up.

"Knowing the answers will help you in school. Knowing how to question will help you in life." —Warren Berger

