

**Establishing  
what is valuable to  
the customer**

(Being productive)

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Like many other people we enjoy the odd drink. You know the sort of thing, a couple of flasks of a popular Belgian brew on a Friday evening after a particularly stressful week in the office. Sometimes we enjoy more than the odd drink, generally reserved for the sort of occasions when we have something special to celebrate (you won't believe what justification we come up with for what is special). It was one such celebration that saw us sitting in a local public house recently. The pub itself was one of the more traditional pubs that we sometimes frequent as it's close to our office. The kind that serves good old honest beer and has little in the way of noisy distractions such as jukeboxes and pin-tables. We like this pub because it gives us the chance to relax and have a chat and we have even been known to come up with the odd idea for a training workshop while discussing life, the universe and everything, but on this particular evening we were somewhat distracted.

Pubs are great places to people-watch but on this evening it wasn't the people using the bar that we were focusing on, it was what was happening behind the bar that caught our eyes and ears. There was some employee training occurring and we couldn't resist the urge to eavesdrop.

The manager was showing the ropes to a new member of bar staff. This included him pointing out where everything was located, beer pumps, wines, spirits, soft drinks, the cash register and the like. The manager was especially keen to draw his new employee's attention to a laminated poster that was located on one of the walls behind the bar. He was not only successful at drawing the new employee's attention to this poster but also our attention, (although we did have to lean rather dangerously forward on our stools and stretch our necks out to see what this man was referring to). The poster in question, to which the bar manager pointed on at least three occasions to this new employee, contained a list of 'customer prompts' that included such things as, 'Always acknowledge the customer when they approach the bar', and, 'Smile in a friendly manner and ask the customer what they would like to order'.

All good stuff, we thought, even if the manager was a little obsessive in his pains to point out how important it was to follow the 'good customer service code'. So obsessive in fact that he at one point asked the new member of staff to recite the service code back to him as a test that they had well and truly got the message. Hmmm. We looked at each other and could

almost predict what was going to happen next. We didn't have to wait that long. In fact it was just a few moments later when the manager proudly announced that the new member of bar staff was ready to serve some customers and the manager retreated to the end of the bar in order to witness his protégé's work.

Enter a young man who came up to the bar waving a note in his hand. 'Hello', said the bar attendant accompanying his greeting with the required smile:

'How can I help you?'

'Give us some change for the cigarette machine mate.'

'Would you like ice and lemon with that?'

How foolish the person behind the bar appears for this quite inappropriate response. But are they actually the foolish one in this situation? Whatever way we look at what happened, they did what they were asked and what they did was the 'right' thing to do given the company's instructions that were so vehemently referred to by both the manager of the bar and the laminated poster itself.

They were right but were they effective or productive? An interesting question really, the question that asks if we would rather be right or effective. We have lost count of the number of times a sales person or a department in a company has done the 'right' thing and simultaneously dealt with the customer ineffectively and as a consequence either damaged the sale or lost tomorrow's. The airline example we referred to in the introduction is a good example of this. What was done was, according the rules, the right thing to do. But did it serve to create an effective outcome for the customers? Did the right thing to do produce future sales growth? We're not so sure.

So what has the story of the bar person got to do with the second of the Effective Selling Principles – the one we call establishing what is valuable to the customer? And what was it that caused this person to respond in

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1. Yes this did actually happen. Even we couldn't make this up.

such an inappropriate way? Well there could be two explanations. The first one is that the person in question recognized how ludicrous it was to stick, word for word, to a script that, whilst useful in terms of a prompt, clearly wasn't a useful question to ask every customer that walked through the door and perhaps, upon recognizing this situation, they deliberately used the prompt sheet to point out how ridiculous it was in this particular circumstance.

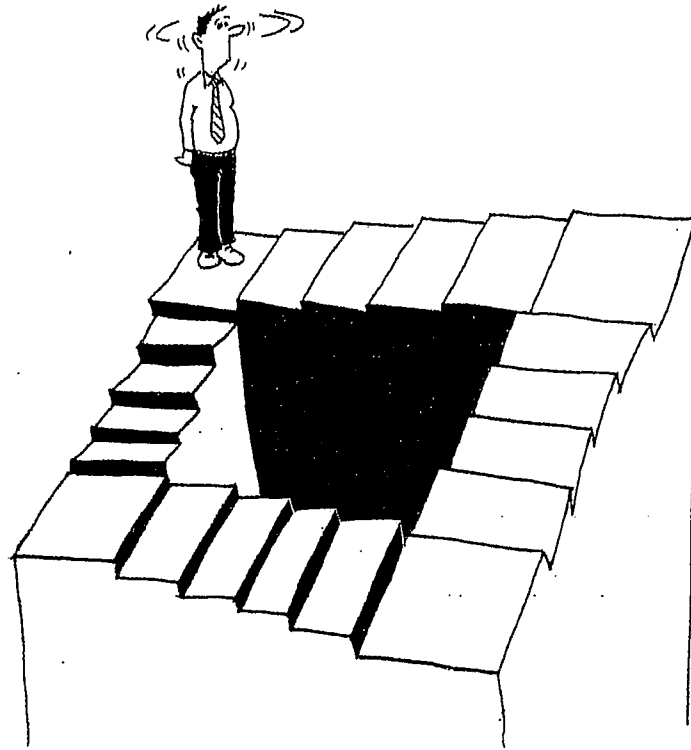
The second explanation is that the bar manager had done such a good job drawing his employee's attention to the 'good customer service code' that he literally directed their attention to it at the expense of everything else. The message for the new employee was simple. Concentrate on the poster and remember it to the expense of everything else and to the expense of common sense.

**You can direct a customer's attention by the way you ask them a particular question.**

Regardless of which of these two explanations is the more likely they both contain a (fairly extreme) lesson for you which relates to how you, when you are selling, establish what is valuable to your customers. Only by establishing what that value is will you be able to see whether you can in fact provide that value which in turn will make it easier for the customer to buy from you.

The lesson is one relating to a very important skill in the business of selling – asking questions – and is simply this. You can direct a customer's attention by the way you ask them a particular question and where you place that customer's attention may be productive or unproductive to you and your customer's cause. Take an example by way of illustration.

If we were to ask you what you like most about the current car you drive, you would have to think about your current car and the things you like about it (assuming there are some things you like about it) in order to respond to the question. Similarly, if we were to ask you what might stop you from buying a car that we are trying to sell you, your attention would be directed to the things that stop you from buying the car.



**'Which direction are your questions taking your customer?'**

By asking someone a question you are literally directing that person's attention in a particular direction and therefore influencing the progress (or not) of the subsequent discussion that continues. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, because as sales people you ensure that the questions you ask are related to the needs of the customer and of yourselves and, secondly, because you need to deal appropriately with the response the customer gives you in order to move both the discussion and the sale forward in a productive manner.

In essence the questions that you ask your customers should fulfil only two criteria. They should be productive and they should ideally enhance the relationship or at the very least maintain the relationship you have created through liking and listening.

## Being productive

So what do we mean by a productive question? Is it that one killer question that opens up the customer to the point where they spill out every want, need and desire on the table so you get the full story of what they want thereby enabling you to present the features and benefits of your product? Or is it the sort of question that limits the information you glean from the customer to a few essential needs that your product can satisfy? After all it's entirely possible to ask questions in such a way that you get the answers you're looking for. A kind of solution looking for a problem if you like.

No. The answer is that productive questions are not necessarily the right questions at all. Productive questions are those that get you and your customer to a point that enhances the sales process. Productive questions move the sales person towards the point where they can sell their product or service to the customer and at the same time move the customer towards a point where it's easier for them to buy that product or service.

Remember: Would you rather be right  
or would you rather be productive?

So what of the classic 'open' and 'closed' question model so universally recognized by sales people? The one that defines closed questions as those that a customer can respond to with a simple one-word answer such as 'yes' or 'no'. Questions like:

'Is the cost going to be an important factor in making your decision?'

Answer: 'Yes.'

Whereas open questions are those where a customer has to answer with more than the tacit one worder such as:

'What are the important factors when considering making your decision?'

Answer: 'Well cost is important but so is reliability and a quick delivery time.'

Describing questions as open and closed whilst offering a useful definition as to two specific types of question may not, in hindsight, be that helpful

because both can be as productive in certain sales situations as they are unproductive in others. Better, surely, to concentrate on asking the most productive question at the most productive time. Again, would you rather be right or would you rather be productive?

So let's return to the two questions we posed earlier as examples and see what is really happening when you ask them. For the first example, let's assume for a moment that you are a sales representative for a car dealer talking with a potential customer who has walked into your showroom looking to purchase a new car.

You will remember that the first question went like this:

'What things do you like most about the current car you drive?'

Whilst you may be forgiven for thinking that this question makes the assumption that your potential customer does indeed like some things about their current car should they respond with the answer, 'Nothing!' at least you have a clue as to what question you should ask next. However, should your potential customer indeed like a few things about their current car, telling you what those things are will offer you some useful clues as to what they might be looking for in their new one. You simply need to repeat back those key likes parrotphrase style and enquire if they want similar features in their new car.

So is the question a productive one? When looked at in this way then the answer is invariably yes. It is productive because it elicits information that's useful to you as a sales person as a way of understanding what's valuable to the customer and it's valuable to the customer by way of confirming their needs. It is also productive in terms of maintaining a relationship with the customer because you've demonstrated that you have heard what is valuable to them. You have good information to plot the course of the sale with the customer and you've signalled to the customer what you have heard as being valuable to them. Productive indeed.

So what of our second example – the 'what stops you?' question. For the purposes of demonstration this time imagine yourself to be a representative of a computer hardware supplier who's demonstrating your company's latest bit of kit to an IT department manager in a medium-sized company. During the demonstration, which you are conducting with much excitement and enthusiasm you ask:

‘So what things might cause you to stop purchasing a product such as this?’

As we have already pointed out any question you ask of a person will direct their attention in a certain way. Here the question is directing the IT manager’s attention to things (possibly a long list of things) that will stop him from purchasing your product. Productive? Possibly, but also possibly not. Whilst the question will give you information about potential concerns or situations that prohibit the sale it does not necessarily follow that by dealing with these concerns or situations the sale of, in this case, computer hardware will automatically follow. The question is focused on what stops the sale progressing and therefore you have directed your potential customer’s attention to the factors that will actually cause the sales process to falter or even cease all together. Productive? All of a sudden when viewed in this way, probably not.

It’s not only unproductive in terms of where the question places your customer’s attention, it also has the possibility of damaging any relationship you’ve created in the listening and liking stage. The reason for this stems from something that we’ll refer to more in our chapter on gaining commitment but is worthy of mention here, albeit briefly.

When someone expresses an opinion or a belief about something, they invariably become more committed to that opinion or belief. This is especially true if the opinion or belief is expressed in front of others. In our example question, your potential customer has told you the things that will stop him from considering buying your product. These things could be related to the fact that he thinks your product is expensive or perhaps will involve an awful lot of training for his IT team which will take them away from important tasks that need to be delivered to quite tight deadlines. As a professional sales person, not only do you have a huge amount of knowledge about your product, you also have (or hopefully should have) belief and confidence in your product. Given this knowledge of and belief in your products you will probably be able to ‘argue’ the case for the merits of your product to the IT manager, and herein lies the danger. You might feel entitled to go to great pains to point out to the IT manager that your product actually doesn’t require an awful lot of training and also that your product is certainly very cost-effective compared to some of the other options available.



The situation becomes one where you as a sales person are in one position and have a belief about one thing and your customer or potential customer is in another position with a different belief. This in itself is not disastrous; in fact it's commonplace. After all the very business of selling means you are often faced with situations where you need to convince others who have a belief or opinion that is different to yours. That's not the point we are making. What we do want to get across is how these situations arise in the first place and then how you deal with them.

In the example with the IT manager, the response you got was a direct result of the question you asked. You asked, 'So what things might cause you to stop purchasing a product such as this?' and the answer you got was a list of things that might stop him purchasing your product. Your question served only to focus your potential customer's attention on all the things that would stop him buying your product. Will a question like this make it easier for your customer to buy from you? Probably not, and it certainly creates additional problems for you because you then need to persuade your potential customer that the issues he thinks are valid reasons not to buy your product are not really too much of an issue after all.

Secondly, the way you present your 'counterarguments' to these potential issues could do much to potentially damage any relationship you have worked hard to develop in the earlier stages of the sales call. As we mentioned earlier, once we have a belief about something we tend to take a 'position' that could make it more difficult for others to persuade us differently. Indeed we have seen examples of where sales people have become defensive and on a few occasions have actually had arguments with customers because, get this, the customer answered the sales person's question with an opinion that was different to the sales person's belief. On a number of these occasions the sales person's opinion was actually the right one and the customer had got it wrong – but in hindsight, would the sales person rather have been productive in the first instance rather than just right?

Better, surely, that you avoid the situation altogether by thinking about what specific questions you need to ask before you see the customer and as a result have a clear idea of the types of responses your customers could give you to those questions. This is what we would call productive questioning skills and it is those productive questioning skills that will serve you well when establishing what is important to the customer.

## What makes a productive question?

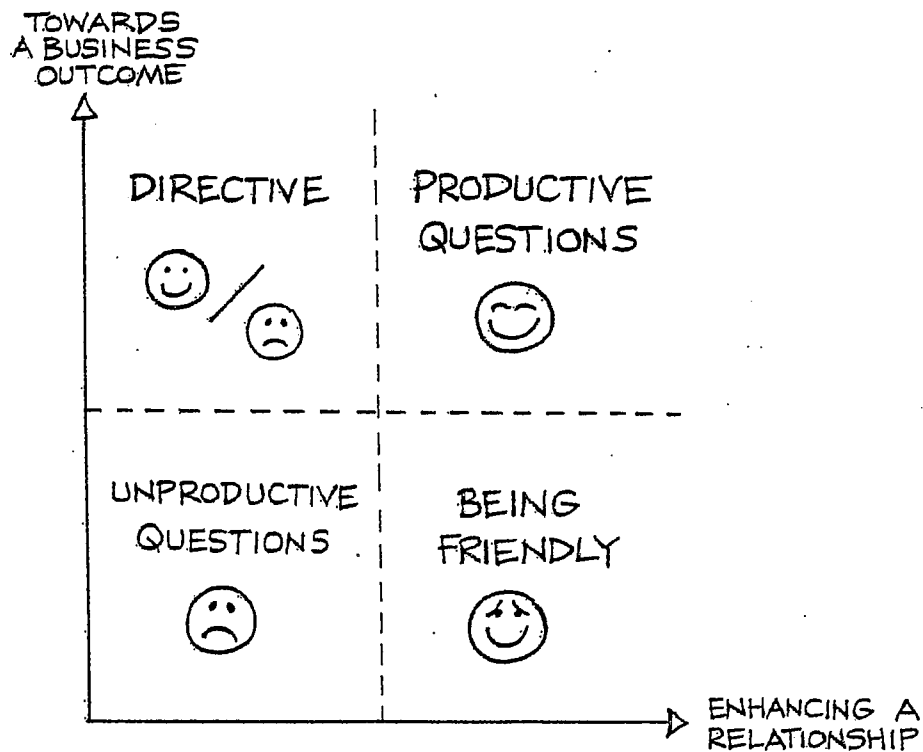
A productive question has two elements. Firstly, it's a question that gets you and your customers closer to an agreed outcome that's going to be valuable to both of you. And secondly it's a question that at the very least

**Thinking ahead about questioning requires a little forward planning but it is time well invested.**

maintains the relationship you have created and at best enhances and improves upon that relationship. Thinking ahead about questioning in this way requires a little forward planning but it is time well invested as it can actually save both you and your customers time during the sales process and can help get you straight to the heart of what could

be valuable to the customer. In turn this gives you the opportunity to make a reasoned decision about whether you can help them or not.

The graphic below illustrates what quadrant the questions you ask your customer should fall into. Too many questions in the wrong quadrant will ultimately mean that you are not being productive in the sale.



For example let's take the top-left quadrant which captures questions that enhance or develop the relationship you have with the customer but that are not necessarily productive in terms of generating business, questions like:

‘Hi, how's it going?’

‘How's the old golf handicap going? Have you played much lately?’

‘How's the family and the kids? Has Johnny got to play in the School Football Team yet?’

‘Did you buy that new car you were talking about last time?’

These kinds of questions serve a useful purpose, especially early on in a sales interaction because they give you the opportunity to create a relationship and dialogue with the customer. Creating that dialogue and relationship is important as the customer will be more likely to be responsive to the questions you ask when you get to the ‘establish what is valuable to the customer stage’. So, all in all, questions that fall into the top left-hand quadrant are productive, but they do come with a warning.

Your business is selling and that makes customers your business because they are the ones who provide the sales revenues which in turn influence the success of the company you represent. But sometimes customers become more than just customers. You start to share more than just a business relationship with them and they become friends. They become the sort of people that you can call on in their office or business and see quite easily often even without an appointment. This situation in itself is fine; however, the warning bells start to ring when the relationship clouds the real purpose of why the relationship is there in the first place, that purpose being to get business done.

To some people the idea of selling to people they like and get on well with is one of the greatest rewards in sales. We are sure that, like us, you have some fabulous customers that you love working with and the fact that you get on well actually means you are successful doing business with them and they, in turn, are successful too. It is a really neat and efficient system.

But there are situations where some sales people do let the relationship get in the way of getting business done. In situations like this the sales person

actually finds it difficult to sell to the customer because they fear that the relationship they have could get damaged if they start the 'shady' business of selling. An even worse scenario is when the customer actually uses the relationship with the sales person to avoid being sold to. We know of sales people who have asked us how to deal with customers who 'pretend' to be friendly with them in the hope that the sales person won't start selling to them. On further questioning we nearly always find out that even though there is very little chance of ever securing any business from these types of customers the sales people still religiously call on them every few months. Often the purpose of these sales calls is to achieve nothing more than the delivery of their company's latest leather-bound diary or perhaps a desk-tidy emblazoned with their corporate logo. They could save themselves the time and money by posting the gift or better still ask the customer outright if they are going to give them any business and following the response make a business decision about whether they should see that customer ever again.

On to the bottom-left quadrant that incorporates questions that neither move the sales process forward in a productive manner nor maintain or enhance the value of the relationship with the customer. It is apparent that questions that fall into this quadrant are clearly unproductive as far as following an effective sales process is concerned. However, rather than moving on rapidly it's appropriate to think about them for a few moments as it's the very idea of not thinking about them that causes them to be used. You're all busy people and you all have demands that sometimes cause you to just get on and do things without much thinking. Whilst there is often a real time-saving component to just getting on and doing the job, there is the danger that time saved today could cost you dearly in the future. Simply selling to a customer without any due consideration of what you're going to ask them, or worse still, asking a question that occupies the customer's mind long enough for you to think up another will result in inappropriate questioning that will be of no value to you or to your customer and will almost certainly mean that that customer will not be one for much longer.

But what about the questions that fall into our third quadrant – the one where you are asking business-focused questions but doing little to create or maintain a valuable relationship with the customer – are these productive or unproductive? The answer here, sorry to say, is that it all depends.

Some customers like the idea of just getting on with the business of doing business. You have probably met these kinds of customers on occasions in the past. They are sometimes described as direct, impatient, strong-willed or in extreme cases even aggressive. Dealing with this sort of customer requires careful handling but if you take your cue from the liking and listening elements in Chapter 1 you quickly realize that by being similar to them in the way they like to do business and being as directive as they are in the questions you ask can be very productive indeed. Where business-focused questions that do little to maintain, or in some cases actually damage, the relationship can be unproductive is in situations where you, the sales person, are seen to be direct, impatient or too aggressive in the way you approach and deal with the customer. On occasions like this your approach would clearly be unproductive and affords you a clear lesson when using questions that fall into this quadrant. If the customer is one of those direct and to the point types with little interest in building relationships and much interest in getting down to business then use the same approach. If on the other hand, though, it's you who prefers this approach, then you need to be aware of that fact and adapt accordingly to what's most valuable to the customer you're currently selling to.

Which takes us finally to the last quadrant that deals with questions that are business-focused and also at least maintain or better still enhance the relationship you have with the customer. These are the most productive of all. They focus both your own attention and also your customers on the business in hand in a way that makes the sales experience useful and even perhaps an enjoyable one.

We have discussed the idea that the questions you ask during a sales interaction with a customer can be productive or unproductive. We've also talked about the fact that some of the questions you ask are more likely to maintain or enhance the relationship you have with the customer. With that in mind let's take some specific examples of commonly used sales questions and judge how productive they really are.

### Questions that ask about a customer's circumstances

Questions that ask about a customer's specific circumstances and situation can be either productive or unproductive depending on how you use them. You should always consider whether or not you really need the information

you are asking for. We all know how annoying it is when you have to call a customer service centre or a helpline and then have to explain the reason for your call sometimes to three or four different people before you actually get to speak to someone who is in a position to be able to help you. It sometimes makes you wonder what entitles them to call themselves 'helplines'. The same is true when you are dealing with customers on a face-to-face basis. If you want to sell the customer a product or service, do you really need to ask lots and lots of questions to get information about their circumstances? Surely better that you do your homework in advance and ask only those questions that are pertinent to the sale and the customer you are interacting with. There is another point to make about questions of this sort and it relates to keeping accurate and up-to-date customer records. Having good up-to-date information to hand about your customers prevents you asking the same questions every time you sell to them. You can quickly check with just one or two questions that their circumstances are indeed the same and move on to more productive questions that move the sale forward. The obvious exception to this is if it's the first time that you've met the customer. In these situations some circumstantial information may be useful, but you need to be careful that it doesn't lead to a list of questions being fired at the customer in quick succession as this will probably have a detrimental effect on the relationship, with the customer feeling badgered.

Some examples of circumstantial questions:

- What products are you currently using to provide [insert whatever your product provides]?
- How many of these would you typically use in a [period of time].

Questions that get 'because' as an answer

Typically these questions start with the word 'why':

- Why have you bought a product like that in the past?
- Why do you use [insert name of competitor product]?

But there are other questions that take the customer in a similar direction:

- What caused you to choose a product like that in the past?
- What are your reasons for using [insert name of competitor product]?

Whether you use a question that starts with the word 'why' or another question that seeks to get the same information you need to be aware of a very specific effect that it can have on the customer, and therefore we should take great care when asking questions like these. The reason for this lies in the response that a customer is likely to give immediately after you ask the question, that response being the word 'because'.

So what are the dangers of asking questions that cause your customer to respond with the word 'because'. One danger is that your question might cause the customer to justify their position or point of view with regard to a decision they've already made and could already be committed to. And what if that position or point of view is different to the direction you would like the customer to move towards? By way of an example let's imagine you are in the following situation. You are selling to a customer who doesn't yet use your product, or perhaps they use just a small amount but certainly nowhere near the amount they could potentially buy from you. During your sales call you innocently ask the customer, 'Why do you use our competitor's product?' to which the customer replies, 'Because it's less expensive than your product, it's a good effective product that I have been using for over five years now and they have never let me down'.

**One danger is that your question might cause the customer to justify their position or point of view with regard to a decision they've already made.**

The only thing you have successfully served to achieve by asking this question is to draw your customer's attention to the reasons why he uses your competitor's product. Productive? Probably not, as your sale will now more likely be focused on how you can sell against the product he already uses with you taking one side and your customer potentially taking the other. Herein lies the other potential danger. Your question will take the customer in the direction of having to justify a decision they have made. Whilst some customers might not have a problem with this, your relationship with the customer might only be in the early stages and you might be meeting this customer for only the first or second time. In these circumstances your question might only serve to ensure that you're unlikely to get his business anytime soon in the future.

We have painted a rather bleak picture of questions that get the customer to justify a particular position and whilst they are generally unproductive

there are occasions when they can be very productive indeed. We are referring to situations when you have a customer that already uses and likes your products and services. In these situations asking them, 'Why do you like our product?' can serve to reinforce in the customer's mind why they like your product. This can be particularly useful when your sales objective is to increase their use of a product or if you're introducing a new product you have recently launched. Here the overriding message of this chapter appears once more. Only by preparing in advance and thinking about what you want to achieve and the types of questions you will use are you more likely to get you and your customers into a position where a successful sale can occur.

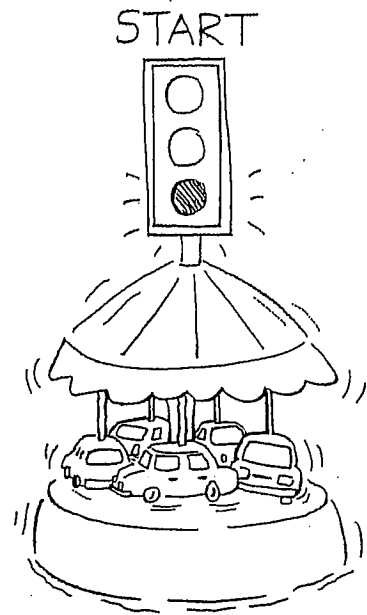
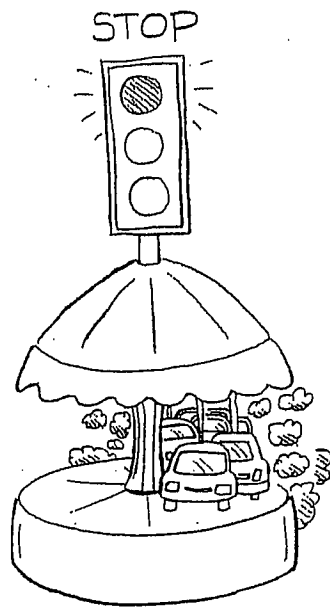
### Questions that stop the sales process (inactive questioning)

We talked about this type of question earlier but it's worth reviewing because, as well as providing us with a lesson about what not to do, you can also get some very helpful clues about what you should be doing instead. For this reason let's go back to the IT manager we were talking about earlier. Remember you asked him, 'So what things might cause you to stop purchasing a product such as this?'

As a result of this question your potential customer gave you a list of things that would stop him from buying from you. Not only is this question unproductive because it actually stops the sales process, it's unproductive in another way too. Even if you're able to deal effectively with the IT manager's reasons why he won't buy your product it doesn't necessarily mean that he will now proceed with buying your product.

To illustrate this point, imagine, for a few minutes, that you're in your car approaching the top of a road that has a large junction with a set of traffic lights. What are the things that cause you to stop your car? Well, clearly, if the traffic lights are showing red you would stop (assuming that you are not driving in central London). The fact that you place your foot on the break will cause your car to stop, as will the car in front of you which has also stopped (assuming this time that you wish to avoid an accident which, by the way, will also cause you to stop).





So, in this situation there are three things that will cause you to stop your car:

- a red light showing on the traffic lights
- your foot on the break
- the car in front.

Now let's just imagine for a few moments that you're at the junction and a helpful young man comes and removes the red bulb in the traffic light. Does it make it possible to go?

What if you take your foot off the break? Does that does make it possible for you to go? Probably not, unless of course you are on a hill and you could then go either forwards or backwards, depending on the hill. Either way, if you do move you are not influencing the direction you are going – the hill is.

And what if the car in front of you moves, does that make it possible for you to move too? Again no. So what will make it possible for you to go? Not the same things that cause you to stop, that's for sure.

What causes us to stop?	What causes us to start?
A red light showing on the traffic lights	A green light
Your foot on the break	A foot on the accelerator
The car in front	A clear road ahead

The things that cause you to stop at the junction are not the same things that cause you to start. The same is true in your sales interaction with the IT manager. He has told you the things that will stop him from buying your product because you asked him. The response you got was directly related to the question you asked. He hasn't told you the things that would make it possible for him to buy from you because you haven't asked him. Your question was inactive and therefore unproductive. You need to ask a different question.

### Questions that make the sales process go (active questioning)

These questions are simply the inverse of the inactive questions we described above. Rather than asking the customer what would stop them from buying your product and service you ask them what they would need in order to consider purchasing your product or service. It focuses the customer's attention and your attention on the potential to do business, not on what stops the potential to do business. Productive? In our experience it's one of the most productive questions that any sales person can use. It quickly gets to the heart of what's valuable to the customer and gives you their real needs and desires so you can work with the customer rather than trying to put fires out. And what of the smart alec customer who, after asking him, 'What would need to happen in order for you buy our product?' replies with a curt 'Make it free!?' Well it could happen, but situations like this are few and far between. And for every situation when this occurs there will be a hundred where you'll actually go in a useful direction with the customer and begin to establish what truly will be valuable to them.

### Maintaining the relationship

Clearly your ability to establish what's going to be valuable to the customer is dependent on asking productive questions that maintain the relation-

ship and move the selling process forward. It's also dependent on your ability to create and maintain a valuable relationship with the customer through liking and listening. You also need to recognize that listening and liking isn't a one-off event. It is not a 'tick the box' done-that-bit-thank-you-very-much activity that you do at the start of a customer interaction and forget about it when it comes to the nitty gritty of asking questions. You need to maintain the relationship throughout and, whilst it's important that you've prepared good productive questions to find out what's important to your customer, it's crucial that the way you ask those questions doesn't have a detrimental effect on the relationship you have worked so hard to create. In simple terms you don't want to start interrogating your customers.

John Hughes' 1989 film *Uncle Buck* starred John Candy as the lovable uncle looking after his nephew and two nieces while their parents are out of town. In one classic scene in the kitchen over breakfast the nephew, played by Macalay Culkin, started to ask his uncle a few questions about what he did in his life:

Where do you live?

Do you have a house or an apartment?

Do you own or rent?

Are you married?

Ever been?

Ever want to be?

What's your job?

Do you wanna job?

Why?

Why?

And so it went on until the point when John Candy asks his nephew:

‘What’s your record for consecutive questions asked?’ to which the reply came, ‘38’.

‘That’s pretty impressive’, remarks the uncle.

‘Well I’m a kid, that’s my job’, states the nephew.



Clearly the film demonstrates in a comical manner the inquisitiveness of a child, but there could also be a point to be made about how sales people might also approach the task of asking questions of customers. By simply running through a list, question after question, regardless of how productive those questions are, you can risk simply interrogating customers to the point where everything

you do is counter-productive. What is needed is a way of incorporating your well-prepared and productive questions into an environment where a valuable customer relationship is maintained. How do you do it? Well if you consider that asking questions requires you to *take* information from the customer, to redress the balance you should *give* some information back to them.

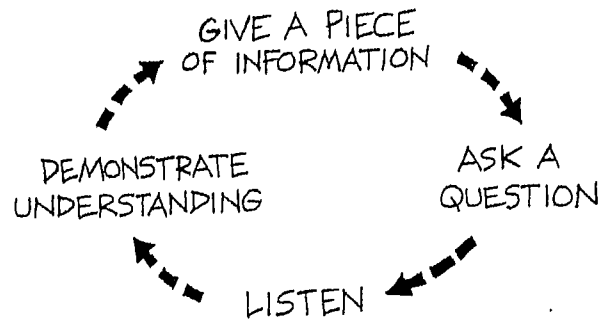
Before asking a question it’s often helpful to prepare your customer by giving them some information first as it can help to break the potential interrogational approach. For example, if you need to find out how much a potential customer has budgeted to spend on a particular product or service, what they’ll be using it for and what kind of things are important to them, you could take a leaf out of the inquisitive six-year-old’s book and just ask them almost in a military fashion:

How much have you got to spend?

What do you need it for?

What’s important to you?

Alternatively you could apply a more 'consultative' approach by using the questioning and understanding cycle illustrated below.



First you give a piece of information or make a statement connected to what you're going to ask. Next you ask your productive question. Then, taking your cue from the liking and listening principle, you listen to what the customer has said and then 'parrotphrase' it back using the customer's own words to demonstrate you have heard and understood them. Finally you wait for a typical response from a customer who has been understood: 'yes.'

Here's the example again in action. Let's assume the product is a hi-fi system.

SALES PERSON *(giving a piece of information)* 'There are actually quite a few different types of these products available now and they cover a wide range of prices.'

*(asking a question)* 'What kind of price do you have in mind?'

CUSTOMER 'There are a lot of products. It's almost overwhelming. I don't know, I guess about £300 I suppose.'

SALESPERSON *(listening and demonstrating understanding by repeating back)* 'It can be overwhelming but you can get a nice one for around ... £300 you say?'

CUSTOMER 'Yes.'

SALES PERSON *(giving a piece of information)* 'I have smaller hi-fi at home which I use for connecting up to my PC.'

*(asking a question)* 'What are you going to be mainly using it for?'

CUSTOMER 'Well I have a digital TV and I want to connect the hi-fi up to get a better sound quality. And I also play a lot of CDs.'

SALES PERSON *(listening and demonstrating understanding by repeating back)* 'OK so as well as playing CDs you'd like to connect it up to your digital TV.'

CUSTOMER 'Yep!'

SALES PERSON *(giving a piece of information)* 'Lots of people have different ideas about what the best hi-fi for them is. Do you have any particular things that are going to be important to you?'

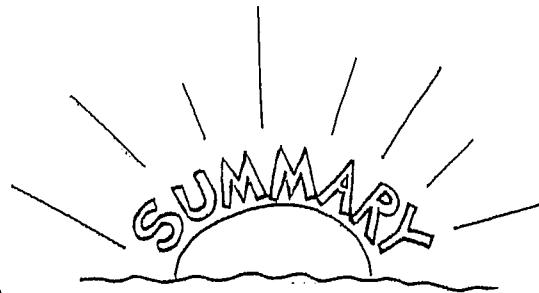
CUSTOMER *(asking a question)* 'Well I certainly don't want anything big and cumbersome. My TV takes up most of the space in the sitting room already and it needs to be easy to operate.'

SALES PERSON *(listening and demonstrating understanding by repeating back)* 'OK. Not too big then and one that's easy to operate. I think we have a couple of products that will fit the bill nicely.'

And so on and so on. The questioning and understanding cycle approach helps you to keep the sales process moving forward and maintain a valuable relationship with the customer in a very succinct and effective manner.

Why is it so effective? Because you do this anyway in your everyday life. When you come home from work at night and talk about the day's events with your family or friends you give them some information about your day and ask them about theirs. When you chat to friends on the telephone, conversations tend to be mixture of asking questions, giving information, listening and understanding. The same is true when you are in the pub with your mates or when you go out to dinner. It is a natural part of human interaction that sometimes gets forgotten when you start selling to people and fail to remember that you are still human and dealing with others who are also human. It's akin to having an invisible suit that you put on in the morning that suddenly changes you from being a normal human being into 'the sales person'. It doesn't have to be that way. By operating in a way that creates and maintains valuable customer relationships and productively gets to the heart of what's important and valuable to the customer

you prepare the ground nicely for the next stage of the Effective Selling Principles. That, of course, is actually selling the product, or what we term 'Giving 'em what they want!'



## Chapter 2 Establishing what is valuable to the customer (Being productive)

The questions you ask have an effect upon where a customer places their attention and therefore influence the responses you obtain. As a sales person you have to deal with those responses to progress the sale.

Questions are often characterized as being 'open' (in that they generate more substantial answers). 'Closed' (where they typically generate answers of just a word or two), for example, 'yes' and 'no'. However, it's more useful to consider the questions you ask as productive or un-productive.

A productive question:

- moves the selling process forward towards a useful outcome for both the customer and the sales person/company
- at least maintains or ideally enhances the relationship with the customer.

The questions that you ask will have an effect upon the relationship you have with your customers and your relationship with the customer will have an effect upon the questions you can ask.

You can avoid the possibility of interrogating your customers by using the questioning and understanding cycle.

Remember: Would you rather be right or  
would you rather be effective?