



Mastering Technical Sales
3030 Grand Bay Blvd #333
Longboat Key FL 34228
Phone +1-215-431-1552
Info@masteringtechnicalsales.com
www.masteringtechnicalsales.com
John Care, Managing Director

Questions, Questions

The Power of Asking The Right Questions

“You can judge a great Sales Engineer not by the answers they give, but by the questions they ask.”

Questions are a wonderful weapon in the arsenal of the Sales Engineer. Questions can help you obtain information, questions can show that you are actively listening, and questions can also (surprisingly) demonstrate your knowledge and your credibility. In sales we focus a lot on answers, the other side of the Q&A equation. We relate answers to objection handling, demonstrating knowledge and the power persuasion. Most SE’s are great at asking technical questions, so let’s focus on the science behind questions and the application of questioning techniques.

The Three Types of SE Questions

We can broadly group questions into three categories – open-ended, closed-ended and the non-question questions. For a quick definition up front (“Questions 101”), closed-ended questions are those which usually generate a “yes” or a “no” in response. Open-ended questions can help drive a conversation and they need a sentence, or at least multiple words, to answer. Non-question questions are those statements and actions which still drive a conversation and seek information, but don’t have a “?” behind them.

What’s the best type of question? That’s an open ended question right there! Sales people will tell you NEVER to ask closed questions (with the possible exception of “can you sign this today?”). That’s not necessarily true – as every type of question has its particular use.

Closed Questions

Closed questions typically generate a “yes” or a “no” in response. Starting a question with:

“Can you..(secure all your end points)?”

“Do you ..(have a backup site)?”

“Is there..(a single cause for the slow response)? ”

“Is this a good time to talk”

“Did you .. (get a copy of my email)?”

“Are you able (to access that information)?”

Will likely get you a yes or a no. If you're lucky, the customer will continue onwards and explain the answer. But maybe not, especially if hiding behind a webex/virtual shield or they are data driven / engineering types.

Yet a closed question can help you rule out possibilities and option.

"Is trans-warp reverse osmotic identity governance an option for you?"

So bottom line – closed questions can be useful for SE's, when used appropriately to "close out" both technical and business options and possibilities. For general conversational purposes, they're not so good and can put a drag on information gathering. Try avoiding closed questions at your next cocktail party and see the results!

Open Questions

Open questions drive conversations. Sales methodologies focus on open questions, which means so will your sales people. Google "open-ended sales questions" and you'll see over 80 million¹ results.

When asking questions, especially in up front business value discovery situations, we recommend preparing using the 5W+H technique. 5W+H covers WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHICH and HOW. You'll notice that "WHY?" is missing. Despite the success of Simon Sinek's "Start With Why?"² philosophy asking why isn't always the best approach for an SE. In many countries it can be viewed as judgmental and even confrontational. It has an implied "you idiot" appended to the end of it.

Try that ..

'Why haven't you fixed it yet (you idiot)' and 'Why was it designed that way (you idiot)'

Every Why question can be rephrased in a softer and kinder SE friendly way. Note that although you shouldn't use many why questions, the sales team eventually needs to answer the "three whys" customer questions.

1. WHY do something?
2. WHY do it now?
3. WHY do it with us?

You should prepare a mix of 5W+H questions before a customer encounter, especially with execs, as a guide to help you drive the conversation. Experienced SE's already do this mentally, the newer or nervous SE can write them down and refer to them during the call. For an added bonus throw in a few hypothetical "if" questions as well {"If we could help you do "X", who would that most impact?"}

¹ As of August 2019 – English language access

² TED Talks. https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action

Non-Question Questions (NQQ)

The drawback with closed ended questions is that they are still questions. Unless you are a skilled conversationalist, at some point the customer is going to feel like they are being interrogated and the flow of information will slow down. That's just human nature. This is where interjecting NQQs is useful.

1. Interjectory & Continuing. Show interest in continuing the line of conversation or explanation. Use *"tell me more"* or *"please continue"*.
2. Express Interest. Light up the explanation brain cells. *"Wow"*. *"Amazing"*. *"That's incredibly innovative"*. *"That's the first time I've heard that!"*
3. Reflective. Echo back the final few words of your customer's sentence.

Customer : *".. and then we had to reboot the server."*
You: *"Reboot the server..."* (without the vocal ? modulation)

By adding some NQQs into the mix you can demonstrate active listening, as you're not waiting for the next moment of silence to ask another question, but are instead amplifying the natural flow. You can practice this as an improvisational game in a staff meeting.

Summary

The call to action here is obvious. Look at your typical interactions with clients, and salespeople, and your boss and even your friends. How is your mix of open and closed questions (that's an open question) and are you using the NQQs (that one is closed)? If you are not that's wonderful, if not, try modifying the mix, especially the NQQs and see what happens. You may suddenly be labelled a great conversationalist.

"My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and ask a few questions."

Peter Drucker, Consultant

Talking Points is an occasional column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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