

75 Best Questions to Close More Business

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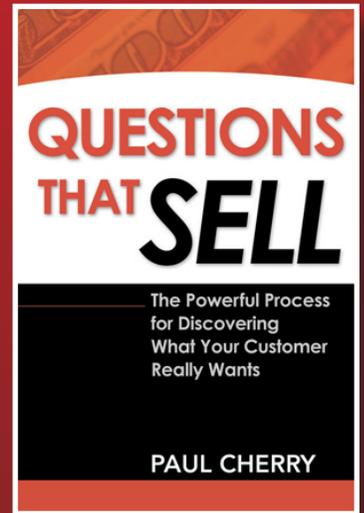
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75 Best Questions to Close More Business



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Have you ever faced a situation where the sale seemed to be just about sealed, only to stall at the last minute? Or you had great rapport with your contact, but at the last minute another influence came in and derailed the whole thing? Or your prospects decide they simply don't need change right now? How do you make them see the value of your service, not just the price tag? You do it by asking questions that expand your customer's mindset, which in turn helps him to realize the value of your solution — BUT how will you know what to ask?

Why do we ask questions, anyway? More to the point, why don't we ask enough questions — important questions?

Like many salespeople, you may be nervous about asking questions for fear of asking the wrong ones, or worse, getting answers you don't want to hear. You don't always know what to ask, and silence makes you even more nervous. Then you worry that if you ask the wrong questions, you'll come across as intrusive — after all, customers don't want to feel like they're being interrogated. Perhaps you even feel like you're imposing on customers, as if you should already know the answer (why, are you a mind-reader?) This kind of thinking actually does more harm than good, disempowering both you and your customer, who'll end up feeling misunderstood, unlistened-to, and unimportant. A customer who feels ignored by the vendor from whom she's seeking help is a customer who feels powerless, and therefore resentful. Too many salespeople unintentionally create these negative feelings when they shortcut their questions.

Instead of feeling powerless when it comes time to ask questions, consider this: when you ask questions, you're actually controlling the conversation. That's right, questions mean power! Questions make customers think and respond, and asking the right questions will give you the responses you need to provide customers with the right guidance. Even if you don't get the answer you hoped for, you're nevertheless engaging customers' emotions, and that's half the battle. Customers may justify their actions with logic, but deep down, it's their emotions that motivate them.

It's not enough just to give your prospect the facts and features of why to buy — it's important to give him a chance to respond, and to listen carefully to his responses. When you're the one doing all the talking, there's an emotional disconnect because the longer you talk, the more likely it is that your customer is tuning out. He may be politely nodding and "mmmhmming," but the fewer opportunities you give him to respond, the more likely it is that he's really off in his own world. But if you ask the right questions, you'll snap him out of his half-listening haze and motivate him to respond in ways that will lead to meaningful dialogue between the two of you.

Like all good salespeople, you want to understand your customer's vulnerability, his need to control his own fate. You also want to stroke your customer's ego by connecting emotionally, responding to the specific concerns he expresses. That's why you have to really listen to your customer; his responses are crucial to helping you tailor your questions to his needs and goals. Don't confuse this with manipulation! If you care about your



customer as a person and not just as a source of revenue, it will show in the way you ask your questions. The key is to help your customer find his business pain and tap into it. At the same time, good questions can help bring out the positives. You can help your customer feel positive by talking about his strengths, which in turn kick-starts his subconscious into thinking about the specifics of what he needs to do differently to capitalize on those strengths. Aha! Now you've planted the seeds where you can begin to position your solution as the possible answer.

We also ask questions to force people to think, therefore tapping into their needs, wants, and desires, getting them on your wavelength, leading you and your customer to think in unison. This process helps you and your customer to diagnose the problem and break it down. Only then can you grasp the magnitude of the issue in question and the potential ripple effect of the problem the customer wants you to solve. The good news is: the larger the customer's problem, the bigger your solution.

EXAMPLES OF WARM-UP QUESTIONS WITH NEW RELATIONSHIPS

Remember that before you can work with your customer on a solution to his problem, you need to get to know him. While you can't hurry trust or manipulate a business relationship into a specific time frame, you'll find it's worthwhile to invest time in the relationship-forming process by asking the right questions about the customer's past and present — and, equally important, being patient and listening to their answers. If you really listen

to what your customers have to say, you'll instill confidence in them, forming the foundation upon which to build a powerful business relationship. Of course, you can ask questions about the weather, sports, weekend or what's happening in the news. But in addition to those types of questions, it's good to gain insight on what your prospect is experiencing on the job and the challenges he and his organization are facing. His input may reveal valuable information on other relationships to form in his organization and how best to position your solutions when the time is right. A few warm up examples include:

1. How long have you been doing _____? So tell me what you like most about _____? Least about _____?
2. What would you say is different about your organization (project, job, etc.) today since you started _____?
3. Could you share with me some past experiences with vendors when it comes to _____?
4. Since you've been with the company, what have been some of the challenges you've been facing with _____?
5. What originally led you to take on this responsibility (project, job, task, etc.)? What were your expectations when you started _____, and how have they changed as you look at your needs today?



QUESTIONS TO DISRUPT EXISTING VENDOR RELATIONSHIPS

Phrase your questions in ways that won't end up undermining your efforts to win your customer's business. For example, don't just ask your customer, "What do you like about your current supplier?" If she's fairly content with the status quo, she just might start talking about all the positive qualities of that relationship... and if things are going just dandy between them, what does she need you for? Here are better ways to get that information without undermining what you have to offer.

6. Would you share with me the ideal qualities you look for in a vendor?
7. When you originally selected this vendor, what were your selection criteria? In what ways have your criteria changed as you evaluate your needs today? What would you like to see happen in the future?
8. If you could enhance one thing about your vendor's qualities, what would that be?
9. How would you rate your current vendor relationship on a scale of 1 to 10? (When your customer states a number, urge her to elaborate, as with the following example.) All right, when you say 7, what would you want your vendor to do to move it to a 10?

QUESTIONS TO STRENGTHEN EXISTING CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

It's all too easy for salespeople to take their customers for granted. Oh yes, customers are guilty as well. These questions work best when you already have a relationship in place, but you'd like to take it to a higher level in order to capture more business.

About once or twice a year, I enjoy taking my important clients to lunch or dinner so we can reflect on our recent accomplishments working together. My other objective is to explore how our business relationship can improve and how I can add more value in the months (or year) ahead. These questions are asked in a relaxed setting and when there's time to talk about the big picture. Because you never know if and when your competitors are trying to steal your important clients, I suggest asking a few of the following examples. Be sure to put them into your own words so the questions are conversational. Ask these types of questions, and you'll turn good relationships into great ones:

10. What do you feel we are/I am doing right to sustain our business relationship? (Continue with lots of follow-up questions...)
11. What could we be doing differently (more of/ less of... or where can we improve) in order to ensure that you achieve your goals?
12. What's most important to you for us to keep focused on your objectives?



13. If you could enhance one thing about our business relationship, what might that be?
14. In what ways can we make your job easier? ...rewarding? ...profitable? ...successful?
15. If a prospective customer were to ask you to explain why you do business with us, how would you respond?

QUESTIONS TO UNCOVER PROBLEMS, PAST AND PRESENT

What's missing in the present is the promise of the future. People always project into what they want down the line, rather than what they have now. For example, in the film *Hollywoodland*, it is suggested that the late actor George Reeves' fatal flaw was in not appreciating his success as the wildly popular star of TV's *The Adventures of Superman*, but instead being too fixated on grasping for movie success, which always seemed to elude him due to typecasting, among other factors. In contrast, the private detective investigating Reeves' mysterious death learns from the doomed actor's mistakes — as the film ends, the detective takes steps to improve his strained relationships, reaching out to his estranged family for a fresh start. You, too, need to make your customers see how their present impacts on their future.

When we assess common questions, 85% of them address the **present**. For example:

- What are you currently doing?
- How many _____ are you producing?
- How do you use this product/application?
- Who are you using now?
- What do you like about them?
- Are you the decision-maker in your company?
- What are your challenges?
- What are your needs?
- What do you want?
- What can I do for you?

Whoa! What's the challenge in asking these questions? Unfortunately, most salespeople ask these types of questions — they are common and mundane. They're important to the salesperson, but boring to the customer. Plus, again, these types of questions fall into the customer's **present** situation. Most customers are either bored or dissatisfied with the present. They are much more interested in the future because that's where they think the answers are. If you reflect on your own situation, don't you think somehow your life (personally or professionally) is going to improve one year from now? That's why you want to ask questions that go beyond the present — by tapping into the **past** and exploring the **future**.



QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

16. Think back to when you originally implemented this process. What were your expectations? What results are you getting now? What kind of results would you like to get in the future?
17. To what extent is your current situation meeting your expectations?
18. So how does your current situation compare to what you would like to be doing?
19. How do you envision your (future, situation, job, responsibilities, etc.) three years from today? In other words, what would you like to be doing more of...? Less of...?
20. What steps will you have to take in order to make that happen?
21. What are the benchmarks that will tell you that you achieved your goal?

QUESTIONS TO UNCOVER PROBLEMS

Have you ever called on a prospect who was clueless about the problem he was facing? Or a prospect who'd become utterly complacent about his problems? Or one in survival mode? Or one who hoped if he waited it out long enough, the problem would eventually fix itself? Finding problems means uncovering opportunities!

Customers are more motivated to fix their problems than to pursue pleasure, but they're so caught up in their day-to-day struggles, they haven't got the time or energy to step back and assess their situation. You can help them by digging for problems whenever you can, transforming yourself into a business advisor your customers will know they can rely on, helping them evaluate their current situation and act on it before potential problems erupt. Here are questions to help uncover and crystallize the issues your prospect needs to work on:

22. What exactly is the problem?
23. What's causing the problem? Can you give me an example?
24. How long has it been going on?
25. If left alone, what are the possible ramifications?
26. What's this problem costing you in terms of (resources, money, profits, overhead, productivity, output, labor, time, customers, market share, etc.)
27. What barriers stand in your way to get this problem resolved?
28. On a scale from 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your current product/vendor/situation? (Based on the answer, you respond, "You mentioned the number _____. What would you like to see the product/vendor/situation do/deliver/accomplish in order to achieve a 10?")



QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR CUSTOMERS' CUSTOMERS

Surprisingly, not every customer you contact is focused on external customers. Unless your clients have direct contact with external customers, too often you will discover how insensitive or ignorant they are of their external customers' needs. Under these circumstances, it is likely that internal customers will have greater influence. This makes your job even more challenging, because you need to convince your customers that their customers are important! The key is to uncover the wants and needs of those external customers.

29. Who are your most valuable customers?
30. What do your customers expect from you as a vendor or supplier?
31. What are some things we can do to help reinforce the value to your customers?
32. What steps do you take to ensure your customers' needs are met? Where can we add value?
33. Why do customers buy from you?
34. What do your customers complain most about? Where can we assist in providing a solution?
35. What do customers like most about doing business with your company? What do they like least? What steps are you taking to improve in this area?

36. Would you explain the difference between a profitable customer and an unprofitable one?

Be careful who you direct these questions to. If, say, you ask these questions of a purchasing agent, you'll get a blank stare. That's because purchasing has little, if any, interaction with your customer's customers. Make sure you direct these questions to people who have significant contact with the company's external customers. However, there is still value in asking these questions to a purchasing agent, because he or she still needs to be thinking about how his purchasing decision could be negatively impacting his organization's bottom line.

WHY ASK "WHY?" QUESTIONS TO UNCOVER HIDDEN NEEDS

"Why" questions allow you to understand your customers' motives, which, in turn, brings their hidden needs to light. Some customers act out of fear, others out of self-interest, and still others out of a desire to increase profits. Your ability to uncover motives will bring you invaluable insight into how your customers operate. This knowledge then allows you to provide individualized service for your customers. But getting info on motives is tricky. If you simply ask, "Why" over and over again, your customers will probably become annoyed or offended. The examples below give you the chance to delve deeper and to better understand what's motivating your customers:

37. Tell me, what is prompting your interest in _____?
38. What's causing this to happen?



39. What's driving the need for change?
40. What originally led you to this decision?
41. Share with me what is motivating your decision to _____.
42. Why is this important to you?
43. If you can achieve this result, what will it mean to you?
44. What concerns do you have if you are unable to achieve this result? How would this affect you?

QUESTIONS ABOUT WHO ELSE IS INVOLVED

It's not enough to get to know your customer — you also need to find out about his colleagues and superiors. These people impact how purchasing decisions are made — how the employees feel about the company — what the relationships are between different departments or between headquarters and its subsidiaries — the relationships your contact has with others on her team, with her boss, and with all of the other departments in the company — and how changes are proposed and implemented.

Questions about the company's culture allow you to become a "fly on the wall" in your customer's boardroom. They give you access to the organization's inner workings, allowing you to anticipate problems before they crop up. Remember, employees are competing for a fixed amount of resources within a company. So your plan to overhaul their delivery

system, for instance, might run into a brick wall if you're not sensitive to the fact that other employees have input into the decision regarding whether or not to implement that plan.

It's like talking to a married couple and discovering that each spouse has a different philosophy about spending money or running the household. Maybe the wife is bent on saving money for their retirement and their children's future education, while the husband can't resist impulse purchases of the latest toy, game, or gadget the kids beg for — after all, they're only young once. The point is: each member of a team, whether that team is a family or a business, has a different set of important criteria. Everybody's coming from a different set of experiences. Here are examples of questions about who else is involved:

45. Can you walk me through your decision-making process?
46. Who else in addition to yourself is involved in this process?
47. What exactly is his/her perspective on this issue?
48. What are the steps your organization has to take to reach a decision on this type of purchase?
49. How can we best present this solution so that everyone will see it as a win instead of a loss?
50. Can you help me understand some of the obstacles you anticipate to occur during the decision-making process?



- 51. Tell me your thoughts on this upcoming project. How does your boss feel about it? Your peers? Others on your team? The committee?
- 52. Who on the team might resist or be indifferent to this solution? Why?
- 53. How can we tailor the solution so everyone sees it as a win instead of a potential?

QUESTIONS ON CREATING VALUE

Questions about value help customers shift from the “lowest price” mentality to a discussion of true value. Different people have different definitions of value, so be sure to ask your customers what’s most important to them. That way, you’ll be able to effectively position your solution as a smarter investment over lower-priced alternatives.

You cannot sell value until you understand what your customer values. Value is unique to the eye of the beholder. For instance, value to a purchasing agent is about getting the lowest price. Value to an engineer is all about quality. Value to a CEO is about increasing market share and satisfying shareholder needs. Value to a salesperson is keeping current customers happy and attracting new ones.

- 54. How do you measure success with a current vendor?
- 55. Share with me the criteria you use when selecting a vendor?

- 56. Which is most important to you: price, quality, service, delivery, customer support, and/or ease of use? Which of these is the least important?
- 57. How important is price compared to service? Compared to quality? Compared to availability? Compared to “time to market”?
- 58. You mentioned that quality is important to you. Would you share with me your definition of quality?
- 59. Can you give me an example of when your standards for quality were not met?
- 60. Can you rank the criteria you shared with me, from most important to least important?
- 61. How would others on your team rank this criteria? In what ways might their ranking be different from yours?

QUESTIONS ABOUT COMPETITION, TRENDS, AND MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

Assessing the competition periodically is a matter of survival for any business. Similarly, no business can thrive without keeping its finger on the pulse of the trends affecting its industry — effective marketing depends on such awareness. Questions about these aspects of business compel your customers to focus on the future while critically analyzing their present situation; they’ll have to ask themselves, “Can I get where I want to go with what I have now?” Whatever the answer, you’ll have



provided a valuable service by motivating them to answer that question.

- 62. How do you differentiate yourself from your competitors?
- 63. Why do customers buy from you?
- 64. If there was one area you'd want to improve to better serve/improve/fix/address _____, what would it be?
- 65. How does your company see itself in the market today?... In three years?
- 66. Where do you see the market opportunities to pursue? Obstacles to overcome?

IMPACT AND IMPLICATION QUESTIONS

These are questions used at the tail end of your discovery phase, to size up if you have a legitimate opportunity and a sense of urgency on your customer's part. Everybody has an excuse for why they do things! For example, let's say you ask your customer, "What's the implication for you and your family if you don't begin a savings plan now for your retirement?" He could reply, "I don't know, I guess the government will take care of me," or "I'll let my children figure it out." The answer clearly reveals there is no urgency or probably no interest. That response is very revealing. Maybe you should end the conversation as soon as possible so you can pursue a more qualified prospect!

Impact questions are crucial because they elicit motivations, the sense of urgency for action or not. Based

on the customer's response, you can quickly determine if you've earned the right to start selling/closing or to walk away or pursue another path of questioning to uncover the customers' real needs. Examples of questions you can ask include:

- 67. What kind of impact would this have on you if this problem is allowed to continue?
- 68. Let's pretend for a moment that the problem you just described doesn't go away. What's the possible ramification on _____? How would that affect you?
- 69. What if the problem you identified is not corrected? What would the consequences be?
- 70. What do you think these problems are going to cost you in the long run if not resolved?
- 71. Can you afford not to take action?
- 72. Let's assume nothing changes. What will it cost you this year? If you don't fix this problem, what is the potential impact on your business? Can you afford to take that risk?

VISION QUESTIONS

With vision questions, you ask your customer to look towards the future, presenting him with a picture of how much brighter the future could be with the positive changes resulting from him doing business with you. Once you get your customer to the point at which you'll use a vision question, you've earned the right to convince him how your



product or service will help him achieve that goal. Examples of vision questions include:

73. If we could eliminate that problem you are currently experiencing — for instance, that problem that's costing you \$1 million per year — what benefit do you think that would have on your company?
74. If we could implement that change, what would that enable you to do or achieve?
75. How would implementing this change affect you personally? What would you be able to do differently? If those changes could get implemented, how do you think your job (or career) would look 5 years from now?

I've provided you with lots of questions. Perhaps you feel like there are too many questions, but trust me, you can ask these over the course of numerous calls in numerous situations. Look at it as a smorgasbord of questions that you can choose from. By asking questions like those in the preceding examples, you'll establish a true rapport with your customers, leading you to the information you need to position yourself as an advisor they can trust. Once that happens, you'll have opened their eyes to the value of your solution, not just the price tag. ■

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CONCLUSION

BEGIN with the right questions so you can CLOSE more business.

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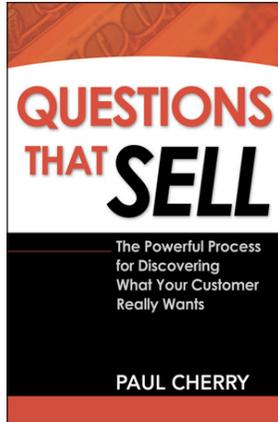


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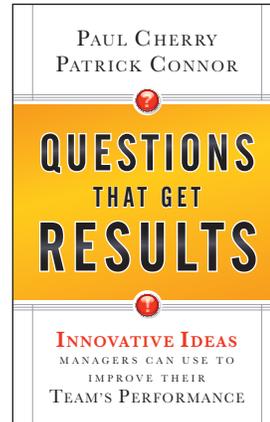
Paul Cherry is founder and managing partner of the Philadelphia-area, sales and leadership training firm Performance Based Results. He has worked with over 1,200 companies and organizations in every industry. Recognized as the leading authority on asking the right questions to achieve one's goals in business and in life, Cherry is the author of the top-selling book *Questions That Sell* (American Management Association) and co-author with managing partner Patrick Connor of the book, *Questions That Get Results* (John Wiley & Sons).



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