

Asking Warm-Up Questions for Cold Calls

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Performance Based Results

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ASKING WARM-UP QUESTIONS FOR COLD CALLS

Written by **Paul Cherry** – 7/11/19

During this very warm summer, I thought that I would re-post a favorite article from a few years back that sparked a lot of discussions and seems appropriate for the season!

Asking great warm-up questions during a cold call meeting is a valuable technique in establishing a new business relationship with a prospect.

You've scheduled your first meeting with a new prospective customer! You're hoping for "beginner's luck," eager to make a stellar first impression—but what's the best way to make that happen? Do you jump right into questioning if your prospect knows little, if anything, about you? How do you provide background on your company without falling into the sales pitch trap? You want to quickly set the stage and build credibility, otherwise your prospect may ask herself, "Why am I wasting my time with you, loser?"

AVOID SMALL TALK – GET TO THE POINT

It's tempting to try warming up with small talk about the weather or an interesting item in your prospect's office—but that can backfire if you're not careful.

I knew a salesman who discovered in advance that his prospect liked the game of cricket. He studied the sport so closely, he was able to engage his prospect in a lively 45-minute conversation. Unfortunately, after their cricket chat, the prospect had no time for talking business because he had to dash off to a crucial meeting!

Then there was another salesman who couldn't help noticing a large teak turtle statue in his prospect's office, and thought it would make a great launch pad for warm-up questions. After asking about the teak turtle's origins and workmanship, he asked, "So what made you decide to put this handsome creature in your office? The prospect smirked. "Oh, I just use it to bait stupid salespeople like you who waste my time with lame questions." *Ouch!*

Sure, you'd like to be able to build a relationship with a customer before you start pitching your products and services. Talking about hobbies and office knick-knacks is a nice start, but you can only milk that so far.

The trouble is, the big businesspeople you want to cultivate are too overwhelmingly busy to take the time to build relationships first. They don't have time to chitchat about cricket, teak turtles, or charming family photos on their desks. Keep in mind, too, that you can't hurry trust.

TALK ABOUT WHAT MATTERS TO YOUR PROSPECT

Trite questions roll trippingly off the tongue, but they also trip you up by inspiring trite responses, especially when customers are short on time. These people are guarded because they don't know you, therefore they don't know how far to trust you. How do you cultivate their trust? How can you tell when people want to do business with you, or if they're just trying to pick your brain for free?

Use warm-up questions to segue into the aspects of business that matter to the customer, and you'll find out what her most pressing concerns really are. The key is to formulate warm-up questions that reach the heart of the matter with surgical precision, while still being subtle enough not to intimidate your customer.

Bring up market trends your client's company is experiencing. Point out an article your customer would find relevant in a trade or business publication. You can even say you came across the piece in your research for this meeting.

Let me share an example.

Kyle sells recruitment solutions, and he wants to initiate a dialogue with Emma, his contact at his target company's Human Resources department. He stops by Emma's office and, after some brief pleasantries, leads with:

"Hey, Emma, the reason I am here today is, while prepping for today's meeting, I came a recent article in 'HR News.' It talks

about the cost of losing a high-performance sales rep — as much as 20 times their salary. Did you happen to see that article? A client I visited last week calculated the cost of losing their best sales rep to be as much as \$500,000. What have you been experiencing in your market regarding retention strategies for hiring and keeping strong sales performers?”

“GOOGLE” YOUR NEW PROSPECT BEFORE THE MEETING

You need to do some extensive research well before the cold call meeting. Using Google or another search engine, start gathering personal and business profiles on your prospect and prospect’s business. Go beyond ordinary search methods by gaining more business-worthy information and data using an online business resource service. The more details you are able to compile, the more personalized your warm-up questions will be. Learn to understand the company’s:

- Ranking in its industry
- Financial strength
- Executives and their backgrounds
- Industry trends
- Competitors
- Customer base.

Services to find this information include:

- Dun & Bradstreet
- D&B Hoover's
- Leadership Connect
- Reference USA
- Mergent
- Plunkett Research

THE 60-SECOND SOUND BITE

After you briefly exchange pleasantries, you need to quickly transition and grab the busy prospect's attention before the client "checks out" of the sales conversation.

Using a 60-minute talk technique, or "elevator speech" because, as with an elevator ride, you have a fleeting window to act, will help achieve this transition. However, it's challenging. There's so much info you want to convey—how do you condense it all into a sixty-second commercial that'll leave your prospect eager to hear more? Since customers have so little time to spare, you need to ask to-the-point questions without appearing too overbearing.

For instance, Andre might say to Sam, *"Before we get started, would it be helpful if I spend 60 seconds on exactly who we are and what we do?"* He then spends eight seconds explaining briefly what his company does, or highlight a specialty that will grab Sam's attention. Then introduce a recent client success

story or case study. Sam, like most sales professionals, relates to stories that are specific to his business and strike an emotional chord. These stories are:

- Short
- Specific
- Relevant
- Results-oriented

A great 60-second sound bite must speak results in terms in one or more of the following:

- Dollars
- Percentages
- Numbers

It should also illustrate how to:

- Overcome adversity
- Achieve greater sales success

FIVE ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR A COLD CALL

1. Warm-up questions. Sales pros like Kyle and Andre should ask questions that are open-ended, broad in scope, and focused on getting clients like Emma or Sam talking about their own issues. For instance:

- *"How long have you been with this organization?"*
- *"How has your job (or responsibilities) evolved since you started with the company?"*
- *"What would you say you like most about your work?"*
"Least?"
- *"If your employees (team, co-workers, boss, etc.) were to describe this organization in five words or less, what words would come to mind?"*
(Listen to the words given, then respond, "The word _____ is a good one. Can you elaborate on that?")
- *"What would your best customers say are the reasons they enjoy doing business with you?"*

Based on a client's responses to the sales rep's warm-up questions, it is possible to quickly discover the client's interests, personality, beliefs, and how the client feels about their work environment and company culture.

2. Jot down the information the prospective client gives. Capture any and all critical info before it evaporates from your brain. For example, listen for certain keywords and the emotions behind them:

- *"We are having difficulty with _____"*
- *"We are trying to _____"*

- "We are unsure of _____"

For example, when Andre jots down those keywords, it's much easier for him to go back and get Sam to elaborate.

3. Do not make assumptions about a prospect. In another scenario, Evan, a rep who sold high-tech equipment in a complex tech environment, had been on the job only six months when he closed the biggest deal in his company's history. Asked about his secret to success, Evan admitted that he hardly understood the product. So how did he control the sales process? By asking lots of questions! "Beginner's luck," you say? More likely, Evan's fresh perspective and lack of assumptions about the client, the client's problems, and the client's product actually worked in his favor. His curiosity compelled him to ask questions that experienced sales reps would have skipped because they assumed they already knew the answers.

4. Slow down. Don't try to sell too quickly. It is imperative not to give in to the urge to sell too quickly. Ironically, if you seem anxious to sell, your prospect will pick up on that and get defensive. Desperation is an unattractive quality in business. You don't want to sound like every other sales rep trying to shove a solution down the customer's throat. You'll be more successful at establishing a relationship if you shift and maintain the conversation's focus on the customer, not you. Salespeople have strong egos – that's what helps them survive the rigors of such a demanding profession. Keep in mind, though, that customers have strong egos too, and they want to

talk as much as you do! Use well-chosen warm-up questions to get your customers talking – and you'll learn the best way to meet their needs. That way, it will be the first of many meetings and the start of a great business partnership.

5. Know the bottom line. Prospects are interested in how a sales rep will eliminate business headaches and help increase profits. Positive business relationships have to develop over time. Keep warm-up questions focused and relevant – use them to give prospects a taste of how valuable you and your services are – while still maintaining the shortest time-frame possible. Nothing builds rapport with decision-makers like showing them you can help them save money and grow their business because you truly understand where they're coming from.

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