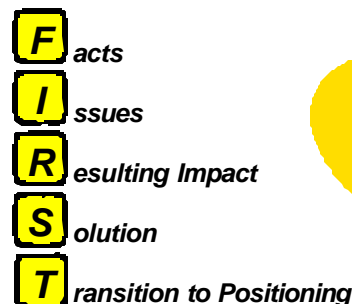


FIRST: The Key to Successful Sales

Abstract: Good sales professionals know the importance of asking questions to identify opportunities. GREAT sales professionals know questions can be used to increase the value of their solution, eliminate the competition, and increase the prospect's urgency to move quickly. This article presents a model for asking effective sales questions.

In today's competitive sales environment, customers buy solutions that help them capitalize on opportunities or reduce problems. Successful sales professionals use questions to:

- Uncover *facts*
- Identify *issues* (opportunities or problems) that the customer faces
- Determine the *resulting impact* of not addressing the issue
- Help the customer identify the criteria for *solutions*



Entelechy uses the FIRST model to describe the process that successful sales representatives follow.

Fact Questions

Fact questions answer who, what, when, and where. They are fairly easy to ask and to answer. Fact questions can yield critical information including technical requirements and the customer's buying criteria. Fact questions include:

- What is your role?
- How many people are involved?
- When would you like to begin implementing a solution?
- Who will be making the decision?
- Where are various systems located?

While fact questions give us important information, they usually do not help us identify problems. In fact, for large sales, a large number of fact questions – especially around publicly available information -- are associated with UNSUCCESSFUL sales calls. Customers don't want to train us on their business; they become annoyed. Many facts can – and should – be determined before the call.

Issue Questions

Issue questions help us – and the customer – clarify the problem they are trying to address or the opportunity they wish to seize. Like fact questions, issue questions are also relatively easy to ask and answer. Unlike fact questions, these questions target the issue (problem or opportunity) the customer is facing. Issue questions include:

- What problem are you facing?
- Can you describe the situation as it is now?
- What would you like it to be?
- What's preventing you from achieving your goals?
- What might be causing the problem?
- Are you happy with...?
- If you could change something...?

For large sales, identifying issues (or low value needs) is a plus but is not by itself associated with successful sales calls. Why is this? Identifying an issue (a problem OR an opportunity) is often not enough impetus to act. The status quo is good enough in the mind of the customer.

We need to help the customer identify the implications of taking action -- or not taking action.

Resulting Impact/Value Questions

Resulting Impact/Value Questions help determine the resulting impact of the issue. While the temptation is great to present once the customer indicates that they have a problem that you might be able to solve, we suggest that you will be more successful if you ask Resulting Impact Questions to determine how significant the issue really is.

Resulting Impact Questions help determine the full impact — ideally in monetary terms — on customers, employees, business, and the buyer if the problem goes unaddressed or the opportunity goes unrealized. Examples of the beginning portion of Resulting Impact Questions include:

- How might this affect your...
- Does this impact your...
- How much do you think this is costing you...
- What might happen if you addressed this...
- What's the impact ...
- What is the effect on...

Resulting Impact Questions cause three very important things to happen; they:

1. Increase the need to do something
2. Attach value to the need
3. Differentiate your solution

Especially for large sales or where budgets are extremely tight, Resulting Impact Questions are associated with SUCCESSFUL calls. This is because the full impact of the issue may not have been explored; few people look at ALL of the ramifications on

customers, employees, business, suppliers, etc. **Resulting Impact Questions will separate you from your competitors.**

The response to your question, “What problems are you facing?” may identify a low value need, something a customer might not yet be willing to spend a significant amount of money on; if you were to present a solution at this point, the customer would likely not see the need to take immediate action.

Usually problems have far greater impact than any one person imagines; your job as sales professional/consultant is to help the customer identify the full impact of the problem and turn a low-value need into a high-value need.

As appropriate to the customer, explore impacted areas such as:

- Employees (morale, turnover, training, productivity, downtime, miscommunication, hiring, errors, additional headcount, overtime, benefits).
- Customers (customer service, lost sales/opportunities, lost customers, bad publicity/word of mouth, reference sites for future sales).
- Business (market share, time to market, R&D, new products/services, production, distribution, sales, revenue, profit, competitive advantage, decision-making, cash flow, finance).
- Job (overtime, stress, cannot get to important/strategic issues, work done at home).

The second thing impact/value questions do is attach value to the need; they can be used to quantify and justify. While we are expanding the impact of the problem/need, we also need to be attaching value to each of the responses. This increases the motivation to take action and justifies the cost of our solution. (It also virtually eliminates negotiations!)

Check out the following Resulting Impact Questions:

“You mentioned that you contract out the Phase 2 work to three independent companies and a small data management group. You also mentioned that the communication between the organizations has been problematic.”

1. How do the communication issues impact the quality of data you receive?
2. How might it impact the time your people need to spend clarifying issues?
3. How does it impact scheduling and deliverables?

By asking these questions, we have identified the value of addressing this issue. We could — and should — carry the questioning further and actually identify dollar figures to each area of impact. We are now addressing a high value need: The customer perceives the value of the solution to be greater than the price.

Third, impact/value questions can be used to differentiate your solution (your product, service, and company; YOU!) from competitors. When you’re tipping the scales for the customer to take action, you want them to take action with YOU!

How can impact questions do this? Tactical differentiation happens throughout the sales dialogue; while it is unplanned, you can differentiate tactically only if you have done your personal conditioning. Strategic differentiation is planned; impact questions that

you use to differentiate yourself strategically are planned before your call. Plan to embed your company's strategic differentiators in your sales calls.

Solution Questions

When you ask Resulting Impact Questions, customers may get rather depressed. The issue, after all, is significantly bigger than they first imagined!

Solution Questions turn coal into diamonds by moving the value from the issue (which you've already clearly identified) to the solution — YOUR solution!

Solution Questions get the CUSTOMER to identify the value of the solution. Examples of Solution Questions include:

- How would having a company with multinational presence help you bring the product to market faster?
- What would it mean to the product development timeline if you were to work with a company with expertise in your product?

Transition to Positioning

You move the customer through the buying cycle by effective questioning and getting them to see the significance of the problem, which will also create greater value for your solution.

Also, you magnify issues around key differentiators that increase our chance of winning.

After the issue is big enough in your customer's eyes, then you get them to tell you the benefits of solving the issue.

Now that you know what your customer's key benefits are, you can position your solution to those things that matter most to him or her.

Transitioning to positioning accomplishes the following:

- Focuses on issues that are big in customer's eyes (Resulting Impact Questions).
- Focuses on your key differentiators (Resulting Impact Questions).
- Aligns you with what the customer stated were benefits (Solution Questions).
- Increases the value of the solution (Resulting Impact Questions).

Examples of positioning statements:

- As you stated earlier, you want to ...
- You said that ideally what you're looking for is...
- You stated that you need...

Now that your customer sees that there is a major problem, and has begun seeing a solution and its benefits, this is where you position your solution (which is a topic for another discussion!). You also know the target: your customer sees a true need, and is looking for something that will meet his or her need, and you have influenced that need based upon your strengths.

Conclusion

Use FIRST to increase your sales success by uncovering important facts and major issues and by exploring the impact of those issues on your customer's business, employees, customers, and personal goals. Get your customer to identify the value of the solution and transition to positioning your solution and the associated benefits as they relate to your customer's high value needs.

This information comes from *Searching for Opportunities*, a module in Entelechy's High Performance Sales program. Check out this module as well as our 40 other modules, training tools, and eGuides at www.unlockit.com.

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