



## Gathering Information: *Critical for Sales Success*

By Jim Stewart

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It is one thing to have a prospective customer respect your opinion and endorse the products/services you are discussing—it's quite another to know how to make the sale. Once rapport has been established and there seems to be a basic compatibility between the seller's capabilities and the buyer's needs, the task is to now approach the sale with sensitivity and intelligence. Now is the time to gather critical pieces of information that will be helpful eventually in closing the sale.

It is important to position (or qualify) the fact that you would like to take some time to gain a more detailed insight into your prospect's requirements, wants, and needs. This will involve engaging in a two-way, productive dialogue where questions are asked in order to get this "deeper and broader" insight. To lead into this step (i.e., to qualify), you might say something like, "If **we** are to objectively be of service to you, it's important that I get the answer to a few questions. Do you mind if I ask you **these** questions now?"

Two words are especially important here. First, "**we**" implies that you represent more than just yourself, and carries the connotation that there is a group of people (i.e., a credible organization) standing behind the product/service. And next, "**these**" implies a planned series of questions, and avoids an inference that you are about to begin a barrage of pointless queries.

Types of questions fall into two simple categories. **Closed Questions** prompt for answers in very specific areas, and do not call for much flexibility/expansion; responses usually are yes/no, or some specific and limited fact. **Open Questions** demand a broad range of possible answers, and these questions do not attempt to limit or structure the response. Planning and knowing which type of question to use can be of great advantage in securing needed information. This open dialogue also demonstrates that you are sincerely looking out for your prospect's best interests, and are that you will not make specific recommendations until you're both comfortable.

When you receive the go-ahead to ask your questions, you now have the opportunity to gain important insights into:

- **Needs:** "What are your specific requirements for this type of service?"
- **Wants:** "What are your thoughts on the further development of this product/service?"
- **Ability to make the final decision** (i.e., level of authority): "Is anyone else involved in the decision besides you?"
- **Financial capacity to purchase:** "What funds have been allocated in order to make this purchase?"
- **Dominant buying motive:** "Which single option is the very most important to you?"

Without a thorough understanding of these items, it is next to impossible to create a win/win outcome.

Your ability to generate and gather information according to the above criteria is important for successful selling. Asking questions is fundamental. What makes the difference between mediocre salespeople and superstars is the ability of superstars to process and assess the answers they receive from the questions they ask, (i.e. they also engage in active/effective listening). Do **you** have a purpose behind every question you ask?