

Do Your Questions Put Off or Persuade?

By Dianna Booher

Salespeople, interviewers, managers, and various and sundry other presenters ask a lot of questions. So do many other outgoing people. Why? For the most part, we ask questions for four reasons: to solicit information, to show concern, to establish rapport or relationships, and at times, to indirectly express an objection.

But that communication habit can work against us. All questions are not created equal. Some questions annoy people for their lack of a clear purpose. They seem intrusive at worst and pointless at best.

“So tell me a little about your operations now—what’s automated and what’s not?” A typical, but weak approach for opening a sales presentation. First, opening with such a broad question will make the other person reluctant to answer because he or she doesn’t know where the question is leading. Second, most of the answer will probably be irrelevant to the discussion at hand. Even with the consultative approach, people want to know where you’re trying to lead them. If you start with a question, focus and explain the benefits or the point of knowing the answer. To customers or colleagues, focused questions, not broad ones, will seem worth the effort to answer.

Showcase a Benefit

To be persuasive, frame a benefit: “How much time do your engineers spend in preparing these charts each month?” Follow up: “This software package can generate such a chart with fewer than six keystrokes.” Raise a question: “Do your managers look forward to performance appraisal conferences?” Give a response. “Our consultants can identify performance problems objectively with this survey before these problems lead to termination.”

Sometimes this questioning technique alone is the difference between having prospects tune out what they perceive as a formal, canned sales “pitch” or what they consider a consultative approach, customized conversation specific to their needs.

For example, here’s a wasted question—one that often gets an unnecessarily negative response: “Do you have about five minutes—I’d like to tell you how our relocation company would handle the move.” The response will often be, “No, I don’t five minutes.” Or: “Okay, five minutes. Give me the pitch.”

On the other hand, here's a question that showcases a benefit: "Do you transfer employees into this office often?" Follow-up: "Then you'll be interested to know that we can handle the entire move for all sixty of your people so that you don't have to deal with so many different vendors during the process. We even offer mortgage financing."

Invite Others to "Try on Your Idea"

How many times have you heard the comment, "If I could just get the boss to try it, she'd like it." That's why we get cereal, soap, and software in the mail. The same principle is at work with ideas. People can't try new ideas on over old ones. "Would you be open to discussing something new?" You have to persuade people to put aside the old policy, equipment, or training—even if temporarily--to give the new a fair trial. Help others to play with an idea first—discuss what-ifs, who-withs, where-necessaries, whys, and how-tos. A question to test or call attention to others' openness, or lack thereof, will establish a safe environment for them to "toy" with an idea without fear of communicating commitment to "buy" it.

Give Questions Context

Della, a trade-show manager, asked her assistant how much small, plastic trash cans cost. The assistant, Pam, then called eight stores to put together a list of potential suppliers of trash containers, with the available sizes and prices for volume purchases. When Pam reported back to her manager with her list of suppliers, Della commented that they're all too expensive for the one-time use she intended—to place them in the exhibitor booths for the upcoming trade show. When Della finally amplified on her purpose, the perturbed assistant explained that her next-door neighbor ran a cleaning service. And that cleaning-service company would supply trash containers with their janitorial service for a fee less than the cost to purchase the containers.

Once again, wasted effort. The manager didn't give the bigger picture that prompted the question. If people know why you're asking, they may supply helpful information that you haven't even thought to ask. Context narrows the field.

So even though on social occasions people often lapses into a question-answer format to show interest and vicariously participate in others' experiences, constantly remind yourself of the need for structure and purpose. Focus makes a big difference in whether you build rapport or destroy a relationship or opportunity. Don't pose questions that put off people; instead, persuade them.

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*Dianna Booher works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*

For more tips on using visuals effectively, see Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire and Persuade (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.