

When it Comes to Sales, the Question is...  
by Dan Ross  
Executive Director  
Entrepreneurs Forum of Greater Philadelphia

If you attended the January Entrepreneurs Forum meeting, you participated in a dynamic interactive discussion on sales and marketing. Our session, “Cure Your Sales and Marketing Challenges in 60 Minutes”, was attended by over 100 entrepreneurs. The format consisted solely of questions submitted by the audience. Everyone walked away with real-world solutions that could produce immediate results.

One question resonated with me. An attendee asked what the biggest mistake sales people, new and experienced, repeatedly make. One of our panelists, Scott Messer, President of Sales Evolution, gave a great answer. He said that the biggest mistake a sales person makes is the failure to articulate a differentiated value proposition to the prospect. Scott and the other panelists pointed out that many times a sales person will communicate a value proposition that can be just as true for their competitor. Stated differently, if you write down your value proposition and your competitor’s name can easily replace your company name with no change, your sales person isn’t likely to succeed.

This is an excellent litmus test for your sales person. However, I will point out that it is the responsibility of product development/management and marketing to *create* the value proposition. The sales person is responsible for *communicating* it to the prospect. Make sure that the sales person has the tools necessary to be effective.

As is true with most things, there probably is no one “biggest mistake” a sales person makes. Hopefully, there are only a few! However, there is at least one other mistake that stands out in my experience and is addressed in most sales training programs. That is, the failure to ask questions of the prospect. Good questions uncover customer needs. Questions are at the core of today’s approach to consultative selling. I firmly believe that questions are the most powerful tool a sales person has.

In a perfect world, marketing delivers a prospect (not a lead) to the sales person that is 100% aligned with a differentiated value proposition. Unless your product or service is very simple and your marketing machine is perfect, that will not always happen. Questioning the prospect early in the sales cycle helps uncover how well the prospect aligns with your value proposition.

Too often, the sales person launches into a sales presentation without really understanding the prospect’s needs. This happens for a number of reasons. The prospect may be impatient. The inexperienced sales person may be nervous or unsure. Therefore, he or she is afraid to let the prospect talk because they may say no. The experienced sales person has seen many prospects. Maybe too many. The assumption may be that they are all the same. They are not.

I recently bought a new car. Like many people, I did my homework on the internet before going to the showroom. I knew what I wanted and how much I was willing to pay. I had already bought two cars from the dealership. The new car would be a replacement for an earlier year of the same model. A few simple questions would have saved the sales person a lot of time. Instead, he treated me to the full sales pitch that he learned in school. He knew his product's features and benefits well. However, I really did not care about a lot of them. I finally stopped him when he wanted to open up the hood and let me see the engine. As far as I am concerned, they should weld the hood shut! I do not want to know anything about it.

In this case, he still made the sale. However, he kept talking past the point of the sale, risking mentioning something that could have caused me to have second thoughts.

Questions are magic. They will let you know if you have a good prospect, who your competitor is, which of your features are the most important, when they are planning to buy, how much they will pay and who the real economic buyer is. Plus much more.

Many of the entrepreneurs who attend the Forum are not professional sales people. They do not feel comfortable in selling situations. If you are in that category, you should seriously consider investing time in some form of training. However, you do not need to wait to begin using this powerful tool more effectively. Asking questions does not take anything but the willingness to hear the prospect say no! The word "No" is your second best selling tool. It saves you and your customer time and effort. It lets you know if your value proposition is resonating. It provides a roadmap to the best possible outcome for both your prospect and you. Selling really starts when the customer says no.

To paraphrase Dale Carnegie, you will sell far more by becoming interested in your customer than you will by your customer becoming interested in you. If you simply ask your prospects sincere open ended questions you will demonstrate your interest in their success. Along the way, in addition to improving your closing ratio and shortening your sales cycle, you will help your customers achieve their goals, meet some fascinating people and maybe make some friends.

#### About Dan Ross

Dan Ross is the Executive Director of the Entrepreneurs Forum of Greater Philadelphia. Previously, Dan completed a 32-year career in the IT industry with Unisys Corporation. He has held leadership positions in sales, sales management, sales training, strategic alliance development, channels development and marketing. Dan was instrumental in the early formation of indirect channels in the IT industry, helping many entrepreneurs launch their businesses. He created programs to help these companies build business plans, hire and train sales people, create marketing plans and collateral, and build sales pipelines through effective lead generation. [danross.efgp@comcast.net](mailto:danross.efgp@comcast.net) .