

# Improving Sales Performance Through Questions

## An Approach To Increasing Sales

Critical to creating value is the development of customer problems – jointly with the customer – to the point that these problems become strong and clear in the eyes of the customer. Even though this might seem obvious, this point is lost on many sales reps.

In order for a customer to take action to actually solve a problem they must have a strong need from two perspectives:

1. They must see the problem as significant and of high value to solve. Either the problem has high value if it is solved *or* it carries a significant opportunity cost if it is not solved *or* both. In either way, the value must be significant.
2. The customer must want to solve the problem. It must carry a high enough priority in relation to the other problems on their radar screen that they feel a compelling need to solve the problem now.

From the customer's perspective, they may think they want to solve the problem. The mere existence of the problem causes frustration and hassle inside the organization and perhaps with their clients as well. But, in reality, they probably haven't thought through the problem and don't

understand how, if at all, the problem is impacting their business. Unless their company has unlimited financial and people resources they can't expect to solve and eliminate every problem. So, reality sets in, and the problem keeps on being a problem.

The sales representative must help the customer understand the severity of the problem and how the problem truly impacts the company's top and bottom lines. Unless the customer and the company perceive that the problem carries a significant opportunity cost if it is not solved, the customer will fail to solve it and the sales rep will fail to close the sale.

The customer will either run into resistance from above because the financial impact to the business is not sufficient or because other issues carry higher opportunity costs.

### ***Uncovering the problem***

First-things first: uncovering the problem. It can be as simple as the customer volunteering that they have a problem from the onset or the sales rep asking a few appropriate questions to uncover the problem. Once the problem is on the table; that's where most sales reps, even the pretty good ones, fall short.

Sales people fail to help the customer develop the size of the problem to the point that the customer is compelled to take action. And, until the customer is compelled to take action to solve the problem the sales rep is not going to get an order.

The key to greater sales success lies in a two-word question that the sales rep should be ready to use over and over and over again – SO WHAT?

### ***So what?***

Let's suppose that the customer indicates they are having difficulty fulfilling customer orders in a timely manner. At the point that the customer states that they have a problem, the sales rep still doesn't know much about the problem.

- Is the problem simply a pain in the neck?
- Is it so severe that their customers are canceling right and left due to untimely deliveries?
- Or is it something in the middle?

At this point the sales rep needs to become a dog with a bone and ask the question "*so what?*" Not in those exact words, but after a fashion. The question "*so what?*" serves as a powerful mental reminder to the sales rep to ask the questions that will give him a better understanding of how big or serious the problem really is.

Ultimately, if the problem is causing the customer only a few thousand

dollars of lost sales over a year's period then the customer will probably continue to live with the problem. However if the problem is causing million of dollars in lost sales as a result of their customers going to competitors while eroding the company's previously positive public image, then the customer might be forced into action to solve the problem.

What the sales rep has accomplished by asking the "so what" question has not only helped him to better understand the opportunity cost(s); but, more importantly, has also helped the customer to understand the size or magnitude of the problem(s) and the impacts to the business if it (they) are not solved. The latter is the key point. In the end, it doesn't matter what the sales person thinks, it only matters what the customer thinks.

### ***Understanding through questions***

"So what?" questions can take many forms, for example:

- What is the impact of not being able to fulfill customer orders having on your ability to meet sales targets?
- What is the consequence of not being able to meet top and bottom line financial targets?
- How have sales been affected? Have customer orders begun to decrease? By how much?

- How have sales revenues and profits been impacted? By how much?
- What might happen if this problem is not solved quickly? Or not solved at all?
- How has sales morale been affected? Have sales reps become frustrated as result of this problem?
- Could this problem cause your company's fine public image to become tarnished? What would the impact be to your bottom line if your image began to erode?
- Have customer complaints increased? By how much? How have they affected your top and bottom lines?
- How much time does the sales force spend addressing customer complaints? As a result, how has sales rep morale been affected? Could this eventually impact the bottom line?

We want to continue to ask questions to understand how the problem is affecting or impacting the customer's business until we get to bedrock i.e. the root financial impact the problem is having on the company's bottom line.

Bedrock is being able to fully understanding the magnitude of the financial impact as well as the root causes of what would happen to the company if this problem were not solved. In reality, this questioning

process is helping the customer see how big the problem is. And until the customer understands how the problem is truly impacting his business he probably won't act to solve it.

This approach also helps to flush out any other issues that result from the original problem.

### ***Everyone's A Winner***

The end result to the customer and to the sales rep is a win-win:

- The **customer** realizes that his issues are real and much more severe than previously thought. This realization could very well be the catalyst that results in the customer taking action to solve the problem(s).
- The **sales rep** has established himself or herself as someone who understands the customer's business and is capable of solving his problems and creating value for his business, thus resulting in a sale.

In fact, as a result of asking "so what?" the customer could conclude that the sales rep does in fact understand their business...and that doing business with the sales rep and his/her company could be a smart move.

**And it all started with asking – "so what?"**