

2 n d E d i t i o n

Ask
Questions,
Get
Sales

CLOSE THE DEAL
AND CREATE LONG-TERM
RELATIONSHIPS

S t e p h a n S c h i f f m a n

Author of Cold Calling Techniques (That Really Work!)

Ask
Questions,
Get
Sales
2nd Edition

CLOSE THE DEAL
AND CREATE LONG-TERM
RELATIONSHIPS

Stephan Schiffman



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Getting Started

The odds are good that you bought this book with the intention of improving your questioning skills during the sales process. And that's exactly what we'll be covering here.

I'll bet you're also wondering: Who is this guy, and why should I listen to what he has to say about dealing with my prospects?

It's a fair question. Here's the answer. I run a twenty-four-year-old sales training company that has, as of this writing, trained over half a million people and has offices in New York, Toronto, Los Angeles, Chicago, Columbus, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Dallas, Houston, Boston, Long Island, Central New Jersey, and Kansas City. I started the business from scratch. We have received tremendous reviews from Amazon.com and *Selling Power* magazine; and we are number-one rated for training and prospecting. Since launching the company back in the late 1970s, I've been lucky enough to:

- Establish relationships with hundreds of the world's top companies, including Chevron-Texaco, Exxon-Mobil, Federal Express, Nextel, Chase, Waste Management, Washington Mutual Finance, Fleet Bank, and many other *Fortune* 1,000 companies
- Implement successful training programs in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia
- Write and publish twenty-three books in seven languages

When I started this business all those years ago, I didn't know it was going to be a sales training company. I thought it was going to be a consulting firm. I sat around, literally by myself, asking, "How do I create something? How do I make something happen? How do I get customers?"

To answer that question, I first printed 10,000 pens and 10,000 brochures. I decided I was going to use these to send out a mailing, but that didn't really work for me. (I still have some of the pens, if you're interested.)

What I ended up doing was learning how to make appointments. And that, fortuitously enough, was what I began building my company around: setting appointments, learning how to sell, and understanding the sales process. So what I'm going to share with you here are some things I've learned about selling—specifically, things I've learned about asking questions during face-to-face meetings with prospects.

What Is High-Efficiency Selling?

Many salespeople are taught to go in and "find pain" or "find a problem" during their meetings with prospects. Traditionally, salespeople are taught to ask about the pain, ask about the problems associated with whatever's going on in the prospect's world.

But in doing that, you actually limit yourself to a very small percentage of the situations where you could add value.



By asking about pain and problems, you basically *limit* yourself to winning sales from those people who are willing to answer “Yes” when you ask them if they have any problem or feel any pain. The rest of the people are going to be “All set.” And that’s what you’re going to hear, over and over again. Some variation on, “We’re all set.”

Eventually, you’ll realize what I realized after a few months of selling. *The answers we get are directly related to the questions we ask.*

We Create the Flow

In other words, you and I as salespeople create the conversational flow during all our exchanges with all the people we talk to during the course of the day.

Let’s say that I sit down across from your desk and say to you, “Mister Prospect, what pain are you having right now with your current vendors?” I’m going to get an answer based on the concept of “Pain.” You might say, “Yes, this is the problem; we are feeling pain about so-and-so.” And I might get some degree of business from you.

There’s nothing wrong with this approach when you get the business, but a large percentage of the time, you’re going to say to me, “Steve, we have no problems with our vendors. *We’re all set.*”

When people come to see me and try to sell to me, they often say, “Well, Mr. Schiffman, are you having any problems?” In most cases, I’m pretty happy with the vendors that I’m dealing with. So guess what I say? “Nah. *We’re all set.*”

Let me give you a true story that will illustrate what I’m talking about. As a businessman, I have a longstanding personal policy about dealing with salespeople—I’ll meet with just about anybody, if the person comes out and asks for the appointment. The other day a banker dropped by my office to talk to me. This particular banker has been coming to see me now for the last six years, trying to get my business. Every year, for six years, he calls up, sets an appointment, and then comes by my office and says, “Steve, are you having any problems with your bank?”

I always say, “No, things have been going pretty good for me.”

And he says, “Well, you know, there’s got to be something that’s bothering you.”

And I say, “No, not really.”

I’ve been talking to him for six years, and he always leaves because he can’t find a problem or pain. I’m always *all set* with my current bank.

Another Kind of Question

What if that banker had asked a different question altogether?

Suppose he had asked me something like this:

“Steve—just out of curiosity—how did you choose your current bank?”

If he’d asked me that question—a question based on what I had *done* in the past rather than what he thought my *pain or problem* was—then he would have gotten a very different answer, wouldn’t he?

Instead of saying, “No, I don’t have any problems,” I would have said, “Well, I got a referral from a friend who spoke highly of the bank, and I saw that it offered a no-fee checking account, and that was interesting, so I went ahead and opened an account.” (Or whatever the answer would have been.)

Now, if you agree that sales is all about encouraging a *dialogue* (and most people would not deny that it is), I have a question for you.

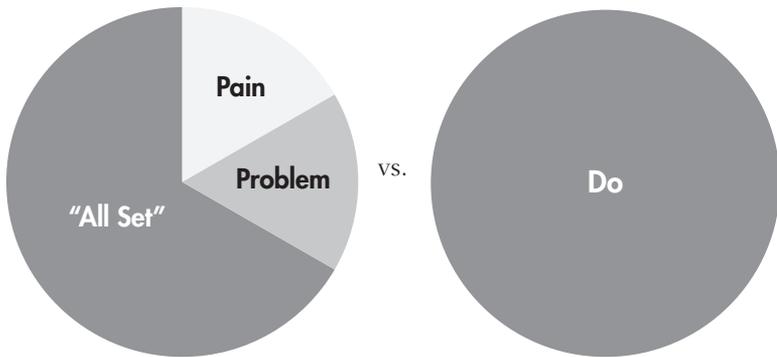
Which of these two approaches is *more likely* to yield a meaningful dialogue with the prospect?

1. What would you change about your current bank if you could change anything? (*Attempt to “find the pain”*)

Or:

2. How did you choose your current bank? (*Attempt to learn about what the prospect did, is doing now, or is planning to do*)

As you ponder this question, consider these two visual representations of the questioning models under discussion:



Look again at the high proportion of conversation-killing responses of “All set” that the traditional approach is likely to garner. Then consider the proportion of people (100 percent, actually) who would have something to say if you asked them a question about what they do.

Your #1 Competitor

Sometimes, during my training programs, I’ll ask people, “Who’s your number-one competitor?”

I’ll get all kinds of answers. “The ABC Company.” “The XYX Company.” “Our own perceived limitations.” And on and on.

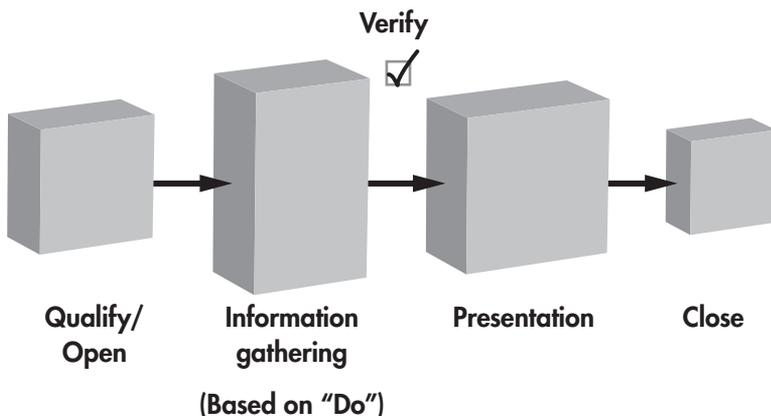
Actually, those answers are not quite accurate. For most of us, the number-one competitor is *what the person you are trying to sell to is already doing*. The number-one competitor is, in fact, the status quo.

Very few of the people you are going to sit down with today, next week, next month, or next year are not already using some kind of product or service *right now*. In fact, they are all using or doing *something*—even if they are currently deciding not to use anything like what you offer.

You walk in there—and I don’t care what you sell, whether you are selling banking, Internet access, training programs, paper, shipping, whatever—the fact is that every single person you are calling on *is doing something right now*. It may not be what you want them to be doing, and it may not be the way you want them to do it, but they are doing something. And it makes sense to them right now for them to do it that way.

The Sales Model

Take a look at this diagram—and consider the box that says “Close.”



In this sales model, you first qualify prospects as being worth your time in pursuing for a sale. Next, you gather information about them, based on asking questions related to what they “do.” You make a presentation (after taking steps to verify that your presentation will meet the prospect’s needs) and eventually (you hope) reach the closing stage.

But what is the “close”? What does “closing” mean?

When I ask this question, the answers I get inevitably sound like this:

“Well, we make a sale, we build a relationship, I get paid. That’s what closing means.”

That’s certainly true. Another significant fact, however, is that the Close means that the other person actually begins to *use* your service. They bought your product and they use it. That’s when the closing has definitely taken place, right? That’s what makes your commission check possible.

Close = Use!

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Think of the nationally recognized courier companies like Airborne Express, Federal Express, Air Express International, and DHL. At these companies the fact that you open an account with them means absolutely nothing . . . *if you don't actually use the service*. There are plenty of accounts at those companies that are underused or aren't being used at all! Clearly, their "customer base" is the people who actually use the service. Ultimately, it's the same for you and me.

So what are we doing as salespeople? We're trying to get people to *use* the service that we offer—*forever*.

That's what the sale is, and that is *all* the sale is: The other person's decision to use the service forever. That's what we get paid for.

Now if that's true—and obviously I think it is—then what are the implications of this (deceptively) simple-sounding principle? Take a look back at the sales model.

Why is the person going to decide to use what you offer? On some level, I think you already know the answer to that question. Because it *makes sense* for him or her to do so.

In other words, if you are going back for a meeting, your aim has to be to get to the point where the person will say to themselves, "*You know what? This concept, this sale, this presentation makes sense to me.*"

In other words, when it makes sense for the other person to use your product or service—that's the close. That's what it all comes down to.

Look at it this way: Whatever it is that you are doing right now professionally—it *made sense* for you at one point in your life to undertake that job, that mission, that role. That's why you decided to do what you're doing now, right? It made sense to you, based on your options at the time. It's the same with your prospects. They do what makes sense to them, based on their options at the time.

So, what's the presentation? Look at the second box over from the right in the sales model. This box represents you *presenting a plan* or *giving a reason* for someone to buy or to use your service. If that reason makes sense, the person will buy from you. If that reason does not make sense, the person will not buy from you.

In order to make a recommendation that *makes sense*, we've got to get information. Take one more look at the sales model diagram. Notice how big that information-gathering box is when compared to all the others!

If we do our job right, 75 percent of the work we do as salespeople is completed *before* we make a presentation. You'll notice that there is a verifying substep between the information step and the presentation step. That's where we confirm that what we're about to recommend is correct. To do this, I suggest you use a "preliminary proposal" or "outline proposal" before delivering a formal recommendation. (See Appendices B and C.)

The point to remember is that getting the information is absolutely crucial to success in sales—and that it's the exact opposite of "pain-based" or "problem-based" selling.

If you go in for a first meeting with someone and simply say to the person, "What pain, what problem are you having? What would you change about what you're doing right now?"—nine times out of ten you're not going to get any meaningful information. Most of the time, what you recommend *will not make sense*.

Suppose, though, you were to build your meeting around questions like this:

1. What do you do?
2. How do you do it?
3. When and where do you do it?
4. Why do you do it that way?
5. Who are you doing it with?
6. How can we help you do it better?

If you ask questions like these, you will get better, more descriptive answers from your prospects, and you'll be in a better position to establish a dialogue.

Learning how to ask intelligent variations on these six questions is what this book is all about. By the time you're done with the book, you're actually going to be able to get better information during your meetings and phone conversations because you'll be establishing a better platform from which to sell. You'll be looking at a bigger picture because you'll be asking questions in six specific areas:

Question Group #1: What the prospect does.

Question Group #2: How the prospect does that.

Question Group #3: When and where the prospect does what he or she does.

Question Group #4: Why the prospect does it that way.

Question Group #5: Who the prospect is currently working with.

Question Group #6: (Advanced—only ask after you’ve addressed numbers one through five.) Whether and how you can help the client do what he or she does better.

When you make a conscious choice to ask questions in these six areas, you’ll find that you get much more substantial answers—and that you’re gathering the information you need to make a more substantial presentation. In other words, you’ll be compiling the data needed to develop a presentation that is likely to *make sense* to the other person.

Let me give you an example of what I mean—and how this “do-based” model can improve your results. At my company, we sell sales training. So the first question I ask prospects is, “What kind of sales training do you do?” I get a very different answer to that question than I would if I said, “I’m just curious, what pain or problem are you having right now?” It gives me a deeper sale and allows me to gather information that may not be based in any pain or problem the other person is experiencing.

In my selling cycle, I ask these kinds of “do” questions during the first appointment, and then I schedule a second appointment, and perhaps a third. At that point, I’ve not only gathered but verified my information (you remember the verification substep from our diagram), and I’m in a great position to say something like the following: “You know what? Based on what you are saying, and based upon all the information you’ve given me, I really think I can help you.” And that results in sales.

Selling is nothing more—and nothing less—than finding out what people do and then finding ways to help them do it better.

Once we understand that, we realize that success in selling to people revolves around *finding out what they do*. If we understand what they do and how to apply that knowledge to our business, and if we understand what I call *product malleability*, we're going to sell more effectively.

Product Malleability

It's important to understand what the prospect does; it's also important, of course, to understand what *we* do.

I understand my product; more importantly, I understand how I can adapt my product to help you do what you are doing better. That's where *product malleability* comes in.

Malleability means "the ability to be shaped into another form." For me, product malleability means being able to address problems that people wouldn't normally associate with a sales training company. I have lots of success stories ready to tell, at the drop of a hat, stories that illustrate how what my company offers has been applied *creatively* to different situations—situations that my prospect might not have thought about yet.

If I understand exactly what the other person *does*, and I also understand how to adapt or shape exactly what I *offer*, then moving through the sales cycle is going to be a lot easier for me.

You Create the Flow

You create the flow of the sales conversation.

You really do. You could walk in on a sales call and say, "Hey, how are you doing today, I'd love to have a Coca-Cola." The other person will respond in kind.

Or you could walk in and say, "Hey, it's raining today." And the other person will respond in kind to that.

You could walk in and say, "You know, Mr. Jones, you're a real jerk." And Mr. Jones would respond in kind to that by showing you the way out.

The fact is that no matter what you say, people will respond to you *based on the issues you've raised yourself*.

So it behooves us as salespeople to think strategically about all the issues we raise when we ask a question. Are they really the issues we want to raise?

Hundreds of thousands of salespeople start their prospecting calls by asking the other person, whom they have never met, “How are you today?” Is that the best way to begin the conversation?

When you ask intelligent questions, you are really asking two sets of questions.

1. You’re asking the person *individually* what they do, how they do it, when they do it, and why they do it that way, and then (and only then) you are going to ask questions that help you help them do it better.

2. You are also asking about the *company* because you want to know why the company is doing it, how the company got there, and what it is the company is trying to do and accomplish.

Let’s say I’m selling carpeting, and I walk into a hotel. I look at the carpeting in the hotel and I say, “My God, they have beautiful carpeting.” I want to sell carpeting, so what I’m going to do is try to find the right person. I’ll go to who I think the right person is and I’ll say, “Mr. Jones, I noticed the beautiful blue carpeting you have out there. I’m curious, how did you end up picking that, why did you buy that carpeting, how did you end up making that decision, who did you buy it from?”

That’s “do-based” questioning. It’s not the way people usually sell.

Case in point: A salesperson came into my office recently. He wanted to update my computers. He sat down and asked me, “Mr. Schiffman, are your computers fast enough?”

Guess what? I don’t know how to answer that question. So I pointed toward my monitor and said, “You tell me. It looks fast to me.” He was mortally embarrassed. He got up and left. There was nothing else to do.

A better question might have been, “Hey, I’m just curious, how did you end up with the computers you are using? How did you get the system installed? Why did you choose this system?” Even if I didn’t know the answers to those questions, I would have been inclined to point him toward the person in my organization who does.

A True Story

A young salesperson comes into my office to see me; he happens to be selling Yellow Pages. He walks into the office and sits outside in the waiting area for me. I know that the meeting is going to take place, but I have to go outside for a minute. Immediately he grabs my arm and says, “Mr. Schiffman, I can help you.”

I tell him we can discuss that in a minute, but before I leave, I turn to him and say, “Listen, before we begin, I’m curious—how long have you been selling Yellow Pages?” He says six years. I say, “All right, what’s your number-one question? What’s the first thing you’re going to ask me?”

He says, “Well, Steve, I usually say to the prospect, ‘Are you happy with your advertising?’”

I ask him how people respond to that.

He says, “Most people are pretty happy with their advertising.”

I say, “What happens after that?”

He thinks for a moment, and then he says, “Well, I usually leave.”

I say, “Do me a favor and open up that copy of the Yellow Pages. See if you can find my name or my company.”

He turns the pages and turns the pages, and he can’t find it. I’m not in the Yellow Pages. He looks up at me and says, “You know what, you’re not in the Yellow Pages.”

I say, “Bingo. So what should your first question be?”

He has no idea what I’m talking about.

Do you?

His first question should be:

“I’m just curious, Mr. Schiffman, how come you’re not in the Yellow Pages?”

That’s a “do-based” question!

So I tell him to ask me that question. I say, “When you see me again in two minutes, I want you to ask me why I’m not in the Yellow Pages. Then maybe we can have a real conversation.”

A couple of minutes later, I go back into my office, and the Yellow Pages guy comes in. He says, “Can I ask you one question?”

I say, “Sure.”

He says, “Are you happy with your advertising?”