

Questions:

The Answer to Sales

DUANE SPARKS

The Sales Board, Inc.

www.thesalesboard.com

www.actionselling.com

Copyright © 2005 by Duane Sparks

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced — mechanically, electronically, or by any other means, including photocopying — without written permission of The Sales Board.

Questions: The Answer to Sales is available at special discounts when purchased in bulk for premiums and sales promotions as well as for fund-raising or educational use. Special editions or book excerpts can also be created to specification. For details, contact The Sales Board at the address below.

The Sales Board, Inc.
15200 25th Ave. N.
Minneapolis, MN 55447
(800) 232-3485
www.TheSalesBoard.com

ISBN: 0-9753569-3-3

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing December 2005

FORWARD

I am delighted that Duane Sparks chose to write a book that shows so clearly and dramatically how vital questioning skills are to a salesperson—especially when those skills are applied within the broader framework of the Action Selling system.

CARQUEST began teaching Action Selling to our 1,200 outside salespeople in 2005, in connection with a corporate initiative that our CEO calls the Journey to the Elite. The Journey has to do with transforming CARQUEST from a good company to a great one. The phenomenal results we have achieved with Action Selling are due to what is now an Elite sales force.

Many of our salespeople have been in the field for more than 20 years. When they were merely good, they thought their job was to sell auto parts. To become Elite they had to learn that customers must be sold on all elements of the buying decision, beginning with whether to “buy” the salesperson. They didn’t know how or when to “sell themselves” as trusted business consultants. They didn’t know that asking—not telling—is the way to make that first and most crucial “sale.” Now they do.

Our most experienced salespeople are often the ones with the greatest appreciation for the difference Action Selling makes. Take this example from a veteran CARQUEST sales rep. A week after completing the course, he sent an awed email to his sales manager. “Over my 40-year working career I have taken many, many courses,” he wrote. “But let me tell you, this is the first one that truly delivers immediate results. I have been astonished this week at how fast I got results!”

The rep cited six significant pieces of new business he picked up in that first week—mainly by asking more and better questions than he ever had before. His story is no longer unusual at CARQUEST. Reps like this have become Elite because they now understand what you will learn in this book: Why to ask, what to ask, when to ask, and how to ask questions that truly do become The Answer to Sales.

Bob Ring
Dean, College of Sales Excellence
CARQUEST University

Introduction

All talk, no sale

The basic philosophy espoused in this book—that questioning and listening skills, not the gift of gab, are the key to successful selling—is one I have held for years. But the catalyst that finally inspired me to start writing was an encounter with a salesperson who was one of the best gabbers I ever met.

During a recent visit to Hawaii, the food-and-beverage manager of our country club on the Big Island invited my wife and me, together with a group of friends, to a wine-tasting event. The evening featured a presentation by a wine expert who sold high-end vintages to bars and restaurants. The club manager’s agenda was to find out which wines we particularly liked so that he could order cases of the stuff; if we bought it, so might his other customers. He promised that we would enjoy the speaker. “The man’s expertise is incredible,” he said.

Was it ever! The presentation was superb. The speaker was flamboyant, fun, and fascinating. He wowed us with colorful details about the history of wine, how wine is made, how vineyards oper-

ate, who were the powers behind particular vineyards—there was no end to his knowledge and no limit to his enthusiasm for the subject. For nearly an hour he held us spellbound.

“Wow,” said one of my friends when the evening ended, “that guy is the ultimate salesperson.”

I had enjoyed the presentation as much as anyone, but that stopped me. *No*, I thought, *he’s the ultimate example of the guy most salespeople think they want to be.*

Terrific though the speaker had been, there was one small problem. Nobody in our group, including the food and beverage manager, bought any wine. And I was confident that I knew why. It was because none of the salesperson’s formidable expertise was ever brought to bear on the concerns of any individual buyer. He seemed to know everything there was to know about wine, and he was wonderful at talking about it. But what he *didn’t* know was the factors that might have spurred any one of us to open a wallet and buy a case or even a bottle. He didn’t know that because he didn’t ask. Nor did he invite us to ask questions that might have given him a clue.

My wife, for instance, prefers a good merlot. I’m sure he’d have been able to tell her plenty, but she never got a chance to ask. The guy was absolutely world class at what he did. But what he did was talking. It wasn’t selling. As a public speaker, he might have a bright future. As a salesperson, he is a dinosaur. Unless he can adapt and change, I suspect he is doomed. And change will be difficult for him precisely because he is so great at talking—and he enjoys it so.

What do buyers care about?

If you take nothing else away from this book, for the sake of your career remember this: Three-quarters of the real “selling” that occurs in any sales transaction takes place while the salesperson is listening, not talking. Listening to what? To the customer’s answers to careful, thoughtful, open-ended questions about needs and concerns—questions that can’t be answered with a simple yes or no and that encourage customers to think and talk about what’s important to *them*, not just to the salesperson.

Years of research by The Sales Board show that:

- 95% of customers say that salespeople talk too much.
- On average, successful sales calls include 25% more open-ended questions than close-ended ones. (Conversely, failed calls have 86% more close-ended questions than open-ended ones.)
- The success rate of sales calls rises significantly when more than two specific customer needs are uncovered by questioning. In other words, if a salesperson’s questions lead a customer to identify at least three needs relevant to a product or service, the chances of closing a sale increase dramatically.

In truth, successful selling always has had more to do with asking than telling. That fact has been obscured, however, because in years past salespeople could coast further on the gift of gab, coupled with their own knowledge and expertise. In today’s world, many customers have as much expertise as the salesperson. And they can easily find out more than they ever wanted to know about a subject just by jumping on the Internet.

This means that the days of the salesperson as a fount of specialized knowledge are over. Where once it was hard to verify or argue with a salesperson's claims, now it is easy. In addition, competition has intensified, and almost all products and services have become commodities. If you are like most salespeople, there is probably little objective difference between your wares and your competitors'. Every day it gets harder to differentiate your product—and especially to justify a higher price—in the classic way, by enumerating “unique” features and benefits.

Knowledge, expertise, and enthusiasm are still important—even vital—for salespeople. But in the battle for customer commitment, the rules have changed. The challenge today is not to “educate” customers by dumping your general knowledge on them. Rather, it is to figure out how to *apply* your expertise to the customer's individual situation. That's what wins hearts and minds—and opens wallets. There may be nothing unique about your product or service, or even about a customer's needs. But what is unique, always, is the customer's perception of his own situation—the reasons why certain needs keep *this* person up at night. The only way to discover those is to get the customer to tell you about them.

To do that, you have to ask good questions. And you have to listen carefully to the answers. By doing so, you earn the customer's permission to ask even better questions. Before you can *talk* about your products in a way that really matters to a potential buyer, you have a lot of listening to do.

First, sell yourself

How long must you listen before you can start selling? Wrong question. Here's something most salespeople don't understand: As long as you're asking questions and listening carefully to the answers, you *are* selling. You're selling *yourself* to the customer as a potential ally who cares about his problems and wants to help solve them. That's not just incidental to selling your product, it is your Number 1 task. Because customers will not buy your product until they first have bought you.

This is no casual claim. Research has proven that in the course of any major sale, customers make five key buying decisions, and they always make them in a particular order. The first of those decisions is whether to “buy” the salesperson. Before customers will decide to buy your product, before they will settle on your company, and before they decide whether to pay your price, they first must buy you—meaning that they must like *you*, trust *you*, and want to do business with *you*.

Whether to buy the salesperson is not only the first major decision the customer makes but also the most important one. There are two reasons. First, if products cannot be differentiated from competitive offerings based on features and benefits, then the only meaningful differentiating factor is the salesperson. Secondly, if you can establish a relationship in which you are a trusted consultant, ally, and problem solver—someone who understands the client's situation thoroughly—then you will form a lasting bond with the customer. That bond will be difficult for competitors to break.

The Sales Dinosaur Model

<u>Cause</u>	<u>Symptom</u>	<u>Consequences</u>
Failure to Ask/Listen	<p>The inability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get to decision-makers• Win when competition exists• Create urgency• Demonstrate value• Differentiate the salesperson• Differentiate the company• Differentiate the product• Manage (shorten) sell cycles• Keep current customers• Add new customers• Build trust/credibility• Get your price• Prioritize accounts• Handle objections• Present solutions• Gain lasting commitments• Sell solutions vs. transactions	<p>Lost sales Poor margins Unprofessional image Fragile customer relationships</p>

Conclusion: Salespeople who lack a plan to improve Questioning/Listening skills are at high risk for extinction.

Shut up and sell something

Most of the recurring problems salespeople wrestle with, and most of the excuses they make for lost sales, result from a single cause. It isn't laziness, it isn't a lack of product knowledge, and it isn't that they aren't glib enough. It's that they fail to ask the right open-ended questions and listen to the answers.

Look at the “symptoms” column on the Sales Dinosaur Model. Do you have trouble differentiating your products? Justifying your price? Getting through to final decision-makers? Handling objections? The problem is not that you aren't saying the right things. The problem is that you aren't asking the right questions. Forget about talking your way in to see the ultimate decision-maker. Try *asking* your way up the decision chain until somebody *wants* you to see the big boss. Forget about refining the PowerPoint slides in your product presentation. No matter how pretty they are, until you've asked the right questions, you don't *have* a winning presentation. All you've got is a colorful data dump.

I want to persuade you that successful selling is primarily a matter of asking, not telling. I want to persuade you that if you approach selling that way, a new and better world can open to you. But how can I show you what that world looks and feels like?

As in my previous books, I've tried to do it by telling you a story. This one is about two fellows named Mitch and Harry. They're both great talkers—likeable salespeople with the classic gift of gab. But gab isn't cutting it anymore. One of these guys already knows about the new world I mentioned—the one that begins to open when you

learn and use a system called Action Selling. The other is about to discover it. He'll be very glad he did. I think you will be too.

Any questions?

Duane Sparks

Chairman

The Sales Board, Inc.

CONTENTS

PREFACE	1
<i>‘Why can’t I compete anymore?’</i>	
CHAPTER 1 THE GABBY DINOSAUR	13
<i>Your terrific pitch — and where to pitch it.</i>	
CHAPTER 2 THE PROFESSIONAL’S BLUEPRINT	23
<i>How Harry saved his career.</i>	
CHAPTER 3 THE “NEW” ART OF SELLING	39
<i>Mapping out a masterpiece.</i>	
CHAPTER 4 EARN THE RIGHT TO ASK	53
<i>Yeah, but how do you do it?</i>	
CHAPTER 5 MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE CUSTOMER’S HEAD...	67
<i>‘I think this guy can actually help me.’</i>	
EPILOGUE	77
<i>Learning a new game.</i>	

PREFACE

‘Why can’t I compete anymore?’

Mitch’s drive off the second tee was pretty good, a slight fade landing nicely in the fairway. Harry wondered when Mitch would get around to telling him the real reason why they were on the course this morning.

The call had come a week before, Mitch phoning out of the blue to invite Harry to play a round of golf. “I have an ulterior motive,” Mitch had said. “I want to talk to you about a career issue I’ve got.”

Though they spoke on the phone from time to time, they hadn’t seen each other for almost four years. Now Mitch had something on his mind. But what? The conversation so far had been limited to catching up on wives, kids and current events. Mitch was fun to be with, as always—outgoing, upbeat, confident. But now the cheerfulness felt a little forced, and the confidence seemed brittle, as if it would shatter if he weren’t careful. That was new. So were the worry lines around his eyes.

You've been under some stress, buddy, Harry thought. Why don't you tell me what this is about?

Harry's drive was a good 20 yards beyond Mitch's. As they began to walk up the fairway, Mitch finally came to the point.

"Bet you're wondering about the career problem I mentioned," he said.

"*That bet you might win,*" Harry said, hinting that Mitch wouldn't win their golf bet after his double bogey on the first hole. "What's up?"

The mask of cheerfulness dissolved altogether as Mitch trudged across the grass, suddenly oblivious to the beautifully conditioned golf course and the clear, sunny morning. "I'm losing it, Harry," he said. "I can't sell anymore."

"Ah," Harry said when it became clear that Mitch was waiting for a response. "I get it. So you're training to go on the Champion's Tour."

"I'm serious," Mitch said. "Ever since you showed me the ropes back at Walco, when I started out, I've been a top salesperson—number one at three different companies. Or, rather, I was for, what, 12 years? But about two years ago, I started to slip. Lately it's gotten worse—a lot worse. And I don't know why! I'm *good*, Harry, you know I am. But now it ain't working. I'm only 40 years old! I'm too young to be losing my grip."

They reached their balls, dropped their bags, selected clubs, hit

their next shots, and moved on. The conversation continued as they played, with breaks dictated by the requirements of a game that was no longer either man's main concern.

"Harry, you're the best salesperson I ever knew," Mitch resumed. "You were my mentor and my role model. The most important things I ever learned about selling, I learned from you. You helped me become successful. And you're still at the top of your game. I did some checking, and I know you're a sales star at your new company. I want to ask you to help me figure out why I'm sliding."

"The most important things I ever learned about selling, I learned from you."

Mitch's words hit Harry like a shanked five iron. *The most important things you've learned about selling, he thought, came from the drivel I was spouting back then? I'm sorry to hear that, Mitch. I'm truly sorry.*

"Whoa, slow down," Harry said aloud. "What do you mean by 'I'm sliding' and 'it ain't working'? Give me some specifics."

"Sure," Mitch said bitterly. "Specifically, I was the top sales performer at every company I've been with since you left Walco. I got my current job five years ago and became the top performer there. But two years ago, for the first time since you took me under your wing, I missed my quota. I hit only 82 percent. Last year I hit 74 percent. Now I'm standing at 48 percent of year-to-date quota with just three months left in the fiscal year. Harry, four years ago I hit 140 percent and considered that unremarkable—for me.

“Want more specifics? Last week my sales manager actually called me on the carpet to discuss what she called ‘the erosion’ in my territory. And she was right. I haven’t added a new account in 18 months. Me, Mr. Charm-the-Birds-Out-of-the-Trees! I used to rain new accounts! Not a single new account in a year and a half.”

“My sales manager called me to discuss ‘the erosion’ in my territory.”

Harry flashed back to a scene of Mitch as a rookie, coming to Harry for approval after landing his first blockbuster account. “Mr. Charm-the-Birds-Out-of-the-Trees!” Harry had exclaimed, giving Mitch a high five. He winced at the memory. He still stuck his wedge shot near the pin, though.

“Why aren’t you landing new accounts?” Harry asked. “At what point in the sales process do things break down?”

“Well, for one thing, I’m having trouble getting to decision makers,” Mitch said. “I get bogged down with lower-level managers and sometimes even technical specialists. So no matter how great my presentation is, I’m not delivering it to someone with final buying authority.”

“I’m having trouble getting to decision makers.”

There’s more to this than I’m hearing, Harry thought, as he marked his birdie on the scorecard.

“You’re down two,” he said. “What else?”

“I don’t know,” Mitch said, shaking his head, “it just seems there’s no urgency to *act* anymore. Everybody’s kind of interested, everybody’s thinking about making a buying decision—but they

want to go on thinking about it forever. The decision-making process drags on, and on, and finally it just kind of peters out.”

“Is that always true?” Harry asked. “Or do they eventually decide to buy from someone else?”

“Yeah, I guess a lot of them do,” Mitch admitted. “Usually, after all the stalling and so-called agonizing, they just buy on price from the lowest bidder.”

“Why would they stall if they’re going to buy from the lowest bidder anyhow?” Harry asked.

“After all the stalling, they just buy on price from the lowest bidder.”

Mitch flinched as if the question were painful as he sliced his tee ball into the woods. “Once in a while, they go with a competitor who charges more than we do,” he said. “Those are the losses that really haunt me. Our product and service package is at least as good as any in the industry. We’re a top-of-the-line outfit with a great reputation. I hate to say it, but there’s only one reason a customer would pay as much or more for any of our competitors’ products, and that’s if one of their salespeople just plain outsold me. But I don’t know how they do it!”

I could tell you in three words, Harry thought, *but you’re not ready yet.* He mulled a response while he pulled a six iron for his next shot. Then he said, “Let me see if I’ve got this straight. You’re having serious trouble adding new accounts. You often can’t get through to decision makers, and you can’t seem to generate any urgency with the people you do see. The buying-decision process

either stalls or they buy from someone else—usually, but not always, based on price alone. Does that sound right?”

“Pretty much,” Mitch said.

“So, these problems are with new accounts. What’s happening with your current clients?”

“That picture’s not so hot either,” Mitch conceded. “At two large accounts, where I was their so-called ‘first call,’ I’m now number two or three. The competition is chipping away the mid-market, too, despite the great relationships I have with my clients. Again, I think it’s usually price. When it *isn’t* price...well, sometimes I hear, ‘I didn’t know you carried that product.’”

Mitch missed his first putt, jabbed at the second one and then picked up, down three after three holes.

Are you listening to yourself? Harry thought. *Those don’t sound like “great relationships.”* “I see,” he said, as they walked to the next tee. “What have you done to try to turn things around?”

“I’ve tried everything! I’ve tried more small talk to build better rapport, but everybody’s so busy that no one has time to talk anymore. It’s just, ‘Get to the point.’ So I’ve practiced my delivery in a dozen ways. I’ve customized my presentation—taken some material from the marketing department and made my own PowerPoint slides that really zero in on our key differentiating points. I’m convinced I have a better presentation than any salesperson in the company. And Harry, you know that when I get going, there aren’t many better. I’m stumped.”

Harry sighed, as they waited for the group in front of them to clear the green. *Might as well get to it.* “Mitch, do you want to hear it straight?”

“Everybody’s so busy that no one has time to talk anymore.”

“Absolutely. Please.”

“All right then, I have two thoughts. First, you said nobody has time to talk anymore. It would be more accurate to say that nobody has time to listen to *you* talk. Second, whether you designed your presentation or the marketing department did, it doesn’t include any differentiating points at all. Because you deliver it before you have any idea what a differentiated need *is*.”

Mitch stopped cleaning the grooves of his four iron with a tee. “What do you mean?”

“Nobody has time to listen to you talk.”

“First, tell me this: You said the most important things you know about selling came from me. What, exactly, did you learn from me 15 years ago?” Harry braced himself as if he were about to take a beating.

“Are you kidding?” Mitch said. “I remember your favorite line: ‘It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.’ You taught me that everything really important in sales starts with that. It’s all about enthusiasm during the pitch. If I act excited, the customer gets excited. With some charisma, I pitch my products confidently and convincingly. I gain credibility. If the customer finds me likeable and credible, then I’ve won their trust. ‘And a customer who trusts you will buy from you,’ you always said. You showed me some good techniques, too,

but in the end, you said, it comes down to enthusiasm, credibility and trust. And to get those things, it's not what you say; it's how you say it.

"That's what you taught me, Harry, and I know it's true," Mitch continued. "So how come I can't seem to say it right anymore? Sure, people are busier, but has there been some other earth-shaking change I missed? Do they want to hear something different? Or is it me?"

"Do I stink?" he asked, sniffing his golf shirt. "Have I grown a giant wart on my nose that's visible to everyone but me? What the heck is going on, Harry? My career is going down the tube."

Harry felt ill. *Yep*, he thought, *that was my motto, all right: "It's not what you say; it's how you say it." I guess I got you into this mess, Mitch. Now I need to get you out of it.*

"The green is clear. Let's hit first, then talk," he said.

Harry squared his shoulders as they walked toward the green together. "Back then, I thought I was doing you a favor, Mitch, but I was wrong. Yes, I believed that selling was fundamentally about the gift of gab. I got by on it for years, and so did you, because we're both unusually good at it. But I know now that it isn't *what you say*, and it isn't *how you say it*, either. It's what you *ask* that makes the difference between success and failure. Everything—the whole ball of wax—is about what you ask. Want to know how those other sales reps took away your business without discounting? I can tell you in three words: *They asked questions!*"

Mitch couldn't believe his ears. "Give me a break! You mean I should qualify prospects? I said my career is in trouble, Harry, I didn't say I just fell off a turnip truck. *Of course* I ask questions—whenever they give me five minutes to do it!"

Harry shook his head. "No, you only think you ask questions. Fact is, you don't ask the right questions at the right times and in the right way to give you the information you need before your talking skills can even begin to help you."

"How would you know?" Mitch asked.

"I know from every single thing you've told me," Harry replied. "I don't really have to ask this, but have you heard of Action Selling?"

"What's that, one of those sales-training programs you always laugh at? I could use a laugh right now."

"It's a sales system, yeah. But this one I didn't laugh at, Mitch. This one saved *my* career."

"What are you talking about? You never had any..."

Harry cut him off. "This trouble you're talking about? This thing where suddenly the old charm isn't working anymore? It hit me about a year before it evidently hit you."

Mitch stared in disbelief.

"I'm dead serious," Harry said, marking his ball about 15 feet from the hole. "A few years ago I *was* you"—*a chatty dinosaur, gabbing my way toward extinction*, he thought—"my volume down,

struggling to add new accounts, nobody with the time to talk to me. Or rather, to listen to me talk. I decided that maybe I was getting stale in the same old job—I had worked in the same place for six years. So I switched companies, partly for the change, partly

“A few years ago I was you—a chatty dinosaur.”

because I figured I’d better move on while I still had what was left of my reputation as a top sales rep. I told you about the company I work for now.”

Yes, part of their earlier conversation had been about Harry’s new firm. He’d said he liked it there.

“Turned out they use a system called Action Selling,” Harry said. “The first thing they did was to put me in a course. You can imagine how I felt about that.”

Mitch smiled despite himself, remembering the sarcasm Harry used to heap on sales-training programs he was forced to attend. Harry claimed he could tell what a sales vice president had been eating for breakfast by the gimmicks expounded in the seminar the VP decided everyone needed *this* month.

Mitch’s chip stopped two feet from the hole. “Nice shot,” Harry said. Then he continued, “Well, I went in expecting the same old stuff. But I came out of this one realizing that I’d been selling for

“I was just a seasoned amateur.”

more than 20 years, and I had never actually known squat about how to manage a sales call. I was just a seasoned amateur, and that wasn’t cutting it anymore.”

Harry sunk a long birdie putt on the fourth green, and then stood

up straight with the putter dangling from his hand. “A few years ago I couldn’t imagine saying something like this about a sales program with a straight face. But, Mitch, my friend, I stand before you today as a Certified Action Selling professional. That’s why I know that you don’t understand a thing about asking questions. And that you’ll never dig yourself out of the hole you’re in until you do.”

“I guess you’d better tell me about it,” Mitch said. “What have I got to lose?”

“Wrong question,” Harry muttered under his breath. *You don’t know it yet, Mitch, but this is about what you have to gain.*

GET TRAINED AND CERTIFIED AS AN ***ACTION SELLING*** PROFESSIONAL!



Want to learn more about how Action Selling can help your organization realize its full sales potential? For information about training and certification for yourself or your salespeople, contact The Sales Board.

Founded in 1990, The Sales Board has boosted the performance of more than 350,000 salespeople from over 3,000 companies worldwide in virtually every industry. Action Selling provides a systematic approach to managing and conducting the entire sales process. Our complete training program provides all the necessary tools for students and instructors. Training is customized specifically for each organization's selling situation and even for individual salespeople.

Studies document that salespeople who become Action Selling Certified improve their sales performance at a rate that is 6 times greater than those without training. As for rookie salespeople, there is no finer system to start them off on the right foot and make them productive immediately.

Students participate in a highly interactive two-day training session facilitated by our talented trainers or by their own Action Selling Certified managers. Students then take part in Skill Drills to refine and reinforce their new skills in the field. Accountability is built into the process with management reinforcement, plus an assessment and certification system.

To learn more about the complete Action Selling training and certification system, please contact us or visit our Web site:

The Sales Board
(800) 232-3485
www.TheSalesBoard.com
www.ActionSelling.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Duane Sparks is chairman and founder of The Sales Board, a Minneapolis-based sales training company that trains and certifies salespeople in the system and the skills of Action Selling. He is the author of five best selling sales books:

Action Selling - How to sell like a professional even if you think you are one

Selling Your Price - How to escape the race to the bargain basement

Questions - The Answer to Sales

Masters of Loyalty - How to turn your sales force into a loyalty force

Sales Strategy From The Inside Out - How complex selling really works

The Action Selling sales training program trains and certifies salespeople in the critical sales skills that have the greatest impact on sales performance. And from the ground up, its programs are designed to ensure that those critical selling skills are not only learned but used, consistently, in the field. Action Selling is recognized worldwide for sales training that produces sustainable sales growth.