

Questions:

The Answer to Sales

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The Sales Board, Inc.

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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

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