

# TAKE YOUR SALES *TO THE* NEXT LEVEL

ADVANCED SKILLS TO BUILD  
STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS  
AND CLOSE MORE DEALS

**CHARLES D. BRENNAN, Jr.**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Sales Questions That Close the Sale*

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New York Chicago San Francisco Lisbon  
London Madrid Mexico City Milan New Delhi  
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## How to Unlock New Information

Several years ago, my wife and I decided to transfer our son from one school to another. He was a fifth grader in a parochial school, and at the end of the year we transferred him to a school with more resources to challenge him. Transferring him to the new school in sixth grade enabled him to interact with an entirely new class of students. We selected an all-boys school that has a lower, middle, and high school. It was our hope that the transition would go well in middle school and sustain itself into high school so that he would not have to change schools again. I would like to share with you an experience that my son had the first month of school that relates to the topic of this chapter.

I remember vividly coming home after conducting a seminar at the end of September. It was early evening. When I saw my son, I remembered that he had had his first test at the new school, and I wanted to find out how he did. The subject was history, one that he excelled at in his other school. When I asked

him to explain to me how the test went, his response was, “It was stupid.” Over the years, my wife and I have learned how to interpret his language and comments. What he was actually saying was, “The test was hard!” I asked him to share with me what was on the test. He said the first part was okay, multiple choice questions, but the second part was ridiculous. (This was another way for him to say that it was really difficult.) I asked him what made it hard, and he said it was the essay questions. I asked him if he could recall one of the questions and share it with me. The last question on his sixth-grade history test was: If Custer were to fight Napoleon, how would the two go about the conflict?

I will admit that I stood in front of him trying to conceal my reaction. Personally, I had no idea what the answer was. I was even thinking to myself, “You are right, son, that question is ridiculous.” A second or two later, after I composed myself, I said to him, “What the school is trying to teach you is critical thinking.” That is what this book and chapter introduces. Critical thinking is the key to your sales success.

## Critical Thinking

Critical thinking gets customers out of their box. Allow me to explain the importance of critical thinking to creating a sustainable sales relationship. During my graduate work in training and development, I had the good fortune of taking a psychology class taught by a professor named Dr. Paul Hilt. Little did I realize how his class would affect me in years to come. As I moved through the semester, I was captivated by the way people learn. The topic of left- and right-brain dominance was introduced through something called the Herrmann brain dominance inventory test. This test identified how people incorporate information. In a

sense, it is another tool that can be used to determine how people receive information. If you are familiar with personality types, this topic would fall into this category of processing information.

Toward the middle of the semester, Professor Hilt asked me for a favor. He wanted to know if I would be willing to assist him in reviewing more than 20 years of research relating to the way people communicate. At first I was somewhat reluctant. It sounded like a lot of work, and I really didn't have the time. Then I realized that he had been very helpful to me and very insightful when it came to the material he presented in class, and now he needed my help. So I signed on to help. Most of the material I reviewed talked about open and closed questions.

## Open-Probe and Closed-Probe Questions

Most people who are reading this book or who are familiar with consultative selling have probably been introduced to the concept of open- and closed-probe questions. Probing is just another way of saying questioning, and the idea behind it involves gathering information and discovering a customer's needs.

There are two kinds of probing questions: open probes and closed probes. Closed probes limit the range of a customer's responses to yes or no. Also, there is a limited range of answers, based on the alternatives supplied. A closed-probe question is likely to begin with words such as: *do, is, are, have, has, did, or which*. They might include questions such as:

- Did your department make its goal?
- Are you looking for a way to eliminate that problem?
- Do you find that a problem?

- Did you receive any complaints?
- Which of these problems most affected your operation?

The answers you can expect from a closed-probe question are somewhat limited—a short answer, such as yes or no, or a validation of a topic. For example if you ask the question, “Do your patients listen to what you say?” the doctor would probably respond with an answer such as, “Most of the time,” “I think so,” or, “Not as much as I would like.”

There is a good chance that these kinds of responses, which are typical of what you get when you ask a closed-probe question, will be short and to the point. They are not apt to move you closer to your goal of starting a meaningful conversation. These questions do, however, confirm and validate information.

On the other hand, an open-probe question encourages a lengthier reply. Open-probe questions are likely to begin with words like: *who, when, where, why, tell me, how, and what*. Some examples include:

- What are your goals for this year?
- In what areas are you looking to improve?
- Tell me about your application?
- Who is involved in the selection process and what is their role?
- When did you begin to notice the problem and what happened after that?
- How has the system been working?

As you can see, these questions are likely to lead to longer responses. Probing questions are the cornerstone of the selling process; unfortunately, these questions will not help you advance your existing relationship. Many of them have been answered before and generate a recitation response.

## Do Open Probes Differentiate You?

Let's go back to your mission as a salesperson. Your goal is to differentiate and brand yourself, gather key information, and move your existing relationships forward. Chances are that the customer views what you are selling as somewhat similar to what the competition is providing. There are probably few products or services offered in today's market that are remarkably different from the competition and that offer significant price differences or better service. As a matter of fact, the customer probably assumes that both you and the people you compete against will provide relatively the same thing. Therefore, you are being viewed as the same as the competition, almost like a commodity. Of course you want to establish a strong business relationship, separate yourself, stand out, and become a significant partner in the customer's business. To make that occur, you need to ask better questions.

We have been told that business surveys suggest that the "business" relationship between salesperson and customer is often the most important factor in the sales process. As a matter of fact, a number of years ago, the New York Sales and Marketing Club conducted a survey to determine what influences a person in business to buy a product or service. The top three answers were: relationship, success, and best. Out of the three, relationship was the most influential. According to the NYSMC, 38 percent of the time a customer will select a product or service because of the relationship with the salesperson. Success received the second highest total with 20 percent. Best was third at 18 percent. Almost by a two to one margin relationships influenced decisions according to this survey. But will asking the classic open- and closed-ended questions get you to where you need to be? I sug-

gest that the open- and closed-probes are only a part of what it takes to evolve and sustain a business relationship. So what gets you there? Let's go look at research I was conducting during my graduate work.

## Asking the Right Kinds of Questions

During my analysis of 20 years of research on the way people communicate, I came across several interesting articles and studies that made me think a little differently about questions, how they are presented, and the way salespeople ask them to build and develop relationships. Some of the research looked at the way questions were posed in the classroom. For example, when a question is posed to a class and a student responds with a wrong answer, the class might perceive the student as being less smart than the rest of the class, and the student may not respond in the future. Do you see how that could happen in a sales call? How do you ask your question? What is your tone and inference? The way you ask questions will factor into the way the customer receives and responds to them.

A study conducted a number of years ago looked into the way teachers posed questions to their students. The study was commissioned to discover why most children give limited responses when they are asked a question. The results could also apply to dealing with our children or speaking with our spouses or significant others. For example: I am blessed with three children. If you are a parent, aunt, or uncle reading this book, I am sure that you have probably experienced the following. And even if you haven't, you will appreciate the story. Our family lifestyle tends to be somewhat hectic because our children are involved

in many different activities. These activities range from sporting events and practices to rehearsals, shows, and recitals. Because of all these commitments, we don't sit down as a family at the dinner table as often as we'd like. This time, we were all gathered at the dinner table, and I turned to my oldest daughter and asked, "How was your day?" She replied, "It was fine." I then asked her, "What did you do in school today?" If you have children in school, you probably know that the number one answer to this question is "nothing." So, somewhat frustrated with my daughter's answer, I turned to my son. At times my son can talk up a storm. So, I asked him, "What did you do today in school?" He looked at me with somewhat of a puzzled expression and said, "I can't remember." "Nothing," and, "I can't remember." I sat there shaking my head and pondering the answers I received from my children. Now let's return to the world of selling and the studies that I read.

These studies focused on the fact that too many recital questions were being asked in the classroom. A recital question is a question that is asked of individuals that gets them to recite what they already know. Educator Meredith Gall suggested that recital questions get someone to recall information that requires little-to-no thinking. As a matter of fact, there is a high probability that a recital question has been asked and answered in some form in prior conversations. So when a customer answers a recital question, she recites something she already knows and probably has already been asked before in previous conversations. Let us think about this for a moment. Allow us to simmer on this: A recital question gets the customers to recite what they already know.

Think of all of the questions that you asked prior to reading this book. Do your questions fall under the category of recital? If so, is it possible that you might be boring your customers, because you are forcing them to go over the same ground they

have been going over with everyone else? Let's take this thought a little further. How many salespeople do you think your customer sees in a day? One sales representative? Two salespeople? Could your customer see as many as ten salespeople per day? For argument's sake, why don't we settle on five salespeople a day? That is 25 a week, 100 per month, and more than 1,000 sales calls and conversations per year. Is it possible that your customer has heard the same question, day in and day out, year in and year out? The customer hears the same question hundreds of times and gives the same answer. Just like our children, they get bored answering the same old questions. I am guessing that you get the picture.

Chris Kane, a training manager for a large medical device company, agrees with this. He states:

Our medical device teams had been wrestling with the challenge of how to approach a customer with whom they've had a long-standing relationship and answer the question "What's new?" or some generic variation. We have a very tenured sales team, many who have been in the same business and geography for a long time. With these customers, they have established a baseline relationship that ranges from the excellent (advocate) to the casual (occasional user) to those who support our competitors. They are likely on a very friendly basis with these customers and have access to them but are at a plateau situation with regards to business. During the times when there are no new products to offer, it has been a challenge to elevate the conversation to another level. The concept of recital versus dialogue questions has provided the platform from which this discussion could advance. Our sales associates are more confident that

they now have a tool with which to engage our customers in a more substantial dialogue. They view this as a way to open the door (again) and to relate on the customer's level and discuss *their needs* from *their* perspective.

## So What Makes a Better Question?

The study of classroom questioning suggested changing from a recital question to a dialogue question. Dialogue questions stimulate a complex thinking process involving a longer exchange that solicits opinion and thought, not just a correct answer. When calling on customers, you want to engage them in dialogue. Your goal is to get them talking at least 70 percent of the time. Most important, when you ask a dialogue question, you create the possibility of change. And change leads to new thinking. This is key: Change leads to new thinking from the customer. Your goal is to craft a question that gets the customer to stop, reflect, and respond with a new answer.

At the beginning of this book, you were introduced to the term *schema* and the importance of getting customers out of their "boxes." At the outset of a relationship, there is a need to gather information. You need to build your intelligence on customers and learn what is occurring at their company. This is accomplished by asking open- and closed-probe questions. During this process, you run the risk of boring and tiring out your customers as you get them to parrot back to you the same information everyone else is getting. This brings up another problem. You are getting, for the most part, the same information that everyone else is getting. If this is true, you are molding your solutions

around the identical pieces of information that everyone you are competing with also possesses. So what distinguishes you from someone else? Your price? I hope not, because that is a slippery slope that no one wants to go down. Because once that is started, you can't stop the slide.

## The Light Bulb Is Going On

I am guessing the light bulb is going on, and it probably is glowing brightly about now. Some of you may be thinking, "Am I lucky to have gotten this far with some of my customers?" As a review, the questions that you have been asking have enabled you to move some of your relationships to the highest level. Your questions have worked. You got the customer to reveal more information to you than to your competition. However, it is becoming clear why a number of other business relationships are stalling out and idling in neutral. Could it be the questions that you are asking? According to sales director Nick Martino, this is exactly why relationships stall out. Martino states that:

From the perspective of us selling to our customers, we take a slightly different approach. First we do what is called "80/20" our accounts. This is the simplified process of using the Pareto Principle to differentiate between accounts and use a decision-making tool to determine the value proposition to our business and also what value proposition we can bring to the account. If there is a marriage, the account is focused on for development. The fundamental driving force is to ascertain how we can mutually benefit from each other and whether or not there is merit in pursuing the account. I

take this practice to heart. Each manager and salesperson under my direction needs to determine the needs (mid and long term) for both parties—us and the prospective customer—it is our job to deliver value to one of these needs each time we visit. This keeps the relationship fresh as the “story” we are telling always has value. It is the responsibility of the manager and his sales team to determine what they share, and why—but *they must be telling something new on each visit!* A good example is Nike Corporation—they maintain a vigil internally that says, “if you can give us a story line about a new product, new process or innovative environmental contribution, we can package it and sell it.” This is the basis on which our sales team now focuses to keep the relationship alive with our primary accounts.

## Keeping It Alive

Success isn't certain, even when salespeople encourage customers to talk. Why? Because just having a regular conversation won't accomplish your objective of getting the customer “out of the box.”

The fact is that there is a substantial difference between just making conversation, like you might at a cocktail party, and making *meaningful* in-depth discussion. By *meaningful* discussion, I mean those that create *meaningful* dialogue, provide you with *meaningful* information, and ultimately set you apart from the salespeople who come in, make idle chatter, and dominate the call.

So how do you involve someone in a meaningful discussion? Think about it for a minute. Do you have any ideas? The easiest

way to involve people in a conversation is to ask them a question. But what kind of a question do you need to ask to evoke the type of response that's meaningful?

Questions elicit responses. They provide you with the information that you need to move the sales cycle along. They enable a conversation, and they help initiate a relationship. Typically when I make these points in my seminars, someone will say, "I ask questions all the time." And I respond, "Yes, most salespeople ask questions." But, more often than not, salespeople don't ask enough questions or, more significantly, the right kind of questions.

To illustrate my point, I'd like you to take a couple of minutes to write the questions that you often ask customers on the telephone or during a sales call to discover their needs. See if you can come up with your ten *best* questions.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

Usually when I do this exercise with a group of salespeople, most participants think it is going to be a snap. They start off with a great deal of confidence, but a few minutes into the exercise some of them start to squirm. It seems that it is much harder than you think to come up with 10 good questions.

If you couldn't come up with 10 questions, don't worry. Very few people do. In fact, the average at one of my seminars is somewhere between 6 and 7 questions. In a study I conducted, 87 percent of the salespeople that participated in our programs said that they knew the importance of asking questions. But only 27 percent, slightly more than a quarter, were then able to demonstrate the ability to ask a well-thought-out question that would stimulate dialogue.

It became clear to me quite early on that most salespeople need to improve their ability to ask questions that generate dialogue. What do I mean by that? If a salesperson or sales representative is asking a customer questions, the typical ones could be:

1. What are your challenges?
2. How many manufacturing facilities do you have?
3. Where are they located?
4. If you could change one thing, what would it be?
5. What keeps you up at night?
6. Who are your current vendors?
7. What is your budget?

There is nothing wrong with these recitation-provoking types of questions. Very often they elicit baseline information that you need in order to develop a meaningful solution for the customer, and they are a necessary ingredient of every sales call. But customers providing a recitation response are simply giving you information they already know. There's no thought involved and

no real opportunity to move in new directions. As a matter of fact, you might be boring customers and prompting them to wonder when the conversation will be over.

Beyond that, recitation responses are very often available from sources other than your customer. If I were a customer, I'd have serious reservations about a potential vendor who took up much of my time asking me how many plants my company has, where they are, how many patients I might see in a day, how many audits I conduct in a year, or who my current suppliers are. So do a little homework and see if you can answer these questions yourself. Once you have gathered that information, it would be acceptable to validate what you have learned with the customer.

Moreover, asking those kinds of questions is the same as opening the conversation by marveling at the stuffed swordfish I have mounted behind my desk. Everyone who comes in asks me the same thing, "Did you catch that fish?"

## Dialogue Questions

Dialogue probing questions are designed to elicit thought. They aren't designed simply to get an answer. Their intent is to make the customer think differently and to open up new avenues for discussion. They are crafted in a way to get the customer "out of the box." The potential benefits of a dialogue question are numerous. They will help you achieve several of your goals, such as gaining more information, differentiating yourself from the competition, and moving the customer's thought process forward.

One of the most obvious benefits is that customers will look at you differently. I cannot tell you how many times students have told me after they finish my class that the customer will say, "You

know, no one has ever asked me that before,” or, “That was a really great question.” When a customer says that, you are making progress in differentiating yourself from the pack. Customers will look at you differently from the way they look at the “how many manufacturing plants do you have” salespeople who try to access their domain day in and month out. You will have initiated the process of creating a meaningful difference. And chances are you will have earned some respect as well as taken the first important step toward building a long-term business relationship.

### **The Status Quo Might Be Good— for the Customer**

It is important to realize that the customer has granted you permission to speak with her. She has brought a certain set of expectations to the sales call and is aware you are there to sell something. And you, the salesperson, should realize that the customer is trying to stay the same and maintain the status quo. This is discussed in Chapter 2 and relates to a customer’s schema. If the information doesn’t fit in with customers’ past experiences, they will start to assess blame. Unless a problem occurs, causing the customer to realize the need for change (vendor, product/service) you are tasked with getting the customer “out of the box.” From the customers’ point of view, their mission is, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” In a sense, there are two conflicting messages. You, the salesperson, are trying to get the customer to change, and the customer is trying to resist change. If this is so, there is a need to create a compelling case for the customer to do something differently because if the customer agrees to do something differently, it will take time, require additional resources, and create focus on him, his department, and his operation.

## Your Job Description

If you think about your role as a sales professional, it is quite clear: you are hired to change the way people think. If they are not selecting your product or service, your challenge is to get them to do so. If they are using your product or service, your challenge is to get them to use it more. Therefore, you are hired to create change. The best way to create change is by creating a dialogue.

By literally forcing the customer to think and perhaps look at something from a different perspective, you raise the possibility of change. You will know that you have a shot at success if the customer says, “You know I never looked at it that way.”

Finally, dialogue creates a sense of intimacy and trust. And once you accomplish that, you’ve bridged the gap from an anonymous salesperson to a salesperson with an understanding of what needs to get done. And as I’ve discussed previously, surveys of buyers indicate that their relationship with the salesperson is one of the key factors in the buy/don’t buy decision-making process.

Now that you understand the importance of creating an atmosphere of dialogue, we’ll discuss the art of asking questions and how to build those skills, as well as the different types of questions and when to ask them. Mastering these skills is at the very heart of the process that will transform you from just a good salesperson to a super salesperson.