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BY RICK DAVIS

Most salespeople have learned that the key to sales success begins with the ability to ask questions. However, it's easy to forget that the way in which we ask those questions is just as important as the

want to help my customer become more profitable, what are the important issues I need to know?" This stumps a lot of salespeople because they are overly focused on selling their product and forget that customers

of your product, what do you need to know about the customer?" your answer should address the issues raised from the *second* question and relate to the customer's profitability. You have not earned the right to concern yourself with the sale of your product until you have demonstrated a sincere interest in the profitability of the builder. A golden rule of sales is: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Spell It Out

Even though they know the golden rule, many salespeople often struggle to ask the right questions, mainly because they are not properly prepared. If you fall into this category, here are two acronyms I developed that can help keep you focused: The G.O.A.L. is M.O.R.E.

The G.O.A.L. In this definition, G means *general*, O is *opportunity*, A equals *agreement*, and L refers to *leading*. The best Sales Leaders realize they must discover the *general* state of a customer's business. Once they have



Line of Inquiry

inquiries themselves because they either demonstrate a heartfelt desire to help your customers or convey a selfish motivation.

You probably think you are an unselfish salesperson, right? To find out, ask yourself this question: "If I want to sell a builder more of my product, what do I need to know about the customer?" If you think the best line of inquiry is related to product issues, then maybe your sales behavior is more selfishly motivated than you realize because it means you actually are focusing on your offerings rather than your customer's needs. As a second follow-up question, answer this: "If I

don't just buy a *product*, they also buy what the product *does for them*.

If you truly want to strengthen your relationship with builders, you must first understand how you can help them increase profits. The important challenges facing your customers relate to competition, sales volume, labor costs, materials costs, and production methods. To help your customers prosper, you need to understand how they perceive their competitive edge and how your product can enhance it.

So the next time someone asks you, "If you want to sell a builder more

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at least a fundamental understanding of the customer's business, they investigate the *opportunities* available. By following this path, it is easy to come to *agreement* on the ways in which the

salesperson can best help the customer. The final step in the discovery involves questions that will *lead* to the next step in the sales process.

Is M.O.R.E. My observations of salespeople have revealed that even the most seasoned veterans sometimes struggle to get more than a few questions into the process of *general* (G) discovery before quickly trying to push products. To improve your success in this area, break

to do with the products you sell, it would undoubtedly enhance your relationship.

There are dozens of indirect ways (that have nothing to do with your products) to help your customers, such as recommending a good business article, unique marketing concept, or construction technique that's been beneficial to other builders. The best Sales Leaders are not merely product peddlers, but valuable business resources for their customers.



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those discovery questions down into four subcategories: M for *marketing*, O for *operations*, R for *relationships*, and E for *ego*. To this day, I still carry a notepad into meetings with four letters written along the left-hand side of my tablet—M.O.R.E. This simple acronym reminds me to discover the issues that are important to my customers.

The most critical factor in the success of any business is the *marketing* and sales of their goods and services. If you are adept at asking questions related to marketing and sales issues, then you will quickly gain the interest of your customer.

Questions about a builder's *operations* present unique challenges to salespeople, mainly because salespeople believe they have little opportunity to provide assistance in this area. Nothing could be further from the truth. When you understand your customer's marketing and operational challenges, then you are in a position to help. For example, consider what advantages you might have over your competitors if you discovered that a remodeler was having difficulty managing costs. You might recommend a seminar that introduces a computer-based program that has successfully addressed the challenge for other remodelers. Even though the recommendation has nothing

The age-old advice given to young salespeople is to "get to the decision maker." But what if there isn't a single decision maker? What if decisions are made within organizations by way of a group process? This is why questions related to *relationships* become important to ensuring that you are targeting the right customers and in the right ways.

Finally, do not discount the benefit of understanding the *ego* motivations and interests of the human being you are talking to—especially those related to business. While understanding that hobbies and personal interests are important, they are not necessarily as important as the personal challenges he or she faces at work. When you understand their corporate drivers in addition to their personal motivators, that person is more likely to care about yours.

Ask the Right Questions

Try the following steps to improve your questioning skills:

1. Use a consistent note-taking method. Prior to each meeting, write the letters M, O, R, and E on the left side of your notepad. Leave ample space to take notes.

2. Prepare questions based on the acronym. This will help you manage your time effectively. *Marketing* questions include: How do you go to market? How do you distinguish yourself from your competitors? What are your biggest competitive challenges? *Operational* questions: What are your biggest operational challenges? How do you manage labor costs effectively? What cost-saving methods are you most proud of?

Relationship questions: When you are considering an important change, what process do you go through to evaluate the benefits? (This question provides you with an important understanding of not only who the decision makers are, but also how the decisions are made.) *Ego* questions: What are your biggest challenges within the organization? Where do you see your career headed in the next few years?

3. Do not make assumptions.

One of the biggest mistakes made by salespeople is they think they should know about a customer's business intimately before they meet. Not only is this naïve, it is potentially insulting. You cannot possibly know everything about your customer's business without asking. You also deny your customer of the opportunity to discuss their favorite subject—themselves!

4. Discover product challenges.

Once again, do not assume. Salespeople often are so caught up talking about features and benefits that they neglect the real issues. The product challenges of your customers range from brand awareness to installation issues. They are not limited to price. People don't change because they see the light; people change because they feel the heat. Try to discover the hot spots of your customers and you will discover more ways to help.

Those who seek knowledge find answers, those who have answers become valuable resources in the business world, and those who sell from the heart are destined to become Sales Leaders. ■