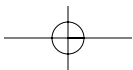
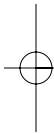
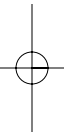


PART

FIVE

All Selling Is Personal Selling

- Day 23** Listening for Dollars, Talking for Dimes
- Day 24** Advancing Commitment
- Day 25** Focus: Building a Power Niche
- Day 26** Selling Value, Not Discounts
- Day 27** Your Differences Will Handle Objections
- Day 28** Pricing to Maximize Value



23

Listening for Dollars, Talking for Dimes

If you think that communication is all talk, then you haven't been listening.

—Ashleigh Brilliant¹

The title of this chapter is one of the oldest sales sayings I've quoted. Salespeople talk too much and don't listen enough. Even when you are invited to do a presentation, you may be better off listening than talking. For instance, one large company had three professional service firms in to do presentations. Company professionals later complained that all the service firms did was "dog and pony shows." Not one firm had researched the company, not one firm knew about its industry concerns, not one firm asked the right questions. All they did was impressive Power Point presentations about their capabilities and their people.

Almost every book on selling or marketing has a chapter on using questions to determine prospects' needs. Almost every communication trainer encourages the asking of open-ended questions (questions that can't be answered by a yes or a no). Books and trainers teach SPIN[®] Selling, Dialogue Selling, Partnership Selling, and on and on. In most cases, these books and trainers miss the main point: Communication is as much about the message you receive in response to your question as it is the message you send. The point of asking a question is to encourage your client or prospect to tell you what's on his or her mind. When what is on your client's mind is transmitted to you so that you truly understand, then, and only then, are you prepared to present.

In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey writes, "If I were to summarize in one sentence the single most important principle in the field of interpersonal relationships, listening is the key." Listening is so important to building relationships. Relationships create a positive environment in which you can sell.

Talk is cheap. Supply exceeds demand.

—John Fogg²

We communicate in four major ways: (1) speaking, (2) listening, (3) writing, and (4) “viewing.” Viewing includes reading print material as well as “reading” people and situations. High schools, colleges, and CPE programs present many courses on viewing, writing, and speaking. But listening skills are rarely taught in formal education.

Listening to Understand Others

Bob Gaida, whom we met in Day 15, says, “You carefully listen to your clients and you constantly probe to understand their challenges because things change. What my client thought yesterday, he might not be thinking today. And you listen to understand deeply what your client is dealing with. If I pretend to know without listening, he’ll see right through me.”

Listening for Sales

According to Lucette Comer at Purdue University, research showed that sales reps with higher listening skills were better in all six phases of the sales process: approach, need for identification, presentation, overcoming objections, closing, and after-sales support.

—*What’s Working in Sales Management*³

There is no reason to have good questioning skills unless you have good listening skills. You will not benefit from the question but from the answer. Even the best salespeople have had difficulty learning to listen. Terry Orr, whom we met in Day 5, says, “I had been working with clients all those years and suddenly it dawned on me, I need to learn how to listen better. To help clients with their deepest problems requires my understanding first. When I understand completely, only then can I be an adviser on the problem or issue.”

Jeff Everly, whom we met in Day 4, says, “I feel it is important to listen to people who are going to make the decision. Listening helps me understand what is going on within their organization. Why they are not happy—or maybe they are happy. Finding out what really makes a prospect happy is an important piece of information. Listening often helps me locate an issue to solve and a person within the organization as an inside coach.”

Perception is reality. The important marketing communications are those whose meaning is accurately perceived by clients and prospects, not the ones crafted by the ad writers whose messages get lost in all the cleverness. By the same token, good selling does not come from good questions but from the answers to those questions.

Bill Fingland, whom we met in Day 2, says, “We have a saying that you should learn to listen so you can listen to learn. You have to learn about the client before you can write a good proposal. If you listen to clients, they will tell you where their problems are. They will tell you what to do to make them happy. I used to always try to end the fact-finding portion of my proposals with this question: ‘Let me suppose for a moment that we are successful in getting this engagement and that I can be working with you. In a year or two, when I come back and ask you if we are doing a good job, what are the two or three most important things that you will evaluate in my performance?’”

In preparing for a client or prospect meeting, it is crucial to prepare your questions in advance and in writing. Having your questions in writing allows you to focus on listening. If you are busy constructing your next thought or your next question, you may miss the deep message your client is trying to articulate.



Listen to your customer, and everything else will fall into place.

—John Burgess⁴

Active Listening

To listen, you need to remove as many distractions as possible. Turn off your cell phone or computer screen. Have a note pad, flip chart, or whiteboard available. Listening to your client while taking notes on a flip chart shows that you are actively listening. Try boiling down each point into three to five words that capture the key thought. When you write it on a flip chart, the client will know that you understand the point. This will cut down on repetition. Periodically restate what your client is saying as you are capturing the words. Ask for explanation and clarification. A good question to use at all times is “How do you mean?” Asking this question will encourage the client to talk at a deeper level.

Active listening includes responding so that your client knows you are listening. Phrases like “I see,” “Uh-huh,” and “That’s interesting” all give others feedback that you are in tune with their thoughts. Using these phrases inappropriately shows your client that you are *pretending* to listen. Pretending to

listen is one of the quickest ways to break trust with people—and it's all too easy to fall into the habit of pretend listening. In boring meetings, with our children, and at cocktail receptions, pretending to listen has become an art form. One of my young children came to me one day in a panic and said, "Mother wants to be cremated." I said, "Tell her to get her coat and we'll go."

Climb the Ladder to Become a Successful Listener

The six steps to becoming a better listener form a ladder. With each step, you become more highly proficient in listening.

- 1** Look at the person speaking to you.
- 2** Ask questions.
- 3** Don't interrupt.
- 4** Don't change the subject.
- 5** Empathize.
- 6** Respond verbally and nonverbally.

One of the reasons why attentive listening is so difficult is because of the discrepancy between talking speed and listening speed. Most people talk at about 150 words per minute; most people can listen at three to four times that rate. As a lecturer is talking, I can think about my weekend, a difficult person I am working with, a family problem, or a myriad of other topics. If I do not focus on listening to the lecture, often my mind wanders.

While engaged in conversation, most people have a limited capacity to remember things. If your client has five things he wants to talk to you about, it is best to allow him to talk through them once before you begin deep probing of any of the issues. Otherwise, his memory capacity may become overloaded and you may miss his key issue. The key issue often does not come out in the first bulleted item.

Have people ever finished your sentences before you do? Jumped on top of your conversation? I've been told that I do that a lot, but I am constantly working to improve. This comes from the powerful urge to get our thoughts out of our heads, lest we forget them. I am so afraid that I will forget that I sometimes blurt out my thought at the worst time. Rather than jump on some else's train of thought or be distracted trying to remember it, it is better to jot your thought down for later. Put it out of your mind and return to active listening.

You'll invariably find the answers—if your ears are open. The average salesperson is a better talker than listener. Listening is not enough. You have to let go of preconceptions and hear old laments as if for the first time.

—Tom Peters⁵

Sometimes active listeners will ask for a pause from the conversation to process the information. If you have a tendency to pause and process but don't announce what you are doing, your client may think you are slow. One way to pause and process while keeping a dialog going is to recap what was just said. Summarizing the conversation also provides a check that your interpretation was what the client meant to convey. It is important to keep a dialogue moving at the same pace as your client.

One of the best ways to persuade others is by listening to them.

—Dean Rusk⁶

Asking Good Questions

To create a selling environment, good salespeople construct a series of powerful questions that will elicit solid information around which they can sell. *SPIN Selling* by Neil Rackham and *Stop Telling, Start Selling* by Linda Richardson⁷ are two excellent books on asking good questions. Rackham's book is based on research into sophisticated selling situations.

While you sit and talk to your prospect at 150 wpm, your prospect is using only a quarter of her thought-processing capability, and she's likely to get bored or her mind will wander. (Don't take this personally. Have you taken any lecture-based CPE lately? Then you know the feeling!)

To engage more of your prospect's thought-processing capability and be more successful at selling in the process, involve your prospect throughout all phases of your sales call, even when you are making a presentation. For instance, you can keep prospects involved in your sales presentation by showing them a list of your references and asking them if they know anyone on it.

One of the best ways to involve prospects is to ask good questions. Here are some questions you could ask a prospect during a sales call:

- ***How do you define quality in an accounting firm relationship? Listen carefully to the prospect's answer.*** While the vast majority of prospects will say things like "I want you to understand my business" or "I want an

236 All Selling Is Personal Selling

accountant who will help me get what I want,” some will define quality in other ways.

- ***What do you like most about the accounting firm you are currently using?*** If prospects answer this question by praising their current accountant extravagantly, they may only be using you to shop for price. However, if they tell you about things they don’t like, you can begin to pursue this topic until you discover their unmet need.
- ***How do you think I might be able to help you?*** Listen very carefully to the answer to this question. Prospects are about to tell what benefits they expect from a relationship with you. Your sales presentation should then be built around proving you can meet the prospect’s expectations.
- ***What are your goals and priorities over the next three years?*** If you can help achieve any of the prospect’s top goals, focus your sales presentation on proving how you will be able to do it.
- ***Who, besides you, would influence a decision to hire an accounting firm?*** Would your bank have any input? Your board? Your family? Sometimes the controller is asked to conduct preliminary interviews of candidate accounting firms, but it is the owner or the CEO who makes the final decision. To succeed in being hired, you must be known to the key decision maker and to as many decision influencers as possible.

It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, U.S. Supreme Court Justice

Selling to Your Prospects

Invite your prospect to come in for a tour of your office. Seventy-five percent of all games are won by the home team. If you can get prospects onto your home ground, your odds may also improve.

A truly effective and persuasive presentation will create a healthy dissatisfaction in the prospect. This sense of dissatisfaction will motivate your prospect to want to change. That desire to change is an absolutely necessary ingredient to successful selling of CPA services. When you *hear* what problems they care about, you can proceed with questions that raise the anxiety level of your prospects.

The right questions create further dissatisfaction in prospects and a desire to make things different. A note of caution: Never ask a question that

will raise negative emotions unless you can solve the problem. If you raise the intensity level of the prospect's dissatisfaction, you create a strong desire to change. If you cannot supply the solution, the prospect will change—but without you!

Last, asking questions that establish the value of your services (i.e., “Is working with a firm that specializes in accounting for the manufacturing industry important to you?”) enables you to make the most powerful benefit statement possible. This type of question also allows prospects to put the value of your services in context with the cost. This type of question will differentiate you from other accountants because you are establishing value. This type of question gets the prospect to tell you what your services are worth. You never boast.

Preparation Is the Foundation for Success

How much respect do your prospects have for you when you are not prepared for the presentation? When your clients do not believe you are interested in their businesses and they feel taken for granted, how willing are they to pay your fees? If you could increase your success rate with your proposals from 2 in 10 to 4 in 10, how much could you increase your fees over the next five years?

When you ask better questions, you will encourage your prospects to do the talking and the selling. When they say something, it's more persuasive than when you say it. When you learn to improve your questioning technique, your persuasive powers are guaranteed to get you better results.

Questions are necessary in any sales interview, but if you ask too many of them, they can irritate prospects.

“Problem questions” help you locate a need. If there is no problem, there is no need and there will be no sale.

“Implication questions” prompt prospects to tell you all the bad things that may happen if the problem is not solved. All of these bad images promote a desire in your prospects to make a change. When the prospect has desire, then asking need-payoff questions will get your prospect to actually describe the benefits of your services.

You will make the strongest possible impact when you get your prospect to articulate the benefits and you then reinforce these benefits with strong statements. If *you* say it, they will forget it or doubt it. If *they* say it, they will remember it and believe it. This is the most powerful closing sequence you can use.

The Right Questions

A key issue that most sellers encounter is buyer fatigue. Buyers get so tired of regurgitating the answers to the same old questions that are asked by everybody, such as “Mr. Jones, what keeps you up at night?” or “Would you give me the history of your business?” The reason for buyer fatigue is that buyers are telling you things they know. They are not being challenged. It is a bit like the audit checklists you ask your staff to go over with your clients’ controllers. Many clients are irritated and say, “Didn’t you ask these questions 10 years ago? I already answered them.”

During Rackham’s research for *SPIN Selling*, he concluded that certain types of questions created buyer fatigue, whereas other types created buyer energy. A *situation question* is one that elicits information that is purely recitation of data known by the prospect. Situation questions usually gather data that is already known. Other people call these questions “information” or “recitation” questions. You should gather this routine information from others who work for your prospect, not bore the key decision maker with them.



Good questioning skills will do more to help you in sales than any “sales techniques” ever could.

—Neil Rackham, *SPIN Selling*⁸

“Which are best—open-ended or closed-ended questions?” I ask my training seminar participants. The chorus comes back, “Open-ended questions.” Then I ask, “What answer do you want to the question: “Mr. Client, would you like for me to handle this for you?” Generally, the class looks puzzled but responds, “Yes.” Then I ask, “What type of question gets a yes-or-no answer?” Of course, it is a closed-ended question.

Depending on where and how they are used, open-ended questions and closed-ended questions can be equally powerful. Normally, the answers to open-ended questions are not as predictable as are the answers to closed-ended questions. So, it generally makes sense to ask closed-ended questions at a time during your presentation when you want a predictable answer.

Asking questions that make prospects think transfers energy to them. Questions that get prospects to contrast, compare, project, or speculate will make them think. Linda Richardson calls these types of questions “dialogue” questions. The real point of a dialogue question is to create new thoughts between you and your prospect—new thoughts can lead to your prospect

viewing you as a powerful ally in the development of his or her business. Rackham calls these questions “implication” or “need-payoff” questions.

To come across as professional, it is important to ask situation, information, or recitation questions in a way that shows you have done your homework. For example, rather than asking the prospect, “What was your revenue last year?” ask a question based on your homework or research. “We looked you up in *MarketPlace* and learned that your revenues are about \$50 million—have you seen a sharp growth or decline in your revenue in the last three years?” is a stronger question. Constructing a dialogue question takes a bit more craftsmanship. But it might go something like this: “We found in *MarketPlace* that your revenue totaled about \$50 million, and we read that firms in your industry have seen massive defections of customers to a new technology. Would you tell me about your experiences with these issues?”

One of the biggest mistakes novice sellers make is to only ask questions inside their own comfort zone. For example, an auditor will ask questions only related to the audit. The technology consultant asks only about the computers. Most professionals tend to ask questions that get us what we want to hear. One key way to differentiate yourself is to learn to ask different questions—more holistic ones. Asking questions only about your areas of expertise is a very subtle form of not listening.

42 Specific Questions You Can Ask Your Prospects

Recently a CPA client of mine was preparing to make a presentation and written proposal to an important prospect. The prospect was a \$100 million company for which the annual core services fees would exceed \$100,000. The CPA and his partners had a series of nine meetings with corporate officers and board members over a period of about two months before being engaged by the client. Here is a list of questions that we prepared in advance of their first meeting. You may find some of them useful for stimulating your thinking about questions you ask can your prospects.

General

1. Please bring us up to date on the success of your business since [insert date or major event].
2. What are some of your most pressing business problems this year? Next year?
3. How do you see us helping you address these challenges?

240 All Selling Is Personal Selling

4. We want to be prepared for your future. Please tell us how you view your business challenges over the next three to five years.
 - What growth plans do you have?
 - Do you plan to exit any markets?
 - Do you expect capital needs? What about new financing?
 - Tell us about your new technology investment and how it interfaces with the accounting department.
5. We know you have been making an extensive investment in quality customer service, and so have we. Please tell us the service standards you would like for us to provide you.

Accounting and Auditing

6. What are the vital elements you want from your accounting and auditing service provider?
7. Are there some things, while not vital, that would be nice for us to provide you?
8. How important is regular personal interaction among our executives and yours?
9. How important is assigning our most experienced people to your engagement?
10. How important is it to have continuity of personnel assigned to your work?
11. How important is rapid response on accounting and tax questions?
12. What do you consider rapid response?
13. How important are the national and international resources of our firm to you?
14. Do you see any barriers to working with our firm?
15. How critical is price to you? Approximately what is your pricing expectation?
16. Why are you changing auditors?
17. What did you not like about your former firm that you do not want us to repeat?
18. What are the elements of our firm that can be of most benefit to you?
19. How did you enjoy working with your former firm?
20. Do you envision any other changes in your needs?

21. Would you review with us the best fieldwork dates during which we can interface with your accounting staff?
22. How do you envision your staff availability and capability to provide audit assistance?
23. In addition to the company's annual report, do you anticipate needing other reports from us?
24. If so, what reports and who will be the users?
25. Are you concerned about any of your asset, liability, or income statement accounts where we should pay particular close attention?

Income Tax

26. Do you have any tax savings opportunities we should explore?
27. Are there any tax audits in progress or contemplated?
28. Have you explored any advanced tax strategies?
29. Would you be willing to be very aggressive with your tax payments? Or would you rather take no risks?
30. You are operating in many states and several countries—we noticed that you may be able to restructure some of your operations to avoid or delay large amounts of tax. How would you react to creatively attacking this opportunity?

Technology

31. Will your new computer installation enable you to decrease your SG&A (Selling, General, and Administrative) expenses? Are there areas we can help you explore to help you drive down these costs?
32. How are your computers helping you?
33. Are you having any difficulties with your technology?
34. What would happen if you had a major fire in your main office?
35. We noticed that your systems are being supervised in-house. Do you have any serious issues with this supervision?
36. How would an independent expert review help you?

Management

37. As a part of our engagement, we invest a certain amount of time understanding your business. For example, we are continuously training on and reading about issues related to your business, and studying your business. In what ways do you suggest we best learn about your business

242 All Selling Is Personal Selling

so we can relate your operations to the financial information and so we can be more proactive in helping you maximize your business success?

38. If we invested (nonchargeable time) in attending certain of your internal management meetings as observers, would you be comfortable with this?
39. How would you feel about our partners regularly touring operations in order to better understand your business and find ways to help you be more profitable?
40. When it comes to managing your assets more effectively, are there ways you need for us to help you? For example, your investment in accounts receivable seem to be expanding at a faster rate than your sales each year. Will that cause you difficulties in cash flow? Carry costs? Missed payments? We noticed that your averages for sales growth, SG&A, and cost of sales were a bit lower than industry averages. Tell us about your goals here and how we might help. (What are the industry averages, specific other averages?)
41. Is working with local professionals who have national and worldwide resources important to you?
42. Do you anticipate any mergers, purchases, divestitures, recapitalizations, or reorganizations in the near future?

Summary

Communication is the key to success with clients—and listening is the key to communication. Ask good questions to get good answers. With a client you can do a wonderful thing and simply say, “How are we doing?” and get a feedback on the value that he or she is placing on the relationship. Is it still high? Is it as high as it was the day you were hired? It should be even higher because you should have exceeded the client’s expectations. If it’s high, then you know you have a ripe environment in which to sell.