

SALES STRATEGIES CENTERED ON ELABORATING QUESTIONS

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Abstract

Making a good sales approach depends largely on the strategy established by a salesperson, depending on the type of customer, the circumstances, and his/her psycho-linguistic availability. The sales strategies based on the science of reasoning, on the oratory and persuasive ability include skills related to communication, on which one of the most important is the development and asking of questions. The science related to the salesperson's ability to handles questions in a sales interview gives the true measure of his/her professionalism. Elaborated based on the taxonomy of the sales steps and depending on customer objections, questions may constitute a basic premise in the development of sales strategies and techniques

Keywords: sales strategies, attitude during questioning, functions of the questions, additional incentive, involving question.

Introduction

The role of questions in sales is fundamental, given that it is essentially linked to the attainment of communication, both on an informational level, as well as in the empathic, attitudinal one, this time involving a psychological factor. This study aims to analyze the premeditated method and drafting of questions in the communication between salesperson and customer, so that these questions acquire the maximum effect desired by the salesperson. Referring to the specialty literature (marketing and psychology), the paper presents a synopsis of the types of attitudes adopted by the salesperson and of the functions of the questions in the sales interview, followed by the analysis of the various categories of questions commonly used in this area, from the perspective of the field research.

Under this aspect one can easily see that the technique of the questions plays a role in initiating, processing and completing a sale, giving it specific functions for each moment / step of the sale.

The entire sales process depends on the way in which the questions are developed and managed, starting from the "hogging" of the customer to gaining his/her confidence, from stimulation of the to the targeting of his/her wishes and needs, from achieving assurance to purchasing the products. A question well asked can lead to the selling of the product, while the absence of a question or even a misguided question can lead to customer loss and inefficiency.

Actual content

Specialty studies (the ones referring to psychology of communication¹, as well as the ones related to sales management²) present a large variety of questions and techniques of elaborating effective questions in the specific act of sales communication.

Each question is asked with a specific purpose, with the intention of accumulating information about the customer and his/her needs and to reach the point in which the sales process is irreversible. Other questions however aim to control and direct the discussion, to stimulate the customer and form his/her convictions. But for this, the salesperson goes through an entire range of questions which represent the same amount of objectives to reach. From this point of view we can state that questions have certain functions in the salesperson-customer communication.

The research of practice shows that a professional salesperson does not necessarily emphasize on giving an absorbing, persuasive speech, but rather on asking adequate questions, through which he/she can find out the customer's needs and even more, he/she can direct the communication and negotiation onto the desired track. Contrary to the prejudices related to the "oratorical" skill, which is essential to a salesperson, we can state without any doubt that a good speech in this field targets the pillars of certain well-thought and optimally asked questions, taking into consideration the person, the time, the space, the type of relationship, etc.

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¹ Jean-Claude Abric, *Psychology of Communication. Theories and methods*, Publishing house Polirom, Iași, 2002.

² Ștefan Pruteanu, *Negotiation and analysis of transaction*, Publishing house Sagittarius, Iași, 1996.

The salesperson's attitude in the context of addressing the questions

The specialty studies from the field of psychology define attitudes as "a mental and neurological and physical state determined by experience and which exercises a dynamic influence on the individual, preparing him/her to act in a specific manner in front of a certain number of objects and events". Another definition presents attitudes as "taking of positions of an individual in relation to an object" or "attitudes are certain predisposition actions".³

In interpersonal relationships, attitudes differ from case to case, however certain dominating types are shaped, which are generally valid: interpretation attitude, evaluation attitude, help or counseling attitude, questioning or investigating attitude, attitude of comprehension.⁴

In the salesperson-customer communication, the attitudes most frequently adopted by the salesperson are the help or counseling attitude and the questioning or investigation attitude, depending on the moment of the sales process.

The first step in approaching potential customers is without doubt the manifestation of the questioning attitude, by means of which the salesperson asks questions in order to help the customer express his objectives. Certainly this creates a certain type of relationship through which the dominant power of the one expressing himself can be seen, emphasizing a certain dependency tendency of the questioned person towards the investigating persons.⁵ Without doubt, the salesperson-customer relationship is an interdependence relationship, each party having his/her role in the harmonization of the sales process. A very important aspect is given however by the salesperson, who must achieve his/her ability to ask questions, so that this situation give him/her the status of a privileged person, through which he/she can channel and manipulate the words of the customer.

In this respect the salesperson can use certain psychological strategies of persuasion, such as "induction by question selection", "induction by formulating the questions" or "induction by order of the questions".⁶

Selecting the questions allows the salesperson to direct the customer's speech towards a certain direction, aspect called in specialty terms "deliberate manipulation."⁷ For the professional salesperson, this "manipulation" becomes automatic, becoming part of the subconscious selection processes, based

on projective mechanisms. Thus, the salesperson will ask the questions corresponding to his/her interest to sell and which are consubstantial with the customer's interest to purchase the product, which fits his/her needs.

Formulating the questions is not an accidental process. It requires both a conscious process of stimulating and triggering, at a psychological and cognitive level, the customer's affective, positive attitudinal reactions, directed towards creating convictions. The mechanism is achieved by using certain words, lexical structures or ... (for instance, use of the verb "to invest" instead of "spend" or instead of "price" – "value", "contract" – "agreement" or "convention", "buy" – "own").

A special importance is given also to the *order of the questions*, a fundamental criterion in insuring coherence and consistency of the answers. On the other hand, the customer will be able to express in a balance manner his/her objections, in a logical, coherent order, which will facilitate the activity of the salesperson in prospecting the customer, this diminishing the contractions or subversive tendencies of the customer. Moreover, psychologists themselves state that "*the order in which a questionnaire is carried out run the risk of closing up an individual in a discursive logic, which makes him/her – under the effect of certain successive coherences – say «white» when spontaneously he/she would have said «black».* Certain questions are thus contagious, determining what is generally called *the halo effect*."⁸

The functions of the questions

The reasoning behind the elaboration of questions forms by being first aware of some functions, which each question activates in the salesperson-customer relationship. Being closely related to the steps of the sale, following a logical reasoning, these may be: the function of the salesperson acquiring control in the conversation, the function of discovering the interest areas of the customer, the function of isolating the objections, the function of confirming the sale process. We may also add to these, certain functions having a psychological nature, through which the salesperson stimulates the feeling form purchasing and directs the attention of the customer towards acquiring new products.

³ Jean-Claude Abric, op.cit., pag. 36.

⁴ ibidem, pp. 38-48.

⁵ ibidem, pp.45.

⁶ ibidem, pag. 46-47.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

1. The function of the salesperson acquiring control in the conversation.

This function corresponds to the ability of the salesperson to capture the attentions of the customer, to lead him/her in a persuasive manner towards the path desired by the salesperson, and not the other way around.

The moment represents the start of the sale, which will be the base of the smooth running of the entire process. In case the salesperson does not show a good initiative and leave the customer feeling ambiguous, the sale process is compromised. The function thus implies the psychological factor, meaning that the salesperson must have control in the conversation, both through verbal communication, as well as non-verbal or paraverbal communication. Essential here is the attitude of the salesperson, in which the customer must see self-confidence, trust and professionalism. And these are manifested both through choosing the proper words, as well as through tone, look, gestures, and mimic. In this regard, after correctly finding out the needs of the customer, the salesperson will state with certainty in speech and mimic or body-language that a certain model/version of the product fits the customer. Self-confidence leads to achieving the trust of the customer and automatically to the possibility of leading the entire sale process.

2. The function of discovering the interest areas of the customer

An important step in communication is made by the salesperson through questions, which help him/her discover the customer's needs, thus shaping the interest areas. The questions follow a logical, gradual order, from general lines towards specific ones, up to finding out the features sought by the customer. The latter will be questioned both from the point of view of the pragmatic needs brought by the new products, as well as of the social satisfaction needs. Often a sale is achieved as a result of the need for social affiliation or of assertion in the society.

Thus a start of questioning the needs of the customer may lead to finding out the benefits that are desired to be achieved by acquiring the respective product. In this respect, the customer will have to be questioned in relation to the current product, which will be changed. In the automotive field, there must be a clear distinction made between different benefits that come with the purchase of a new vehicle. There will be questions about the destination of the vehicle, to be more exact if it will be used as a personal or work vehicle. In the same time, we must find out if there are more persons using the car and what kind of roads will be used. Depending on the received answers, he/she will be recommended to purchase a small class version, a

minivan, or even a van. Moreover, in case the customer will also use the vehicle on bumpy roads of the off-road type, he/she will be recommended to purchase a four-wheel drive vehicle. This step is crucial in the sale process, given the salesperson's conscious targeting towards a certain product. If the salesperson does not have enough dexterity in formulating the questions and interpreting the answers, which is sometimes intuitive, the questioning may lead to choosing the wrong product, which in the end will not be purchased since it does not fit the customer's mentioned or non-verbalized desires.

3. The function of regulating and isolating the objections

This function takes into consideration the prequalification of the customer. With the help of the questions, the customer will be directed towards expressing his/her objections. The salesperson must select the important objections, the ones that represent the real interest of the customer, as these must be cleared otherwise the objections will show up permanently. The salesperson must not avoid, but on the contrary, he/she must search them, in order to correct point out the benefits of the product in question. Objections are the ones that confirm our desire to purchase. The customer places himself/herself in the position of the owner of that product; as a result he/she has already an idea or even the desire to purchase it. Objections must be isolated and interpreted as real or imaginary. An example in this respect is offering a vehicle placed on a superior range. Objections like: the car is too large, it has too many features or the difficulty to park it – may mean in reality that we are offering a product that is too expensive. In this case the class of the product must be brought down to a lower level.

4. The function of confirming the sale process

For an optimal process of the sale, the salesperson must make sure that the customer is involved and, as a result, that he asks the questions that will confirm the salesperson the continuity of the initiated sales process. There are questions, which, once answered, will confirm the salesperson that he/she can move on to the next step of the sale. This function is achieved by asking certain summarizing questions: "I understand that you wish to buy a family car and that you will have long drives; thus a diesel sedan would be what we are looking for, is that right?"

5. The function of rationalizing the decisions

This function has a pronounced psychological substrate, in the sense that by means of certain questions, the customer is determined to rationally justify his/her decisions, as it is more a reassurance of the objection-benefit binomial. The customer is responsible for decision taking, and, in case these decisions are taken on an emotional, sentimental basis (as for instance "I want that product because I like it, rather than need it"), and not in a rational manner, the questions of the salesperson acquire an important role in proving the fact that the desires make sense and can be justified rationally within the area of the needs.

Types of questions

The specialty literature in the field of management and sales speaks about several types of questions used by professional salespersons, which are closely related to the moments of the sale process.

The analyst Rackham believes that in order to achieve a higher level of efficiency and in order to have a good order of the questions, these must be elaborated according to four criteria: "*situation, problem, implication and need-benefit*".⁹ Each criterion involves questions that correspond to different levels of the sale process, starting from prospecting and establishing the needs to finalizing the sale.

In each stage, specialist believe, "the emphasis is on asking the potential customer about his/her particular situation, in order to find a solution coming from the portfolio of the salesperson's products. Here, the three key elements are, first of all, the fact that *the customer's needs are preeminent*; secondly that *the salesperson asks questions*, and does not make assertions"; and thirdly that the transmission of the message sent by the marketing department is not relevant for this fundamental process. (...) In the center of the activity lies the solving of problems, rather than communication; if the potential customer is allowed to speak, he will (actually) tell the salesperson how to sell his/her product (n.n.)."¹⁰

In *The Book about Sales*, Tom Hopkins analyses the elaboration process of these questions and believes that there are two types of fundamental questions, resulting then in other complementary questions. These two are *open* and *closed questions*.¹¹ In order to make the presentation of a

product more efficient, the salesperson must include in the conversation all the question types:

- **Open questions** call for the customer's reasoning, and the answers offer information that is crucial to the salesperson, as they present the first objections (Who? What? How? When? Where? Which? Why?) and shapes *the situation*, which generates the need for a new product. Open questions are the first used in the sale process, since these bring the salesperson a lot of information about the customer, about the customer's profile, his/her financial power and expectations. In the sale time these questions give the salesperson time to think, which is often needed in order to find solutions for the emerged objections. **Closed questions** generally for short, even monosyllabic answers, but these answers determine the continuation or the successful closure of the sale. Questions like "If I deliver you the product in two days, we sign the contract today, don't we? If we find you the darker color, we make the order today, don't we?"

- A particular role have the **complementary questions**, since they operate on a subliminal level and have a very persuasive effect, determining the customer the state and/or confirm the statement of the salesperson. I speak here mainly about the agreement of the salesperson with the customer, expressed by the use of lexical structures such as: "Isn't it right that ...?", "Do you also think that ...", "am I right?", "this is how it's supposed to be, don't you think so?" Tom Hopkins is right when he says that "*Selling is the art of asking the right questions to get the minor yeses that allow you to lead the potential customer to a major decision. It's a simple operation, and finalizing the sale is nothing more than the sum of all yeses.* (n.n.)"¹² These complementary questions can be used in each moment of the sale process.

- Another efficient technique of question elaboration is, in the opinion of the same author, **additional stimulation**, mostly used in the phase of establishing a meeting and it consists of formulating an interrogative structure, which offers two options and as a result calls for two answers. The example of the author is eloquent in this regard: "*«Mr. Johnson, this afternoon I will be in your neighborhood. Do you think it would be convenient for you if I drop by at two o'clock or should I wait until three o'clock?»* When he says: *«Three o'clock sounds better»*, you got the meeting. And you got it by suggesting two Yeses instead of that No he would have chosen."¹³ The technique of **additional stimulation** justifies its efficiency especially because it insures the progress

⁹ apud. Jim Blythe, *Management of sale and of key customers*, Published by Codecs, Bucharest, 2005, page 14.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Tom Hopkins, *Art of Selling*, translated by Lia Decei; edited by: Iuliana Enache – Revised and amended edition – Bucharest, BusinessTech International, 2014, page 74.

¹² ibidem, page 76.

¹³ ibidem, page 84.

of the sale. The salesperson predisposes the customer to accept his/her projects, offering him/her positive alternatives.

- **The implying question** is another stimulating technique with a heavy psychological sublayer. It refers to the benefits of the product, determining the customer to imagine himself/herself as the owner of these benefits, to see himself/herself as an owner, in the future. Naturally, the technique calls for a lot of subtlety and psychological finesse. The implying questions can have, for instance, the following lexical configuration: "Mr. ..., do you believe you'll use the car only for your holidays or will you also rent it?" Tom Hopkins believes that this elaboration technique is also a sort of additional stimulation but on a different level.¹⁴ The customer is given the idea of an additional, productive investment.

- **The hedgehog technique**¹⁵ is answering a question asked by the customer with another question that helps the salesperson keep the control of the conversation and conduct the steps of the sale to the next level. Even though it seems intriguing, this technique shows a high degree of conviction and needs a lot of courage from the part of the salesperson. When the customer asks the question and he/she is answered with another question, the customer may suspect that the salesperson is not capable of giving concrete answers, but the salesperson follows his/her own strategy, thus looking to find information of major importance in the sale process. For instance, the customer asks about the delivery date and the salesperson answers with another question related to the delivery: "Can I have the product on day X of the month?" and the answer would be: "Day X of the month is the best option or you?" The information received by the salesperson as answer to this question may represent a considerable value in the chain of this process, since if the customer gives an affirmative answer, the sale is coming to an end. If the answer is negative, the customer leaves room for delays, doubts etc. The hedgehog technique brings out the customer's unexpressed thoughts and feelings, which must be taken into consideration by the salesperson.

- **Leading questions and discovering questions**¹⁶ are essential in the addressing repertoire of the salesperson. These go hand in hand, meaning that the salesperson leads and discovers, in the same time, much needed information. **Leading questions** are based on an infallible principle in the mentioned area: of the salesperson says something related to the performance of the product, the potential customer may not believe it, however if the salesperson determines the customer to state the respective value,

the customer will remain invariably convinced, since he/she stated it. And thus the customer is "lead" towards purchasing. Thus the customer may be asked about the sunroof of a vehicle, if it were useful and in what mountain regions he would like to drive his car first. **Discovering questions** are more efficient if, paradoxically, they don't have the form of a question. Having an ample, enunciating structure, they avoid receiving a negative answer or one lacking interest. For instance, instead of the cliché question "Can I be of assistance?", which is most of the times followed by the trivial answer "I'm just looking", it would be more efficient to ask the leading question: "Please take a look at our models and I am at your service if you have any questions." An "enunciating" question of the type: I have a model of the small class at an affordable price and a model of the middle class – also at a very affordable price. Moreover the large class models also have a substantial discount.

These types of questions constitute the premises for success in sales strategies, since they operate as incentives for the customer and especially as infallible principles in the order and efficiency of the sale process. In this regard the advice of the famous trainer is unbeatable: „a) *Ask discovering questions and they will show you the benefits bought by the customers, so that you know what products and services you can sell them and how to manage that.* b) *Ask leading questions and these will make them state that they believe what you want them to believe related to your offer. If you don't state anything, they may not believe; but if they state the same thing, then it's the truth.*"¹⁷

On the other hand, the strategies focused on elaborating questions denote the competence of the salesperson to skillfully manage contradictory conversations, inconsistencies or digressions, thus the objections of the customer can be solved with courtesy and condescension, according to the rules of social ethics and deontology at work.

Conclusion

The elaboration of questions may become, in sales management, the gravity center of sale strategies and techniques. "*The one who asks, will lead*", said Aristotle in Ancient Times, revealing the immutable role of the questions: that of leading the attention and interest of the customer towards purchasing. A skillful salesperson who has systematically mastered the functions of the questions in addressing the customer and in achieving his/her argumentation, will adopt the optimal questioning attitude and will use different

¹⁴ ibidem, page 90.

¹⁵ ibidem, pp. 87-88.

¹⁶ ibidem, pp. 96-100.

¹⁷ ibidem, page 100.

types of questions, from the most basic ones, open questions, receiving answers that will help him collect the information needed, to the

complementary ones, the involving ones, whose incentive in the customer's psychological cognitive configuration gives them the reason to be used.

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