The Law of Columbo
Ask Questions, Sell More

“Oh, there’s just one more thing…”
-Peter Faulk as Lieutenant Columbo

The Law of Columbo: Sellers who ask more questions close more sales. Buyers who talk less, buy less. The more questions you ask, the more clues you find, and the more information you can share. The seller who talks too much will soon have silence on the buying end.

Just One More Question…
Do you remember the old 1970’s murder mystery television show starring Peter Faulk as Lieutenant Columbo? If you do, a smile just came to your face. Faulk played a police detective who wore a rumpled raincoat, smoked a cigar and drove an out-of-date car. His method for solving every crime was asking questions… many, many questions. By the end of the episode, just as you thought the murderer was going to get away with the crime, Columbo would always turn around as he was leaving and ask, “Oh, there’s just one more thing…” They always confessed!

Successful sales are made by asking questions and listening to people’s cues and clues… not bombarding buyers with your features or what makes you special. People make up their minds in the first 20 seconds of a new conversation. If they are forced to listen to you talk, you’ve lost their attention. However, if you begin by asking questions, it accomplishes two very important goals. First, they are too busy answering questions to make up their minds immediately. Secondly, they become engaged, talking about themselves and their business.

Everyone likes talking about themselves. Let them do it!

So, what questions does a good account representative ask? Understand that sales is a process, not an event and just like solving a mystery, you have to ask for clues.

The process begins with a seller who spends time learning the existing culture. Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care. Have you spent time researching their industry? their business? their company or regional culture? People in Denver don’t value the same things that people in Memphis do. People have preferences often based on region, culture,
background, nationality, and individualism. How much have you found out about them as individuals?

**UNEARTH CLUES**

Why should you “sweat” the answers while your customers ask you all the questions and interview you? You are interviewing them. If you ask the questions, you are in charge of the conversation. If you ask the questions, they are doing most of the talking. If you ask the questions, they are opening up about what they value most.

What kind of questions should you ask? You want to engage them and make them think. Encourage the development of ideas. Use essay questions (stay away from “Yes/No” answers). Listen to their “story” and listen for clues and cues.

Here are eight good questions to ask on your next call:

1. **What do you like about the products or services you are using from the company you have been buying from recently?**

   *The wisdom behind the question:* It allows the customer to say positive things about the service your competitor is providing and gives you an idea of what you are up against.

   It’s always good to start any conversation on a positive note. This makes the buyer feel at ease and they can say good things about the services they are receiving. It starts to make them think inwardly.

2. **What do you wish the company you’ve been buying from would do for you?**

   *The wisdom behind the question:* This is a positive way to have them start expressing the discomfort with what they are receiving. It gives you an idea of what you need to do to start delivering value and not just make a sale. It also presupposes a longstanding relationship with the buyer.

   You can throw in some examples of similar situations you have solved, but don’t talk too much. You’ll do better to just nod, take notes and be understanding. Allow the buyer to do most or all of the talking. Allow the buyer to express more uncomfortable feelings with the way things are in their business with the more they say.

3. **What is your competition doing to take your customers and business away?**

   *The wisdom behind the question:* Find out where the buyer’s “hurt” is and what you can do to solve it.

   Buyers are usually don’t talk about their primary pains in business because no one ever asks them. You have just stepped into the role of building trust with your client. You are concerned about what they are concerned about. Get them to share as much as you can. Don’t give into that temptation to talk about yourself. The more they share, the better your position. Silence is your best tool and friend as they talk.
4. What do you wish a seller could do for you?

*The wisdom behind the question:* This allows the buyer to dream some and express what they value the most.

They may give a short answer. If they do, repeat what they said and ask them to “unpack” their response so you can understand better what they are feeling. Now the pressure is on them to say, “Here is what I think we should do to resolve this situation for our company’s best interest.”

5. If I could wave a magic wand and solve your greatest problem in business, what would that be and look like?

*The wisdom behind the question:* This is a coaching question that builds trust. It is designed to allow the buyer to envision their greatest problems being solved. It takes you beyond just selling a product or service.

The goal in this question is to expand on the buyer’s dreams and vision for their organization. You have just stepped into the role of “Business Growth Advisor,” and are no longer just another salesperson. Now you haven’t told them any “features” about your product or services. They can see that you are going to work with them to solve problems.

6. If you like my product or service, how do you envision a great relationship to look going forward?

*The wisdom behind the question:* This question moves the conversation forward to assuming they will like working with you.

There is everything to gain and nothing to lose by asking this question. They will tell you how close they want to work with you or how distant. You make notes on what they say and let them see you doing that. Repeat their main points back in a paraphrase to let them know you understand what they are saying.

7. If I could show you an economical value that meets your challenges, would you be interested in seeing it?

*The wisdom behind the question:* While this is one of the few questions that asks a definitive question, it calls for a response. It creates a little good tension.

Follow by asking them to describe it in detail. This won’t be a problem since you already have them doing most of the talking. Remember, the person asking the questions is directing the conversation.

8. When is a good time to get back to you after I’ve done some research into what you just shared with me?

*The wisdom behind the question:* They will now tell you when to get back in touch with them. Remember, The Law of First Contact says, “The object of the first visit is to get the second visit. Nothing more, nothing less.”
This question shows that you will be diligent in looking at customized solutions, crunching numbers and doing your homework on what they told you. It’s good to not quote a fee on the first visit. Avoid this at all costs (pun intended). If it gets down to them asking you the price or fee, you will lose every time because it tells you they haven’t been sold on your value to them.

In the end asking these questions will be about surrendering power to avoid turndowns in sales and finding out more about your client and his/her needs.

Go to YouTube and watch a “Columbo” mystery. You’ll get the idea of asking questions like a true detective. Good luck with your sales reinvention as you become a detective solving “The Mystery of the Dead Sales.”

“Oh, I didn’t come here to ask any more questions. I came to arrest you.”

-Lt. Columbo

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