Case 8-1

Analyze the following telephone conversation and determine how the salesperson could improve future calls:

Salesperson: Good morning, I wonder if I might speak to Mr. Hermann?

Receptionist: Which Mr. Hermann? M. R. Hermann or T. J. Hermann?

Salesperson: Which one is in charge of purchasing?

Receptionist: That's T. J. Hermann. I'll connect you.

Salesperson: Mr. Hermann, my name is Bob Smith. I wonder if I might make an appointment to see you?

Mr. Hermann: What about?

Salesperson: I'd like to explain about our new cleaning services that are now available to businesses in the area.

Mr. Hermann: We already have a cleaning service that handles our warehouse.

Salesperson: That may be, Mr. Hermann, but our company guarantees satisfaction at the lowest cost.

Mr. Hermann: How much do you charge?

Salesperson: We charge $10 for our services.

Mr. Hermann: Our current cleaners charge $8 per hour.

Salesperson: We offer guaranteed quality.

Mr. Hermann: That may well be, but we're not interested in changing at this time. But call back next year. You never know. (hangs up)

Now rewrite the conversation as you think the salesperson should have handled it.

Case 8-2

Ralph VanHandel, a sales representative for WOSH radio, is calling on Jennifer Graham, owner of Darla's Shop, an Arlington, Virginia, clothing store known for carrying the latest and most popular styles. Ralph is meeting with Jennifer to sell her on the idea of buying radio time for advertising Darla's.

Ralph: (extending hand) Good morning, Mrs. Gram. How are you today?

Jennifer: I'm just fine. By the way, my name is Ms. Graham, G-R-A-H-A-M.

Ralph: Sorry. Sure is a nice day today. Wish I was out playing golf. Do you play golf?

Jennifer: No, I don't. Now what can I do for you? I'm kind of busy. It takes a lot of time to keep Darla's going.

Ralph: I bet. You know, everyone says you're the best store in town. Absolutely everyone.

Jennifer: (folding arms across chest) That's nice. I'm glad to hear that. Now let's get down to why you're here.

Ralph: Fine. First, let me introduce myself. I'm Ralph VanHandel with WOSH radio. I hope I'm not intruding on your valuable time today. I would like to talk to you about buying some advertising spots with WOSH.

Jennifer: Well, in the past, we've pretty much restricted ourselves to advertising in the newspaper. We seem to get better results that way.

Ralph: I'm sorry to hear that. Some people feel that way, unfortunately. But you ought to at least give us a try. You might be surprised, you know.

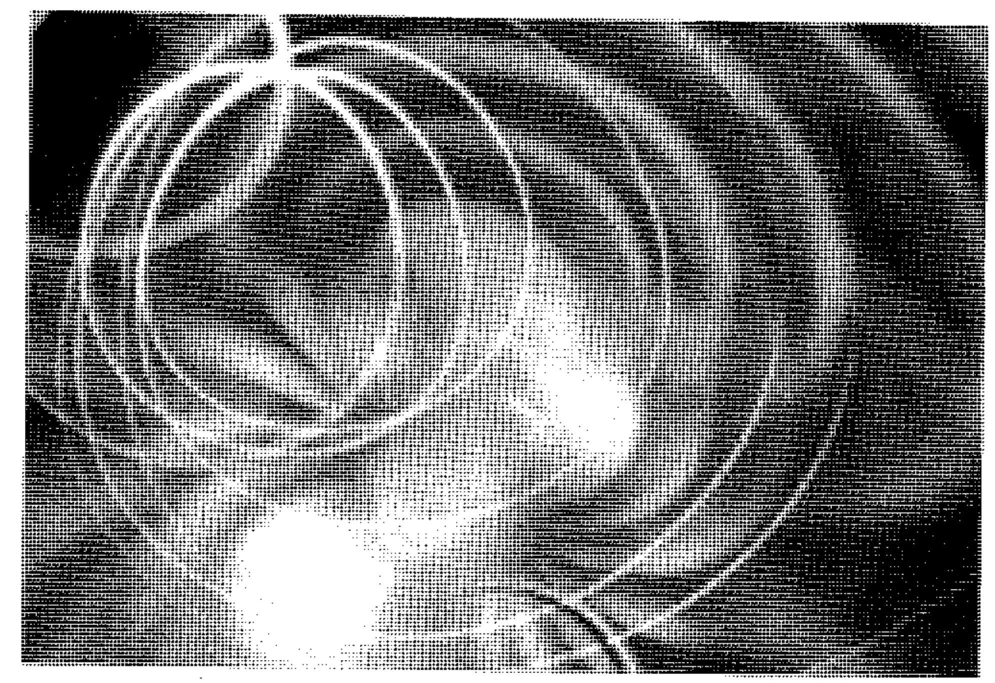
Jennifer: Maybe I will in the future, but right now I really don't have any desire to waste money on radio advertising. Now I must excuse myself, since we've just got in some new shipments.

Questions

1. Did Ralph handle the approach properly? What mistakes did he make?
2. How would you have approached a buyer like Ms. Graham?

Chapter 9

Problem Recognition



Key Terms

closed questions
continuing questions
creative silence
direct questions
dissonance
indirect questions
instant replay
lantern principle
open questions
permissive question
problem confirmation
redirecting questions
statement of purpose
third-party questions

Outline

Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

After studying Chapter 9, you will understand:

- Why problem recognition is critical to the selling process
- The importance of questioning in the recognition process
- How to make the transition from the approach step of the selling process to problem recognition
- Questioning techniques for initiating the flow of information, continuing the flow of information, and checking for understanding
- Further guidelines for asking questions: keep the questions simple; retain the burden of responsibility; space out the questions; ask about benefits, not features; and avoid biased questions

At this juncture in any discussion of selling, it is traditional to talk about the presentation. We will do that here, too, but in a different way. Many salespeople and their managers view selling as a conflict between buyer and seller, with the successful salesperson being the one who prevails in the struggle. According to this way of thinking, salespeople are urged to be dominant—to "manage" buyers and, in effect, to manipulate them. The salesperson is directed to tell prospects about the product or service and why they should buy it, the assumption being that a complete, well-delivered presentation will automatically end in a sale. Although there is no question that delivery and drama are important factors, this manipulative approach is quite likely to establish barriers in the buyer's mind, for most people want to buy rather than be sold.

With the manipulative approach, the prospect is seen as a robot that will necessarily do as the salesperson says if only the right buttons are pushed, and the buttons are present in the salesperson's presentation. The words of the presentation are the stimuli or buttons to which the prospect can respond in only one manner—signing the order. This process is conceived to be one-way: buyer to seller. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with the process; the salesperson must manage the situation and be in control the whole time.

Some companies (and salespeople) have formalized the manipulative approach to selling into the "canned" presentation. Here the salesperson memorizes a speech for verbatim delivery to every prospect. This speech is organized to include a complete story of the features and benefits of the product, the hope being that at least some of the phrases will strike a responsive note with the buyer. The really sophisticated canned presentations may include a series of statements, after each of which the prospect is asked for agreement. For example:

Salesperson: Ms. Prospect, have you ever sat down with your husband and discussed what would happen if you were seriously ill? I want you to give me an honest answer.

Prospect: No, I haven't.

Salesperson: You could use up your savings, but if the doctor said, "You will never work again," your savings wouldn't last long enough, would they?

Prospect: No, not long.

There is a minimum of prospect participation in this process. Such canned presentations are generally used in low-level selling (especially with inexpensive items) or in situations where it is important to tell the complete story in a short period of time and move on with little intention of revisiting the buyer. As you might well imagine, many prospects object to the canned approach because they feel they are being treated as objects rather than individuals. "Better," as Ben Franklin once said, "to put on the role of the humble inquirer." We all hate the canned sales talk that goes on and on, with no questions about our needs.

In contrast to the traditional view of selling as a contest in which the buyer is to be managed, there is evidence to suggest exactly the opposite. In a classic study, Schuster and Danes found that "question-asking by the salesperson was a significant indicator of success regardless of product category."[1] In a 12-year $1 million study of effective sales performance, the Huthwaite Corporation, a sales consulting firm, found that successful salespeople asked more questions than their lower-performing counterparts (especially the right questions).[2]

This is not to say, however, that there is no value in planning a presentation, for there surely is. But with relationship selling, planning takes a different form. Each buyer is conceived to be different; each has his or her own needs and problems to which salespeople must address themselves on an individual basis. However, sales representatives can formulate a series of carefully preconceived benefit statements, a series of statements blending features and benefits. With a supply of these carefully planned benefit statements in the back of their minds, salespeople are prepared to present a credible picture of their product, but they are also in a position to individualize their presentation, selecting the right combination of features and benefits appropriate for that particular buyer.

9-1 The Discussion Process

In the selling process, telling is not equivalent to selling, and getting told does not equal being sold. Selling is least effective when the salesperson tells the prospect; it is most effective when the two parties are interacting. The first part of this interaction or discussion is the process of recognition—a mutual talking about, analyzing, and discovering the prospect's needs and problems. To a considerable degree this involves questioning, listening carefully, and analyzing buyers' needs and problems. Once buyers' problems are evident to both the buyers and the salesperson, the next part of the discussion process, the presentation, can begin.

In many ways, salespeople resemble doctors. If a doctor writes a prescription without first making a diagnosis, it amounts to malpractice. A doctor uses various instruments to conduct an examination of the patient. Likewise, salespeople should use questions as their instruments to conduct an examination of the prospect.

9-1a The Importance of Recognition

Recognition is very much associated with the process of human motivation. An individual begins with some form of need, which leads to a problem to be solved. The solution makes it possible for the next need to take hold. Then the whole process starts all over again, as A. H. Maslow theorized in his concept of the hierarchy of needs (see Chapter 4, "Buyer Behavior").

A *need,* according to Maslow, is "a feeling which, if left unsatisfied, produces anxiety or tension . . . yet if satisfied, imparts a sensation of well-being."[3] An unsatisfied need creates tension. If immediate gratification is at hand, there is no problem. As portrayed in Figure 9-1, if there is a large difference between what is desired (the ideal) and what is at hand (the actual), then a *problem* is presented. A problem in turn motivates the individual to seek a solution and reduce tension.

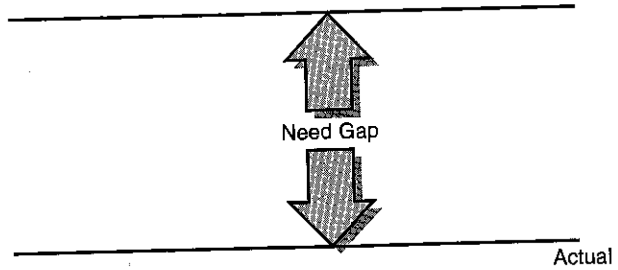


Figure 9-1
The Greater the Gap between the Ideal State and the Actual State, the Greater the Need Gap (i.e., problem) & the Greater the Motivation to Solve the Problem

Let's illustrate this process with an example. Let's say you are sitting in front of the television set, when suddenly you realize you are thirsty. There's a hollow feeling in your stomach, and you know you would like a soft drink. If a can is by your side, there is no problem. But if none is immediately available, then there is a difference between the desired situation (drinking a soda) and the current state of matters (not having one). If this difference is great, going to the refrigerator, going next door to borrow, or perhaps getting in the car to go buy a 6-pack could resolve it. In any case, once the solution is found, the whole process begins anew, and the next need—perhaps a pizza—is ready to take hold.

How does all this relate to selling? The answer is that a sale requires buyers to become motivated to buy; they must recognize a need and a problem to compel them to seek a solution. However, recognition is not always easy. Individuals may not be aware that they have an insurance need or that a problem is present because there is a wide contrast between the financial coverage they have for their family and the coverage they require. Hospital purchasing agents may not be fully aware that a problem exists with their current surgical uniform; they may be only dimly aware that some unfavorable comments have been made about current garments. Such situations require recognition before the motivation process can begin. It is up to the salesperson to start the prospect talking so that a need and problem can be recognized. This talking will help prospects become aware of how large a gap exists between their current situation and the one they desire. Once the problem is established, the salesperson can move on to the presentation and illustrate how the product provides a solution to the problem and how desirable the prospect's situation will become after the purchase.

dissonance
The discomfort people feel on recognizing contradictions in their beliefs.

By indicating discrepancies between current situations and more desirable states that prospects could experience, salespeople create **dissonance**. This concept of "cognitive dissonance" is well known in psychology; it was first proposed by Leon Festinger to refer to the discomfort people experience on recognizing seeming contradictions. Festinger contends that people find inconsistencies troublesome and try to resolve these discrepancies (i.e., they try to change their current situations).[4] The marketing implication is that upon encountering prospects too content with their current circumstances to consider change, salespeople need first to invoke discontent to make the prospect receptive to change; the way to do this is by asking the right questions.

There is a well-recognized principle in biology known as *homeostasis*, which says that organisms seek to maintain equilibrium by resisting change and also by reverting to an original state if change should occur. Much the same is true psychologically. Individuals resist change in their thoughts, their feelings, their habits, and even their possessions. The lesson for salespeople is that their customers, too, are characterized by homeostasis; they tend to oppose change from the status quo. Only

by drawing out prospect needs and problems through careful questioning can the salesperson disturb the customer's homeostasis. Only when questioning makes customers realize the depth of their current dissatisfaction are they likely to listen attentively to the salesperson's presentation. Change is unlikely until the salesperson's questions have first made customers uncomfortable enough with their current situations to seek relief.

No doctor would think of prescribing treatment without first diagnosing the patient. Yet this is exactly what many salespeople do. They immediately confront their prospects with a tirade about their new "miracle" products without first diagnosing prospect problems. It is no wonder that so many customers resist "miracle cures" and usher such salespeople out of their offices as soon as possible. Much like physicians taking patient histories, if salespeople don't accurately diagnose before they prescribe solutions, they run a risk of providing ones that do not address the clients' true problems. As with doctors, the rule is clear for salespeople: *diagnosis precedes prescription!*[5]

Yet, it is astounding how many sales reps fail to ask questions first, before beginning their presentation. In a recent study of life insurance agents, about one in four failed to inquire about the prospect's investment history, assets, saving objectives, and risk tolerance. Nearly 60 percent did not ask about the prospect's tax bracket.[6] It's no wonder that only about 20 percent of life insurance salespeople are successful.

At this point, the reader might question whether recognition is necessary in every selling situation. The answer is no, not always—but usually. Even when prospects have realized a need, they may not be aware of all the dimensions of the problem. Car buyers may recognize their need for a new car because the old one has broken down, but they may not fully recognize the kind of new car they need. Model, style, color, passenger capacity, and interior remain to be determined. Fulfilling these needs will also require the prospect to go through a recognition process.

How does the salesperson go about assisting the prospect's recognition process? As we have already said, telling is not sufficient. For true understanding, prospects must come to the realization themselves. This requires careful questioning by the sales representative to encourage prospects' talking so that they begin to recognize their needs and problems. This is the fundamental assumption in psychotherapy; when people begin to talk about things, recognition and understanding of their problems become firmer and solutions can be identified.

9-1b The Role of Recognition in the Selling Process

The way recognition fits into the selling process is depicted in Table 9-1. In the approach stage, salespeople seek to gain the buyer's attention. Once the approach is completed, problem recognition begins. This largely involves questioning and listening on the part of the salesperson. Once a problem is established, you can move on to the presentation. Here, the salesperson presents solutions to the prospect in a

Table 9-1 Role of Recognition in the Selling Process

Approach →	Recognition →	Presentation →	Handling →	Closing
		ACTIVITIES		
Getting the interview	Questioning	Offering solutions	Resolving doubts	Signing the order
Relating	Listening			

creative and entertaining manner. Once the presentation is concluded, quite often the prospect still has some doubts and objections about the advisability of buying. It is the job of the salesperson to help resolve these doubts. The final step of the selling process is to close the sale.

Later stages of the selling process cannot proceed satisfactorily without adequate problem recognition. More sales are lost due to prospects' not understanding their problems than to any other factor. The smoothest presentation and most practiced of closes will fall on deaf ears if prospects are expected to relate stated benefits to an unrecognized problem. Attempting to sell a computer to a prospect who has not identified an inventory-control or order-processing problem is unlikely to meet with much success. Neither is trying to sell a cellular phone until the prospect understands how much time is lost due to canceled appointments, stopping to call from pay phones, and having to return to the office to check on inventory order statuses.

In fact, as mentioned in Chapter 1, "The Role of Personal Selling," problem recognition is the *most important* part of the selling process. In contrast to short-term transactional selling that involves one or a few calls, handling objections and closing especially, are much less important in long-term relationship selling. In fact, with relationship selling, preventing objections before they arise and minimizing the number of closing attempts are critical.

9-2 The Value of Questioning

We have already identified how questioning assists the recognition process by encouraging prospects to talk and realize their own needs and problems. Questioning is also advantageous from several other standpoints.

First, questioning aids in holding prospect attention. For the length of time it takes the prospect to answer a question, the salesperson has his or her entire attention. It is not possible for someone to answer a well-structured question and think of something else at the same time. Psychologists have estimated that, on average, people remember 10 percent of what they hear, 50 percent of what they do, and 90 percent of what they see and participate in. Learning (and selling) can be difficult when the listener only sits and passively listens. But when learners participate in the process, their attention increases immeasurably. If we are interested in anything, it is the sound of our own voices speaking our own interests. Remember, the average person speaks at 125 to 150 words per minute, but can think much faster. When the sales rep is talking, the prospect can both listen and think of other matters simultaneously—objections, fears, criticisms, doubts, and personal matters.[7]

Listening to responses to questioning builds trust; every question that salespeople ask implies that they are interested in the prospect. The more the salesperson listens, the more the prospect likes and trusts them, two factors we have identified on numerous occasions as absolutely vital to building the relationship. Each question says in effect, "I want to hear you. I respect your opinion." Once prospects feel that salespeople understand them, salespeople are that much closer to making the sale. As stated earlier, people frequently buy not so much because they really understand the product but because they feel understood by the salesperson.

Questioning also allows sales representatives to test assumptions they have made in the preapproach or during the course of the discussion itself. Without the ability to question buyers about their needs, the sales rep has no guarantee that he or she is on the right track. The salesperson might begin the presentation by stressing that "Acme widgets are 2 cents cheaper than XYZ's." However, if he or she had asked, the prospect might have expressed more interest in delivery, because XYZ's latest shipment had been two weeks late.

Perhaps not as obvious, the one asking the questions has control over the sales process. By asking the right questions in logical sequence, the salesperson can lead the prospect into determining to buy on his or her own. This is especially true of the large, multicall sale, where establishing a long-term relationship is critical.

9-3 Transition from the Approach

In initiating the recognition process, the salesperson must first make a transition from the approach stage of the selling process to the discussion stage. Two techniques facilitate this transition. First, if possible, the salesperson should make a **statement of purpose** (much like that made during the telephone request for an appointment). The sales representative may say something like, "Mr. Jones, I'm calling on you today to determine if our new blended surgical uniform has any application to your hospital's needs." Such a statement helps establish the salesperson as someone of purpose and expertise, someone who is not there to waste the prospect's time. Moreover, expressing a purpose engenders trust on the part of the listener. Too often, one person asks questions of another without giving the reason for asking these questions. As a result, the other person becomes suspicious. The listener feels that the questioner is trying to trap the listener in some way. In the absence of a stated purpose, listeners believe that if they knew why you were asking questions, they would not want to reveal their true desires. Later on, they fear, such information could be used against them, to corner them.

statement of purpose
Before questioning the buyer, the salesperson first states his or her rationale for the sales call.

Following the statement of purpose, the sales representative then asks a **permissive question**: "Before I present the merits of our new surgical uniform, Mr. Jones, I wonder if it would be all right if I ask you a few questions about your current uniform uses?" Notice that the salesperson has begun the permissive question in a manner unlikely to offend the prospect. A directive statement to the effect that "I need some facts from you, Mr. Jones" would be offensive to most prospects. But the question prefaced by a "may I" or similar phrase is unlikely to offend prospects, and it will probably encourage them to be more open in talking about their needs. Certainly, it is difficult to refuse a question stated in such terms.

permissive question
Before questioning the buyer, the sales rep asks for permission to ask questions.

9-4 Identifying Missing Information

Before asking questions, the salesperson must ask himself or herself, "What information am I lacking?" That is, in spite of the most thorough precall preparation regarding industry, company, product, competition, and intensive preapproach, there are bound to be areas where the sales rep's knowledge is incomplete. Of course, it would be impossible to provide a "laundry list" for all possible products and services, but there are a number of generic concerns that are typically "information poor." The salesperson might plan questions respecting:

1. Are there aspects of the current prospect situation that I don't fully understand? For example, "How long have they had their current equipment?" "What are prospect growth plans?" "Are they downsizing or restructuring?" "Who are their current suppliers?"
2. Do I need information on prospect buying needs? If selling to retail accounts, are there economic and demographic factors that will affect ultimate

consumer demand? Before presenting the merits of stocking a new, expensive gourmet coffee, for example, to a supermarket, what are the characteristics of consumers in the trading area? Are there physiological, safety, social, esteem, or self-actualization needs affecting the purchase? Is the prospect a Driver, Analytical, Expressive, or Amiable?

3. Are there problems present? Difficulties? Dissatisfactions? Likes or dislikes about the current set of circumstances? Quality or service considerations? Pricing issues?
4. Have I identified all of the relevant decision makers? In the typical organizational decision, there are multiple buying influences and it is often difficult to uncover all of them. It is absolutely critical to determine who has final approval power (i.e., the one who must actually approve the order). Who will be the actual users of my product or service? What power can they exercise in the decision? Which of these decision makers should I call upon first? Spend the most time and effort?
5. Do I need information on competitors? Because the prospect's frame of reference is influenced by the competition, the salesperson should ask:
   - Who are my competitors?
   - What are their strengths and weaknesses?
   - What is the relative standing of competitive pricing?
   - What are postsale service capabilities?
   - How do competitors rank in the prospect's mind?
6. What objection is the prospect likely to raise: price, skepticism, budget considerations, indifference, satisfaction with the present vendor? The professional salesperson should be prepared to respond to all of these.
7. What is the organizational culture? Are they risk-takers or risk-averters? Are they conservative or flexible? What do they value most? Market share, profitability, stability, stock price, employee satisfaction?

9-5 Questioning Techniques

Once the sales representative has successfully made a transition from the approach, it is time to begin questioning to facilitate the prospect's recognition process. In doing so, the salesperson makes use of two main types of questions: closed and open.

9-5a Closed Questions

closed questions Specific questions that seek specific answers.

Closed questions are specific questions that seek specific answers. "Do you currently invest in a mutual fund?" is an example of a closed question. As here, responses to closed questions are limited, direct, and to the point: "yes," "no," and the like. Closed questions are useful for opening a dialogue, redirecting the conversation, and checking for understanding. They are also useful for encouraging interaction with reserved customers who do not respond to open questions. Closed questions limit the possible responses to a simple one-word answer like "yes" or "no."[8] Closed questions often begin with *do, are, is, which, have.* "How many" and "How often" are typical closed probes. Closed questions limit possible responses; they have several uses and can be extremely useful in several circumstances. Use them when your customer wanders to steer the conversation back to business. "This is very interesting, but how can I help you resolve your concern?"

Closed questions can also be used to confirm your understanding of a point your customer has made or to confirm needs. You might ask:

Then, we can assume you will send a check for the previous balance today, right?

If I understand you then, you'd like to cut your annual energy costs without changing your comfort, is that accurate?

When you ask questions to confirm needs, your questions should be designed to gain a yes or no response; therefore, they are closed.

Would it be helpful to . . .?

Would it be important to you to . . .?

Do you need to . . .?

Finally, when you just need specific information, closed questions are effective. "How many times did you try to contact us?" or "What is the date you called in to report . . .?"

9-5b Open Questions

open questions Questions designed to get customers to respond at length.

Open questions are designed to get customers to respond at length. They are unlikely to be answered with a simple yes or no. Open questions provide lots of room for response; customers may answer in any way they desire. Open questions are good for drawing out feelings, attitudes, likes, and dislikes. Open questions typically begin with *what, how, who, why, where,* and *when.* "What do you think about?" and "How do you feel about?" are examples. Open questions typically begin with words like *what, how, why, where, who.* They can also be statements.

Can you tell me more about . . .?

What happened when . . .?

How did you hear about . . .?

You will typically use open questions to explore your customer's situations and to identify needs. They are especially advantageous because they are open to a large range of responses, indicating what's on the customer's mind.

Closed and open questions parallel the sorts of questions you see in exams. True-false, multiple-choice, and other "objective" questions are analogous to closed questions. Essay, case-analysis, and problem-solving questions resemble open questions.

9-6 The Questioning Process

Closed and open questions serve three main purposes: (1) beginning the flow of information, (2) continuing and redirecting the flow of information, and (3) checking for understanding.[9]

9-6a Beginning the Flow of Information

The basic strategy here is to outline the nature of customer problems—to identify the gap between the current situation and that ideal state where the customer would like to be. Salespeople should begin here with closed questions that provide background information about prospects and their business—to basically ascertain "What is the current situation?" Closed questions start the recognition process in a manner that puts prospects at ease because they are easily answerable. Questions that are easy to answer relax the other person. People enjoy giving answers they know are right, and with closed questions you give the other person a chance to give right answers effortlessly. Starting with difficult open questions may well make the prospect evasive and withdrawn. A real estate agent confronted with a prospective home buyer can start the conversation rolling by asking easy things such as the number of rooms in the current house the prospect lives in, the time needed to travel to work, the neighbors, and the schools, rather than leading off with an open question about the sort of home the prospect is looking for. Closed questions basically relate to "what's happening now." They ease the way for open questions and they build confidence and trust in the salesperson. Some examples of closed questions follow:

How many shifts per day do you run in your plant?

How many people in your family drive?

Do you currently have a policy of buying from a single supplier?

Have you ever before considered leasing a data-processing system?

How much insurance coverage do you currently have?

Are you looking for a ranch-style or two-story home?

Will you be making a decision in the next few months?

Have you considered switching to the new Windows XP?

In some instances, closed questions are formulated to verify the accuracy of preapproach information. In other instances, they are formulated on the basis of the sales representative's understanding of businesses similar to the prospect's. In either instance, at this stage of the questioning process, closed questions are intended to determine facts, initiate the prospect's recognition process, and set the direction for asking open questions.

Two phrasing techniques are recommended to ensure that closed questions designed to begin the flow of information do in fact focus on current reality ("what's happening now"). First, always phrase the closed question in the present tense. Second, use key words that signal to the customer that you are asking for information about the present. "Does inventory continue to be a problem?" "Are you still using the B2500 model?" Other key words and phrases that are good here are *remain, as usual, now, currently,* and *at the present time.* Another possibility is making a statement and then ending with the question, "Is this still the case?"

Open Questions for Beginning the Flow of Information

Open questions come into play once the prospect has answered some closed questions. Although closed questions answer "what's happening now," open questions identify the other portion of the problem, "what I want to happen." The spread between the two—"what's happening now and what I want to happen"—reveals the problem. Open questions tend toward the general rather than the specific and allow customers free play in relating their hopes. Open questions tend to begin with *who, what, where, why, when,* and *how.* Some examples of open questions follow:

How do you feel about the new generation of personal computers, Ms. Jones?

If you could wave a magic wand and create a perfect insurance policy to satisfy all your needs and concerns, what would that policy be like?

What advantages do you see for your engineering department workstations, Mr. Smith?

How do you feel about this ranch-style home, Ms. Johnson?

Asking questions is one of the most effective means of maintaining attention. As veteran salespeople say, "Telling isn't selling."

Where are you experiencing the greatest number of problems?

Could you explain why you are doing it that way?

Open questions are of special value in handling resistance from customers whose minds are already made up—but for illogical reasons. In response to open questions, they can begin to examine their own logic, recognize their inconsistencies, and become more receptive to the salesperson's proposition. "What do you like best about . . .?" followed by "What do you like least?" works well in revealing where such prospects are most vulnerable. If the salesperson is referencing a competitor, first asking about preferences reduces the perception that the salesperson seeks only to slander the opposition. For prospects who are satisfied with the status quo, the salesperson might ask, "If you were to make a change, what would be some of the things you would look for?" or "What would be different from the one you have now?"

Two especially good inquiries for getting customers to articulate their desires are "What will happen if . . ." and "Just suppose . . ." For customers who have not yet clearly thought and formulated where they want to be, these techniques are very helpful. "What will happen if the new computer works as you want it to?" "Just suppose you can have another copier anywhere in the office. Where would you put it?"

In both instances, prospects will reveal their prime buying motives and lead the salesperson toward making the sale.

At this juncture it is also useful to use what the industry calls the "Three Golden Questions."[10] Question 1: "Tell me, Mr./Ms. Prospect, what are some of the things you've been proudest of in the past three to five years? What has worked exceptionally well for you?" The idea behind this question is to discover how the prospect defines success. Question 2: "What are some of the things that haven't worked well for you, and why?" This question is framed to discover the gap between "where I am now" and "where I want to be." Question 3: "What areas have you wanted to address or develop, but have been unable to do so due to lack of time or resources or for whatever reason?" Questions 1 and 2 are designed to define success and dissatisfaction, respectively; question 3 addresses future opportunities. This is critical information for the presentation. Other open questions follow: Who are the buying influences? What are their needs? What are buying procedures? Who are new players on the scene? Who is the competition? What are likely buyer objections? In which additional areas is my information weak?

instant replay
How the customer makes his or her decisions on a step-by-step basis on the basis of preceding similar buying decisions.

Just as customers have specific buying motives, they also have a consistent buying sequence. That is, they tend to evaluate a product or service in a set pattern or order. The salesperson can seek an **instant replay** to identify this critical pattern. It helps the salesperson discover not only what is important to the prospect but also the sequence in which to present the sales points. In other words, the salesperson determines how the customer makes his or her decision on a step-by-step basis. For example, the salesperson might ask, "How did you decide to buy your last insurance policy?" The sales rep will probably receive answers like, "I bought it because the agent said it provides protection. He said the cash buildup would earn interest rates above what banks pay." It is quite likely that he or she will decide to buy a new policy on the basis of protection and superior interest rates. In other words, if you learn your prospect's buying strategy, and play it back to him, you're going to receive more business.[11]

Open questions are valuable from yet another standpoint. In the course of talking about their goals and feelings, customers will reveal a great deal about their personality styles, something that will assist the salesperson in formulating strategy for the remainder of the sales call. Expressives and Amiables will tend to stress a more personal orientation in their goals (e.g., "I would like better teamwork" or "I would like to keep my employees happy"). In contrast, Analytics and Drivers will emphasize task concerns (e.g., "We need to produce more rapidly and with less waste" or "My chief concern is to track our costs better"). The time taken to respond is another clue for identifying prospect personality styles. Amiables and Analytics will typically take longer to respond and will be quieter in their responses than Expressives and Drivers.

Once they identify the prospects' personality styles by initial open questions, salespeople can structure subsequent questions according to each style. For Drivers, questions can pertain to industry trends, the growth of the company, and the Driver's role in it, and future directions the company might take. For example, "Mr. Jones, competition is fierce in the computer business and yet you remain an industry leader. What would you consider your competitive edge?" Drivers love to talk about themselves and their accomplishments. They also are interested in bottom-line benefits. Accordingly, the salesperson might ask the Driver, "What type of bottom-line benefits would you expect to gain from our product?" For Analytics, questions should focus on facts and details; for example, "Could you tell me about the budget you are working with for the new computer system?" "What are the parameters you have established for the purchase of the computer?" Amiables like to become friends before doing business. Questions such as, "Could you tell me how you got into this business?" or "Could you tell me about your business?" will be well received. Expressives, like Amiables, enjoy building a relationship first, so the previous two questions also work well for them. Because Expressives like to further talk about concepts and dreams, a stimulating question would be, "Where do you see yourself and your business in five years?"[12] A summary of effective selling questions for your sales presentation is shown in Table 9-2.

Table 9-2 A Synopsis of Effective Selling Questions

1. What is your main objective?
2. How do you plan to achieve that goal?
3. What is the biggest problem you currently face?
4. What other problems do you experience?
5. What are you doing currently to deal with this?
6. What is your strategy for the future?
7. What other ideas do you have?
8. What role do others play in creating this situation?
9. Who else is affected?
10. What are you using now?
11. What do you like most about it?
12. What do you like least about it?
13. If you could have things any way you wanted, what would you change?
14. What effect would this have on the current situation?
15. What would motivate you to change?
16. Do you have a preference?
17. What has been your experience?
18. How do you know?
19. Is there anything else you would like to see?
20. How much would it be worth to you to solve this problem?
21. What would it cost, ultimately, if things remained as they are?
22. Are you working within a budget?
23. How do you plan to finance it?
24. What alternatives have you considered?
25. What benefit would you personally realize as a result?
26. How would others benefit?
27. How can I help?
28. Is there anything I have overlooked?
29. Are there any questions you would like to ask?
30. What do you see as the next step?
31. Who else, besides yourself, will be involved in making the decision?
32. On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident do you feel about doing business with us? What would it take to get that up to a 10?
33. Are you working against a particular deadline?
34. How soon would you like to start?
35. When would you like to take delivery?
36. When should we get together to discuss this again?
37. Is there anything else you would like for us to take care of?
38. What is your present situation regarding . . .?
39. How do you feel about the . . .?
40. What are some of the things you've been proudest of in the past three to five years?
41. What are some of the things that haven't worked well for you, and why?
42. What areas have you wanted to address or develop, but have been unable to do so due to lack of time or resources or for whatever reason?

Direct versus Indirect

direct questions Questions that go straight to the point and their intent is obvious.

As the term implies, **direct questions** go straight to the point and their intent is obvious. "Are you the decision maker on the project?" or "How old are you?" and "How much are you willing to spend?" are direct questions. Other examples of such key, sensitive questions include: "Who really makes the decisions?" "What do you really think of my website?" "Why were we really knocked off the plan last year?" "How much money do you really have?" "How deep in the category are you really going?" "What's really going on in this account?" "How much do you really know about your account's business?" "How much of a risk-taker are you really?" "How much will you really fight for my website?" "What's the real objection to advertising with us?" The problem with these is pretty obvious. They can alienate people, but the bigger problem is that direct questions bluntly expose your intent. They often elicit either incorrect information or none at all. A better approach is using indirect questions. With **indirect questions**, the intent is not as obvious. For example, to determine someone's age: "What year did you graduate from high school?" Indirect questions are softer and more comfortable for customers to answer. Information gained from them is regularly honest and useful. As examples, review the two lists of sample questions. The first are direct; the second, indirect.[13]

indirect questions Questions that are softer and more comfortable for customers to answer.

Direct Questions

- Why is that important?
- Did you make that decision?
- Is the equipment energy efficient?

Indirect Questions

- What do you feel will be most important in the decision?
- Where would you normally go for help with this type of project?
- What would you do if you were in my shoes?
- How is your office's heating and cooling system performing now?
- What do you wish you could change?

An especially valuable form of indirect questioning, indirect questions asking prospects to relate their reactions to the situations of others, are known as **third-party questions**.[14] Asking car buyers directly about their abilities to afford an automobile may offend them and bring the potential sale to an abrupt halt. But asking prospects whether they think the car is affordable for most buyers will be less offensive but no less revealing, since the salesperson may interpret prospects' answers as basically referring to their own situations. Some examples follow:

third-party questions Indirect questions asking prospects to relate their opinions in terms of others' reactions (i.e., third parties).

Most of the people I call on tell me that automatic tellers are revolutionizing the banking industry. Do you find this to be true?

Consumer Reports *has rated this product as the best available for its price range.*

Would you say that most people would be willing to pay this amount for a sport-utility vehicle?

A lot of people feel that a formal dining room is not that important to a home, Mrs. Johnson. What do you think?

Third-party questions are especially important in initiating the recognition process for a particular type of buyer. An especially vexing problem for salespeople is presented by prospects who do not open up readily. Third-party questions represent a valuable tool in getting such clients to talk.

Some other techniques for asking sensitive questions are:[15]

Casual Approach: *"By the way, do you just happen to be in the market for a new fax machine?"*

Everybody Approach: *"As you know, many small businesses are using temporary help these days. Are you planning to do so similarly?"*

Every agency (media department, account, ad director, brand manager, etc.) *works differently* (has its/his or her own special needs, own priorities, preferences, etc.). *Tell me* (help me understand) *what criteria will be used here in this agency* (department, company, etc.) *to select online media for your new campaign.*

No two planners view (set priorities, decide, work with their clients) *A's website the same way. Where do you rank our site on your plan?* (What are your priorities?)

Blame Someone Else for the Question: *A good many of your customers say your firm is very conservative, perhaps too conservative. How would you respond to them?*

Imply That the Question Is Playful: *I'd like to play devil's advocate for the moment. What if you . . . ?*

I could be out of line here, but let me ask you, Why would you use websites A, B, and C and miss the . . . on our site? (If the buyer feels you are out of line and says so, the easy reply is a simple "Sorry" or a humorous answer, depending on your personal style. If the buyer does not give an answer, he or she will certainly appreciate your courtesy, which can only help the overall relationship.)

Preface the Question with Praise: *Your company has long been recognized as a leader in the office equipment business, but recently several industry analysts suggest there are product problems with your new Itanium-based PC . . .*

You know the situation (the client, the budgets, the marketing strategy) *best. What could knock us off the list?* (Will you be spending at the same levels you did last year? Are there opportunistic funds for sponsorships?)

9-6b Continuing and Redirecting the Flow of Information

Like most other people, prospects often lose track of their train of thought, wander off the subject, or stop talking before the listener has time to appreciate fully what they are trying to say. Because effective selling requires a complete and accurate understanding of prospect need, techniques are available for encouraging prospects to continue talking.

Continuing questions ask for a more detailed explanation of a prospect's statement. They encourage prospects to pursue their course of a thought in more detail. Inviting elaboration is perhaps the easiest of all the techniques. To do this, all you have to do is ask for more details. Then, watch out! People love to talk, especially about themselves and their concerns. By asking for more information, you open the floodgates and learn more about their problems. Although they sound like closed questions, continuing questions are in fact open. Some examples are:

continuing questions Questions that call for more detailed explanations of a buyer response.

Could you tell me more about that?

Could you give me an example of what you mean?

Is that the extent of your view on the subject?

Let's get back to the cost-effectiveness issue. Can we make sure that I understand your point?

Besides using continuing questions, the salesperson can encourage the flow of information through two other techniques: the pause and the statement of interest. The pause—a complete verbal silence on the part of the salesperson—not only encourages prospects to continue but also provides salespeople with some time to think and formulate a response. Watch an interview on television: When the interviewee stops talking and the reporter remains silent, inevitably, the interviewee will begin talking again. It also tends to relax the pace of the information exchange, lessening any fears the prospect may have of being pressured. Finally, the pause is valuable to salespeople because it forces them to talk less and listen more.

Statements of interest may be as brief as a simple "Uh-huh." Other interest statements are "Great," "Sure," "That's interesting," and "No kidding." A statement of interest does not even have to be verbalized. It may be a nonverbal demonstration of interest. A nodding of the head, a smile, or leaning forward shows interest and encourages the prospect to continue.

redirecting questions
Questions that can be asked if the customer has strayed or when the salesperson wishes to concentrate on a different feature and benefit.

If the customer has strayed or when the salesperson wishes to concentrate on a different feature and benefit, **redirecting questions** can be asked. Examples of such questions follow:

Is _____ also important to you?

Do you have difficulties with ______?

Is this of any interest to you?

How do you feel about _______?

Listening for Key Words and Exploring

In getting prospects to continue to talk and reveal their problems, the salesperson should look for specific key words and explore or "drill down" with further questions. For example, once the prospect starts talking, write their key words on a notepad. What are key words? Look at the following sentence:[16]

Our copier is always broken. Do you have something more reliable?

Next, start with your first key word and focus your questions. As you do this, keep listening for additional key words. For example:

Salesperson: What do you mean by your copier is always broken?

Prospect: It continues to feed two pages at a time, and the quality is poor. (*Note:* "Poor quality" is another key phrase that needs to be explained, so write it down.)

Salesperson: Are you doing a specific job that is causing it to feed two at a time?

Prospect: When we make our catalogs, we use heavier paper than our vendor says the feeder can handle, and they can't fix it. They recommend an expensive upgrade.

Salesperson: Tell more about the heavier paper you are running, and the other jobs you do.

Prospect: Well, we do . . .

Salesperson: When your feeder pulls in two pages, what happens to your business?

Prospect: We can't do anything until they come and fix it.

Salesperson: How long does that take?

Prospect: Three days.

Salesperson: How much does this cost you?

Prospect: It costs us $5,000 to have an outside printer make our catalogs. And that doesn't count the loss of business.

At this point, you may ask them more about the manuals or more about their outside costs. The point is, by focusing or tapering down the key words "always broken," you have narrowed down specifically what they mean by always broken. In addition, you have uncovered the consequences and costs of being "always broken."

Of great use in exploring is *reflection,* which means considering the implications of what the customer just said. An example is when the customer says he was on vacation last week, and you say:[17]

That must mean your desk was piled up when you came in this morning.

Another example is when the person you are talking to says his computer hard drive crashed, losing all the important files. The ineffective listener will immediately begin to relive the last time he or she had this happen and tell how awful it was, totally stealing the conversation from the other person. The sales rep's goal as a listener is to keep kicking the conversation back to the other party. In this situation, a better response, and one demonstrating this technique, would be any of the following:

That must have ruined your morning.

Was there backup somewhere? You might want to check with IT.

Such responses reflect your interest and concern.

One notch up from reflecting on the implication is responding to the feeling. Responding to the feeling is better known as *empathizing* with another person. It means putting yourself in their shoes and really feeling how they must feel. To respond to the feeling, all you have to do is put some version of the word *feel* in your response. That includes all the forms of *found* and *felt.* Examples of this technique, in response to a customer who tells you about being denied purchasing approval by a buying committee, are:

You must feel frustrated having to deal with this situation.

We at XXXXX feel frustrated as well.

Listening between the Lines of Conversation

In asking for continuation, it is important to listen for the implicit as well as the explicit (i.e., to "listen between the lines"). Each line of conversation conveys several messages simultaneously. One of these messages is communicated through the meaning of the words. This is the explicit message. Other messages are transmitted by implication, or implicit messages. The individual's implicit messages often are more important, expressing his or her real feelings or things the person really wants at the moment; you have to listen between the lines and deal with her intentions.

Why do we need two channels of communication—explicit and implicit? The answer is because living in a society requires abiding by a complex set of rules—legal and moral laws, family and community customs, and etiquette. These rules are man-made; we are not born with natures that inherently fit these rules. This means we must continually make compromises between what our natures want and what the rules require. This results in implicit messages and really comes down to five interpersonal operations: (1) building up one's self; (2) attacking others; (3) making demands; (4) controlling; and (5) expressing love.

1. *Building up the self.* Lack of self-confidence is very common. Many voices are saying implicitly, *Look at me! See how clever, handsome, brave, strong, and funny I am! See how much I have and how much I know!* This all reflects a need for reassurance by the buyer. To make buyers more comfortable and more receptive to your ideas, tell them their actions confirm the presence of their desired characteristic.
2. *Attacking.* Words can be used as destructive weapons. Most of us are affected by what others think of us. Often the explicit message—the words themselves—may sound like objective criticism while the attack is implicit. These implicit verbal attacks take four forms: (a) unfavorable comparisons, (b) minimizing (including faint praise and pointed remarks), (c) teasing (including ridicule and sarcasm), and (d) gossip.
3. *Making demands.* The explicit demand is made by directly asking for something. The implicit demand stops short of this. It merely implies what one wants and then relies on the other person's desire to please.

   When a buyer gets up from his or her chair, this is an indication that the interview is over as far as the buyer is concerned. The rising is an implicit demand that the salesperson leave. Another way of making the same demand is to ask, "Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?" The implication of the question is that, if not, then the sales call is over. Interrupting another person in a conversation reflects the implicit demand that he or she stop talking and listen to you.

   When making demands, it is better to be explicit. People generally prefer to be asked for something directly. Implicit demands may actually stimulate more resistance.
4. *Controlling others.* A common way of controlling others is by exploiting their need for others' esteem. The control seeker promises approval for compliance and threatens disapproval for resistance. For example, to an unsure person, an influencer trying to sell an idea might say, "It seems to me that this would be the smart thing to do now." To someone anxious about being considered kind, the influencer might say, "It seems to me that this would be the considerate thing to do at this point." In effect, the influencer is implying that by performing the suggested acts, the self-doubter will demonstrate intelligence.
5. *Expressing friendship.* You may express friendship when you listen to someone's troubles and try to make them more comfortable; when you compliment a person for pleasure and not advantage; when you give advice to be helpful and not to control; when you accept another's anger without attacking, because you want the person to feel comfortable releasing his or her emotions; and when you provide information to be helpful, not necessarily expecting something in return.[18]

9-6c Checking for Understanding

Because communication is imperfect at best, feedback is a critical part of the process. Salespeople may not always understand the intent of the prospect's words, so they must check to make sure. In the course of checking for understanding, the salesperson also helps prospects to comprehend what they have said themselves. The act of answering the salesperson's query aids the prospect's own clarification and comprehension.

The basic mode for checking understanding is the closed question (although continuing questions may be appropriate for deeper understanding), phrased in such a manner as to imply that the response is assumed to be known. That is, the salesperson assumes the customer will answer in the affirmative. For example, a uniform salesperson might ask, "Is the ability of the garment to withstand repeated laundering more important to you than its initial cost?" An automobile salesperson might inquire, "It appears that interior space rather than fuel economy is the critical matter. Is that correct?" Both questions convey the impression that the salesperson anticipates a "yes" response, but is not certain.

Questions that check for understanding have the potential value of intensifying prospect needs, although this is not their primary purpose. The repetition intrinsic in the salesperson's checking and the prospect's responding helps to underline the urgency of need resolution. When, in response to open questions, a home buyer expresses concern about neighborhood schools, and when the salesperson subsequently asks for verification that schools are a critical concern in the decision, the buyer cannot help but firmly recognize and be motivated by this factor. This makes it that much more likely that the prospect will react favorably when the salesperson shows a home that fits this need.

In effect, the salesperson is reflecting here.[19] Rephrasing is just what it sounds like—repeating to the other person, in your own words, what you heard them say. This may sound like a waste of time; after all, if they just said it, why repeat it? Yet, rephrasing is one of the most powerful listening techniques available to you, and it is one of the easiest to learn. Simply think carefully about what you just heard, put it in your own words, and say it back to them in the form of a question. For example, when someone indicates to you they are concerned about getting new service to their facilities under construction, your rephrase and their response might sound like the following:

I can certainly appreciate why having service ready when you are has to be important to you!

Yeah, we've got several buildings under construction now. It costs us a lot of money to wait for you! What can you do to help us?

Rephrasing shows the other person that their situation sunk in with you and you really understand it. It also gives the person a chance to reiterate and expand upon their concern, which makes them feel better about it and gives you the chance to identify something you can do to make a difference. Keep in mind that rephrasing must be sincere. Artificiality does more damage than good. Some good ways to begin rephrase questions are the following:

As I understand it . . .

Do you mean . . .

By properly using checking questions, the salesperson can probe the underlying needs and problems of the prospect. For example, suppose a sales rep is questioning a purchasing agent about a recent proposal:

Salesperson: How did we do on the proposal?
Purchasing Agent: Not bad, really.
Salesperson: Great. When will we know what you're doing?
Purchasing Agent: We think we'll have it resolved soon.

Although superficially this sounds good and the sales rep may leave expecting to hear soon, it's not sufficient. Now notice what happens if the salesperson had responded differently after the purchasing agent's initial reply:

Salesperson: Does that mean you are seriously considering our proposal?
Purchasing Agent: No. There are a number of other things we're considering.

Salesperson: What are some of these?

Purchasing Agent: Well, obviously, we're concerned about the reputation of the supplier, and the ability to meet our specifications and deadlines.

Salesperson: And, how do you feel about our proposal based on those issues?

Purchasing Agent: We are a little concerned about your capability of meeting deadlines.

Notice in the second conversation that the salesperson has penetrated to a deeper level of prospect concerns with open continuing questions and is now prepared to deal with the prospect at a level that will have a real impact. Basically, the sales rep needs to ask questions of the "Oh?" and "Why?" variety.

Some examples are:

Why are you considering that?

What do you hope to gain by the upgrade?

What problems are you trying to solve?

When, exactly, do you expect to begin and finish this project?

Do you have a budget figure in mind?

9-6d An Illustrative Dialogue

At this point, we have discussed several techniques for facilitating the prospect's recognition process. But to speak of them individually and in the abstract does not really demonstrate how they may be used by the salesperson to assist prospects in their recognition process. To depict this fully, let's look at a sample dialogue between Ron Friendly (the surgical uniform sales representative) and a hospital purchasing agent:

Ron: Ms. Smith, I'm calling on you today to see if your hospital might profit from our new blended surgical uniforms. (statement of purpose)

Smith: Fine.

Ron: I wonder if I might ask you a few questions about your current uniform requirements? (permissive question)

Smith: Sure, go ahead.

Ron: Are you currently using all-cotton uniforms in the operating rooms? (a closed question to begin the flow of information by gathering facts about the prospect's current situation)

Smith: Yes, we are.

Ron: How do your people feel about cotton uniforms? (an open question to reveal sources of dissatisfaction)

Smith: Now that you mention it, there have been some derogatory comments. Only yesterday the laundry manager was commenting about the operating room uniforms.

Ron: Could you be more specific about what the laundry manager said? (an open question to continue the flow of information)

Smith: Well, it seems to me that he mentioned something about how quickly the uniforms seem to wear out, and also their high labor cost.

Ron: That's interesting. (statement of interest)

Smith: Yes, it seems the uniforms must be ironed, which, of course, increases labor costs. It seems to me also that the nurses and doctors have complained about the looks of the uniforms.

Ron: (nods his head and leans forward)

Smith: The operating room doctors and nurses say that the appearance of the uniforms is lacking.

Ron: They don't like how they look in the uniforms when they're outside the operating rooms? (a closed question to check understanding)

Smith: Yes, that's right.

Ron: Are you concerned about price in ordering new uniforms? (a closed question to redirect the dialogue to a new topic)

Smith: It depends. Price is only one factor.

Ron: Then other factors, such as quality, cost of use, and service, may be just as important as price, depending on the department in which the uniforms will be used? (a closed question to check understanding)

Smith: Certainly.

Ron: Let me see if I can summarize what you're saying. Your current cotton uniforms are a source of dissatisfaction for some of your people. The laundry manager dislikes their short life and high labor overhead, and the surgical personnel object to the garments' appearance. At the same time, you, as purchasing agent, are concerned about the price of uniforms, but it's not an overriding issue. Would you say that's a fair statement of the way things stand? (In this statement, the sales representative has established the problem and is ready to begin the presentation.)

Smith: Yes, it is. Have you got something new in mind?

Ron: Yes, I do . . . (Now he begins his presentation of features and benefits.)

9-6e Confirming the Problem

The preceding dialogue illustrates how the salesperson can facilitate the prospect's recognition process through skillful use of questioning and other associated techniques. The dialogue ends with a summation of the problem by the salesperson and confirmation by the prospect, the **problem confirmation.** Once this confirmation of the problem is received, the salesperson is prepared to embark on the next step of the discussion process—the presentation.

problem confirmation A summation statement of the problem to the buyer at the completion of sales rep questioning.

Probably the biggest source of failure in selling is prematurely presenting features and benefits before the problem has been clearly established. Often the salesperson begins a presentation without the client's clearly recognizing that a problem exists. Although questioning helps the recognition process, it is still necessary to follow up with a confirmation of the problem. This requires a formal statement—either verbal or written—of the problem and agreement by the prospect. At this point the reader might ask, "What happens if the prospect doesn't agree with the salesperson's summation of the problem?" The answer is simply, "try, try again." The salesperson may have to make a number of attempts before confirmation is secured, but once it is, the correct information upon which to base a decision is clearly at hand.

There are two parts to formulate a summation statement, which the prospect may confirm. The first part of the statement may be prefaced with key phrases. For example:

Let me see if I understand . . .

If I may, I will attempt to summarize . . .

I hear you saying that . . .

The second part of the statement should end with a question posed to the effect:

Is that a fair statement?

Have I interpreted this properly?

Did I hear you correctly?

A question phrased in this manner will not appear condescending or pressure the prospect because the salesperson is asking for confirmation. Merely telling prospects what their problems are without giving them a chance to answer is too presumptuous.

As much as possible, problem confirmation should include:

- The current situation
- What the prospect wants
- The obstacles

These three parts review the current situation to make sure you've got your facts straight; they outline the objectives (where the prospect wants to be), demonstrating your understanding; and they recall the obstacles, indicating you understand the task that lies ahead. Notice all three elements in the following problem confirmation:

Let me see if I can sum up what we've just been talking about. At present, you're producing about 100 pieces per hour, but that's not sufficient. You need to be making at least 140 per hour or you can't keep your production profitable. The problem is that at that speed you get a slight curl to the edges during the stamping process. That means another production step to remove the curl. You've spent a lot of money on some new dies, but the situation hasn't really improved. Is that pretty much the way you see it?

Confirming the problem sounds a great deal like checking for understanding, and in a larger sense it is. The difference is that in seeking problem confirmation, the salesperson summarizes in one concise statement the entirety of the prospect's problem. Checking for understanding is more limited and occurs in preparation for final confirmation of the problem.

It is important that salespeople not seek problem confirmation prematurely. Successful salespeople, in order to make sure that prospects appreciate the full magnitude of their problems, first ask them about the consequences of the unresolved problems (e.g., "What does this lack of performance cost you?" or "How much employee turnover has this caused?"). The more severely the prospect perceives the problem to be, the greater the prospect's receptivity to the salesperson's presentation and eventual close. Moreover, once the presentation is concluded, the salesperson can confidently close the order, knowing that the product features and benefits will solve the customer's problems. Many salespeople fail to close because they feel somehow they are selling something unneeded. Solidly confirming customer problems, however, should eliminate this feeling.

As problem recognition proceeds, the salesperson should be trying to create an "internal paraphrase" of what the prospect is saying. Think of it as a running mental outline, which the salesperson periodically recaps to himself or herself throughout the conversation. The rep might even want to jot down the principal points. Having such a paraphrase in mind will be invaluable when it comes time for problem confirmation. As the conversation proceeds, close in gaps in your internal paraphrasing with checking and continuing questions. Not only does this lead to an accurate problem confirmation, but it also builds trust because it demonstrates active empathic listening.

Moreover, when several meetings are necessary before a sale is consummated (and most do), repeating the problem confirmation at the beginning of the next

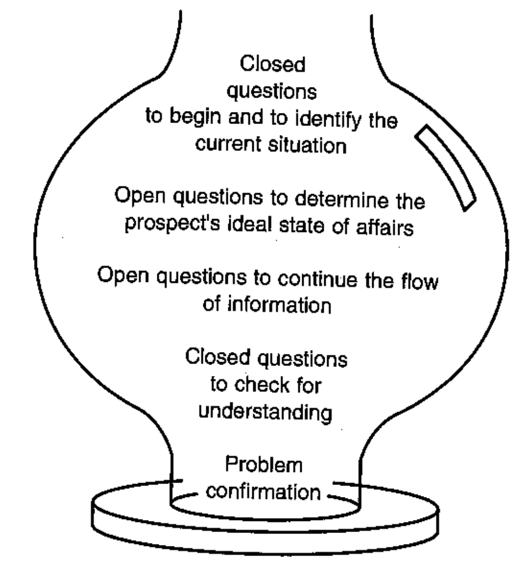


Figure 9-2
The Lantern Principle

meeting facilitates matters and avoids wasting valuable time. It also flatters the prospect, because the sales rep has obviously taken his or her business (and the buyer) seriously enough to ponder what was said in the previous meeting. The buyer is likely used to indifference on the part of most salespeople; summarizing a previous meeting will impress him or her with the rep's professionalism and build the relationship.

9-6f The Lantern Principle

An easy way to understand the questioning process is to visualize a **lantern.** The narrow portions of the lantern shape suggest the need for closed questions, while the wider central section suggests open questions. As illustrated in Figure 9-2, the salesperson begins with narrow, closed questions to gather facts and relax the prospect. Then broader, open questions come into play, as the salesperson seeks to identify the feelings and goals of the prospect. Open, continuing questions are also appropriate in the central part of the lantern, when the object is to get buyers to expand at length so that problems become clearer. Once the salesperson begins to get a grasp of underlying needs and problems, closed questions again are called for, this time to check for understanding and finally to confirm the problem in its entirety.

lantern principle
The narrow portions of the lantern shape suggest the need for closed questions.

9-7 Further Guidelines for Questioning

We have examined the use of questioning and other related techniques in assisting the recognition process. Selling is an art rather than a science, and so only the general form of the question can be indicated. Its specific nature or form will vary widely with the specific product or service being sold. Accordingly, it is up to individual salespeople to formulate their own questions. Here are some further guidelines that should facilitate this process. Salespeople should:

1. Keep the questions simple.
2. Retain the burden of responsibility.
3. Space out the questions.
4. Ask about benefits, not features.
5. Avoid biased questions.

9-7a Keep the Questions Simple

Each question should not contain more than one idea. Too many ideas embedded in one question makes it too difficult for the prospect to answer. For example, the sales representative might ask, "What are your views concerning the low monthly payments, increased mileage, and front-wheel drive of our new Focus automobile?" A buyer facing such a question would be overwhelmed because three separate ideas are contained in this one inquiry. The prospect may not remember all three issues and might simply respond, "They're all fine," to avoid the difficulty of answering. The salesperson should have phrased three separate and distinct questions.

How do you feel about our low monthly payments?

Is the improved mileage attractive to you?

What are your views regarding front-wheel drive?

9-7b Retain the Burden of Responsibility

In the questioning process, the burden of responsibility should be retained by the sales representative.[20] A question such as "Do you understand?" is likely to offend prospects because it puts the burden of responsibility on them. If they answer anything other than yes, they are admitting to stupidity on their part. The salesperson is better off phrasing the question, "Have I adequately explained this point?" Who bears the responsibility with this question? How differently are prospects likely to respond?

Questions prefaced with *why* are especially likely to violate the principle of burden. They are threatening to the prospect, especially if expressed with a harsh tone of voice. "Why do you feel that way?" can be interpreted by the buyer to mean "I don't approve of your feelings." "Why did you do that?" can be perceived as "I don't approve of what you did." These two "why" questions can be rephrased so as not to offend the client. The first may be reformulated into "How did you come to have these feelings?" and the second into "What was the basis for your decision?"

9-7c Space Out the Questions

Questions that follow one another too closely will threaten buyers. They may feel like a witness being interrogated on the stand. Rapid-fire "Who does the buying around here?" "How many suppliers do you maintain?" and "What are your responsibilities?" are guaranteed to offend even the most thick-skinned prospect. It is much better to space out questions, providing time for the client to think over each answer in a relaxed manner.

creative silence
A pause for approximately three to four seconds at two different points in the questioning process.

What we are recommending here is a principle we call **creative silence.**[21] All creative silence means, as Figure 9-3 indicates, is that the seller needs to pause for

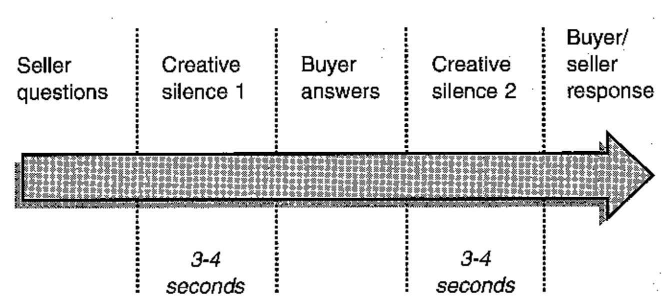


Figure 9-3
Creative Silence

approximately three to four seconds at two different points in the questioning process: after asking the question and after the buyer responds. These two pauses—creative silence 1 and creative silence 2—will dramatically improve the quality and quantity of information the buyer is transmitting. The explanation of efficacy is simple for creative silence 1. The three to four seconds the buyer has to consider and mull over his or her answer is likely to make the information better than if only half the time had been allowed. By practicing creative silence 2 and waiting three or four seconds, you are giving the buyer a better chance to understand what he or she has told you than if, again, only half as much time had been spent in silence. The result of the two portions of creative silence is more leisurely, more thoughtful, and ultimately a more productive flow of information than could be engendered any other way. Moreover, the buyer is not paralyzed with "question shock," the consequence of facing a barrage of questions fired off in rapid sequential order. By waiting to reply, the salesperson implies that the buyer's ideas are important and they deserve consideration, something that will help the buyer be more receptive to the salesperson's coming presentation. If the salesperson is uncomfortable just sitting there, he or she can nod, lean forward, knit his or her brow, or establish eye contact. If after the allotted three to four seconds there is no response, chances are good that the question has been misunderstood and it is time to rephrase another one. An effective technique at this juncture is to say, "My intention in asking that question was to . . ." and then explain what you are trying to find out more clearly.

9-7d Ask about Benefits, Not Features

Earlier we stated that features are physical characteristics of the product, while benefits relate to what the buyer would get from the product (i.e., how the characteristics would fulfill a need). When salespeople ask prospects about their need for specific features, about which prospects may know little, prospects might respond as if they did, not wanting to admit ignorance. As a result, salespeople may think they have made a superb presentation, only to walk out the door without an order. An automobile salesperson, for example, might ask for a buyer's impression of fuel injection, receive a favorable response, and go on to another point, assuming that the prospect already knows the benefits of fuel injection. The salesperson would have been better off asking, "Would you like to escape the expenses of periodic carburetor tune-ups?" Shelf-stable milk not requiring refrigeration is a staple in Europe, but it's clearly an anomaly in the United States, where milk and refrigeration are synonymous. Pitching the product just as shelf-stable got one salesperson nowhere, until he began asking, "How would you like to be able to take milk on camping, fishing, and hiking trips?"[22] Even when the prospect asks about specific features, the salesperson is better off speaking in terms of benefits because the buyer may not know about other features that would serve just as well.

9-7e Biased Questions

If you are not careful and conscious of it, your questions may carry bias. Bias is when the wording or tone of your questions indicates what the correct answer should be. "You do want an energy efficient system, don't you?" and "You'd have to agree our equipment is easier to operate, wouldn't you?" are two questions that carry bias.

Bias diminishes your credibility and makes customers feel they are being manipulated. Depending on how they are asked, questions such as these can be terribly insulting, especially if the customer does not share your opinion.

Raise your awareness to biased-sounding questions and don't let them creep into your discussions with customers. Here are some additional questions that you should not ask:[23]

- *You wouldn't expect our competitor to recommend us, would you?*
- *You do care about the environment, don't you?*
- *You wouldn't put something unsafe in your home, would you?*
- *Saving money is important to you, isn't it?*

9-8 The SPIN Sequence

Neil Rackham, in his book *SPIN Selling,* shows how classic sales techniques such as closing and objection-handling can actually reduce your chance of selling, especially in big business-to-business sales situations, where buyers are savvy to the classic tricks; better to concentrate on questioning, particularly a series of sequenced questions: situation, problem, implication, and need payoff. The first letter of each type of question is the source of the acronym *SPIN.*

Overall, his method, like many other approaches, is a "distress and rescue" approach. The salesperson finds the buyer's problem by a series of well-formulated questions and "distresses" them by exposing the awful things that might happen. The salesperson can then "rescue" the buyer with the product.

The four question types are as follows:[24]

1. *Situation questions.* These are data-gathering questions, such as "How long have you had your current equipment?" or "Could you tell me about your company's growth plans?" Situation questions should not be overused because they can bore or even offend the buyer. He or she thinks about such matters every day. Situation questions can relate to the buyer personally (e.g., "What do you see as your objective here?"); be about the business (e.g., "What is your annual sales volume?"); or concern operations ("What equipment are you using at present?"). The common factor in all these questions is that they collect information on the current situation.
2. *Problem questions.* These explore problems, difficulties, and dissatisfactions (e.g., "Is this operation difficult to perform?" or "Are you worried about the quality you get from your old machine?"). If no problems can be uncovered, there is no basis for a sale (or a relationship). If you are selling tractors, ask about maintenance costs, breakdowns, and so on. If you are selling life insurance, ask how many dependents the person has. A trap here is to dive straight into presenting the benefits of what you are selling. You may know the problem, but they do not! Going straight to the sales pitch will just get you objections.
3. *Implication questions.* These questions ask about the consequences or effects of a customer's problems (e.g., "How does this problem affect your future profitability?" or "What effect does this reject rate have on customer satisfaction?"). Implication questions take problems and explore their effects or consequences. They help customers understand their problem's seriousness or urgency. They take problems buyers perceive to be small and build them up in customers' perceptions, until they believe the problem demands action. For example, the person selling tractors might ask about implications of unplowed fields; the life insurance salesperson could carefully ask what would happen to the children if the target person died or became very ill. Other examples of implication questions are "What effect does this have on output? Proposed expansion?" If a customer problem, for example, is that the existing machine is hard to use, it should lead the salesperson to ask implication questions, such as "Does this increase training costs for operators?" "Are operators dissatisfied?" "Is turnover a resulting problem?" "Are there problems in recruiting trained personnel at higher salaries?" "Is there a lot of overtime?" "Are there quality problems?" or "Do you have many rejects?"
4. *Need-payoff questions.* These questions achieve two things: They focus customers' attention on solutions rather than problems, and they get customers telling sales reps the benefits. Need-payoff questions create a positive atmosphere by focusing on solutions, not problems, and in response to them, buyers gain their own insight into benefits, rather than being told. For example, a question like "How would a faster machine help you?" might prompt the reply, "It certainly would take away the production bottleneck and it would also make better use of skilled operator time." For example, the tractor salesperson can ask how much better the tractor was when it was new, or whether any of the farmer's neighbors have solved problems of old and problematic tractors. The insurance salesperson could ask questions that build pictures of the target person's children being safe and secure despite whatever "curveballs" the world might throw at the family.

   A rather simplified distinction between implication and need-payoff questions is that the latter are "happy questions"; implication questions, in contrast, are sad. Implication questions are problem-centered (they are designed to make the problem more serious in the buyer's eyes) and hence, sad. Need-payoff questions, in contrast, are solution-oriented and consequently, happy. Need-payoff questions are strongly linked to success in the large sale. They increase the acceptability of the sales rep's solution, and they are especially effective with influencers who will present their case to the real decision makers. That is, need-payoff questions create inside salespeople for reps.

Need-payoff questions can be effective because if you can get the customer to tell you the ways in which your solution will help, then you don't invite objections. Nobody likes being told what's good, especially by an outsider. Customers react more positively if they are treated as experts. Buyers can't be expected to learn about a salesperson's product in enough depth to explain it convincingly to others in their company, but they can be expected to have an understanding of their own problems and needs; they understand these best. After all, it's their business, and they'll know best how it would be helped by the solution the rep is proposing. Moreover, when buyers talk to others in the account, it's with respect to needs, not product features. It's much better to get the buyer actively describing benefits to the salesperson for inside selling to others. Also, they take ownership, feeling their ideas are part of the solution.

The fundamental problem that causes an objection is that the seller offered a solution before building up the need. The buyer doesn't feel that the problem has enough value to merit such an expensive solution. Objection prevention is best handled via the use of implication and need-payoff questions. They are more effective because they attack the causes of objections. As a result, objections don't even arise; this is more effective, regardless of the objection-handling abilities of the salesperson. Forestalling, in other words, is the best means of resolving objections.[25]

Chapter Summary

This chapter began by pointing out how the traditional "telling" approach to the sales presentation falls short in a number of respects. First, the telling method treats the buyer as an object to be manipulated and coerced. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that buyers become defensive and even angry. Second, with the telling method there is no guarantee that the prospect understands that a problem exists to justify product purchase. Telling does not allow prospects to recognize the problem themselves, since problem recognition must come from within. As such, the task of the salesperson becomes one of assisting prospects in reaching the conclusion themselves; this requires skillful questioning and listening.

Two different types of questions are used in fostering problem recognition: closed and open questions. Closed questions solicit specific responses. Answers to closed questions are typically limited—"yes," "no," and the like. In contrast, open questions are phrased to encourage as much prospect response as possible. Usually, open questions begin with *what, how, why, when,* and *where.*

Questions may be used for three basic purposes: (1) beginning the flow of information, (2) continuing and redirecting the flow of information, and (3) checking for understanding. The salesperson should start the questioning process with closed questions designed to discover facts about the prospect's current situation and should follow up with open questions that encourage lengthier responses about that ideal situation where the prospect would like to be. In other words, the idea is to identify the existence of customer problems.

In encouraging the exchange of information, the salesperson makes use of continuing questions, pauses, and statements of interest. A continuing question would be something like, "Could you tell me more about that?"—a question intended to have the prospect pursue a train of thought. The pause—a complete silence on the part of the salesperson—is intended to accomplish the same thing: to encourage the prospect to continue. Statements of interest such as "uh-huh," "great," and "sure" are also helpful in this regard. At this stage, the salesperson may also redirect the flow of information by asking closed questions, such as "Is __________ also of importance?" or "Do you have difficulties with . . . ?"

The basic mode of checking for understanding is the closed question, typically phrased in a manner that assumes an affirmative response (e.g., "Is it fair to say that versatility is the most important factor?").

Once salespeople are sure the problem is recognized and understood, they seek its confirmation. The sales representative summarizes the problem as he or she perceives it, and prospects can then confirm the diagnosis as they see fit. From this point, the salesperson may progress into the sales presentation itself.

A convenient way to remember the proper sequence of questioning is to imagine a lantern. At the narrow top of the lantern, salespeople should begin with closed questions. Progressing to the broader part of the lantern, they should use open questions to reveal prospect hopes and to continue the flow of information. Then they should begin to narrow in again with checking questions and finally confirm the problem.

Additional techniques for asking questions are as follows:

1. Keep questions simple and directed to only one idea.
2. Place the burden of responsibility on the salesperson, not the prospect.
3. Space out questions.
4. Ask about benefits, not features.
5. Avoid biased questions.

The chapter ended with a description of the SPIN cycle of questioning: *S*ituation, *P*roblem, *I*mplication and *N*eed-payoff questions.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the traditional method of "telling" ineffective as a means of making the sales presentation?
2. What is a "canned" presentation?
3. What is the place of recognition in the total selling process?
4. Why is problem recognition necessary?
5. What is a need? What is a problem?
6. What is the role of the salesperson in problem recognition?
7. How does the salesperson handle the transition from the approach stage to the problem-recognition stage?
8. What are the two primary techniques for questioning? How do their uses differ?
9. How are closed and open questions used to begin the flow of information? Why is the salesperson advised to start with closed questions?
10. What are the "Three Golden Questions"?
11. How are open questions valuable in revealing the personality style of the prospect?
12. What are third-party questions? Why are they necessary?

13. How can the salesperson encourage the prospect to continue to talk? Redirect the conversation?
14. Explain the salesperson's basic technique for checking for understanding. Are there additional benefits to checking for understanding?
15. What is problem confirmation? Why is it necessary? How does it differ from mere checking for understanding?
16. Explain the lantern principle.
17. What is the concept of burden of responsibility?
18. What are some ways that the salesperson might ask sensitive questions?
19. What is "creative silence"?
20. Interview a salesperson and find out his or her feelings about the importance of questioning and listening.
21. Split into groups of three in your class. Have one student play the part of a salesperson, the second the part of a buyer, and the third the part of an observer who will rate the salesperson's efforts. The salesperson will question the buyer regarding that individual's needs and problems associated with the purchase of one or more of the following products: automobile, skis, DVD player, apartment, shoes, HDTV. The observer should rate the salesperson as to the quality of the questions asked and as to whether needs were sufficiently identified. Each of the three people should have an opportunity to be the salesperson.
22. Explain the difference between direct and indirect questions.
23. Identify the form of the following questions. What is each question designed to do?
    - Does that check with your experience?
    - How long have you had your dishwasher?
    - Is price more important to you than economy?
    - What factors are important to you in deciding to give shelf space to a new product?
    - What do you see ahead for yourself in the next 10 years?
    - How do you feel about using an employment agency to fill your openings? What kind of billing schedule would best fit your needs?
    - Would you say that most companies in the paper business are cutting back these days?
    - Could you tell me a little bit more about your advertising objectives?
    - Then, as I interpret what you're saying, you plan to acquire new companies, but only if they rank number one or two in their business.
    - What problems have you experienced in packaging your product?

Chapter Quiz

1. By indicating discrepancies between actual situations and ideal states that prospects could experience, salespeople create
   a. a need.
   b. a problem.
   c. a motive.
   d. a solution.
2. Activities that would occur during the recognition stage of the selling process include
   a. getting the interview and relating.
   b. questioning and listening.
   c. questioning and offering solutions.
   d. offering solutions and resolving doubts.
3. In relationship selling, _____ is the most important part of the selling process.
   a. approach
   b. problem recognition
   c. presentation
   d. handling
4. In initiating the recognition process, the salesperson must first make a transition from the approach stage of the selling process to the discussion stage. If possible, the first step by a salesperson should be a
   a. statement of purpose.
   b. permissive question.
   c. dissonance-reducing statement.
   d. relationship-building question.
5. "Do you currently invest in a mutual fund?" is an example of
   a. an open question.
   b. a closed question.
   c. a dissonance question.
   d. the lantern approach.
6. Closed questions serve all of the following purposes *except*
   a. beginning the flow of information.
   b. continuing and redirecting the flow of information.
   c. checking for understanding.
   d. determining the who, what, why response.