Ask probing questions to solve client’s often veiled problems

The business buzzword nowadays seems to be “solutions”.

In the business magazines, and even on television, all types of companies are offering “solutions”. Some even anoint themselves as “solutions companies” or some similar cognomen.

Many salesmen are quick to offer pre-designed solutions to perceived problems. Most salespeople lack the skills to find out what the real problem might be, and to hold off on offering a solution until the real problem has been uncovered.

One credo to remember in order to avoid offering solutions too quickly is that taught to psychiatrists in medical school. “The problem the patient brings you is never the real problem!”

The patient may have insomnia, but that is not the real problem. There is some underlying condition causing the insomnia, and it is the psychiatrist’s job to assist the patient in discovering this condition.

Interpolating this to the world of sales, “the problem the client brings you is never the real problem.” It is your job as a salesperson to lead the client on a mission of discovering the real underlying problem.

Once the root of the problem is discovered, a proper solution can be prescribed. If you “treat” the perceived problem, you may be prescribe the wrong medicine.

So how do you go about helping the client to discover the real problem? You become an expert at questioning technique and at the art of “reversing.”

As a salesperson it is time to outgrow that thumbscrews and the rack, but certainly the non-violent techniques.

Our job is to ask probing questions, and to find out the real problems. Only then can we offer valid solutions.

There are basically three ways to get information: asking questions, using leading statements and reversing.

Asking questions such as “What kinds of problems are you having?” is a good way to start probing.

But remember that the client probably does not know the real problem, so this type of questioning will only take us so far. Then we have to use leading statements like “Tell me more” or “and...” in order to get the client to take us further.

Watch the great interviewers on television and you will learn many techniques for asking questions and using leading statements.

As salespeople, where is the “further” we want to get to? We want to get beyond the “What is the problem?” and onward to the “Why?”

Now we are getting closer to the root of the problem. Not only looking for the symptoms, but also for the reasons, the why, behind the problem.

As salespeople we must also remember that clients buy based on emotion and justify the decision with facts. Searching for the “Why?” will lead us into more emotional areas than the intellectual “What?”

These techniques of questioning are not new at all, and are not limited to sales.

Every cop show on television displays interrogating techniques that follow the same pattern. If you can get behind the what and into the why, and evoke emotion, you may get valuable information, or even a confession.

I first learned these questioning techniques, including the reversing that we will look at later, when I was in “spy school” in the Army.

All military intelligence personnel went through spy training at “The Bird” - Fort Holabird, Md. One area stressed in this school was interviewing, or interrogating techniques.

Sales people can use these same techniques very effectively. Perhaps not the use of thumbscrews and the rack, but certainly the non-violent techniques.

Which brings me to reversing.

Mastering this technique will move you into the realm of super-salesperson. You will not only be looking for the why behind the what, but exploring the impact of the problem with the client.

If you can get into the area of impact, an emotional area, you will be able to bond more strongly with your clients and greatly enhance your selling effectiveness.

There is an expression in English about “walking a mile in my shoes” to be able to understand my problems and what drives me.

If you can walk with a client through the process of What, Why and Impact, you will begin to understand her problems. If you can understand the problems, and bring the client with you on the journey, then you will be able to offer effective solutions.

Reversing is the art of reversing someone else’s question into a question of your own. In business, if someone asks you a question, there is a reason for asking it.

As a salesperson the answer to the question is of little value compared to the reason the person is asking it. The reason the person asks, the “Why?” will lead to understanding the problem.

You have to develop the skills to be able to follow the problem.

Remember the basic rule of reversing - no one asks you a question without a reason.

If you answer the question offhand you are missing valuable information that will help you discover the problem and make the sale.

If someone asks a car salesman if this particular model comes with a standard transmission, there is a reason for the question. If the salesperson answers the question, then a rare opportunity to gather information has been passed up.

The super-salesperson reverses, “There must be a reason you are interested in a standard transmission.”

Sure there is a reason, and the salesperson can only guess what it is. By reversing you can find out.

Perhaps it is to have sport car control, or for better gas mileage, or a lower sticker price, or better feel.

You can only find the “Why?” behind the “What?” by reversing. When you master these techniques you will be able to progress from the “What?” to the “Why?” to the “Impact” and onto the sale and a long-term customer. Long-term because they know that you will take the time to understand the problem before you offer solutions to the symptoms!