

THE FUNDAMENTAL SALES COMPETENCY

When reduced to its single dynamic, buying and selling is an information exchange. The buyer provides the seller with information about his or her needs; the seller processes that information, and offers the buyer information about a solution to satisfy these needs. Accordingly, the fundamental competency in which salespeople must achieve mastery is communicating. Communicating in sales means asking the right questions, listening, and explaining the value of a solution to the buyer. In this installment of Sales Bytes, we will explore what it means to ask good questions and listen.

Probing is the fundamental selling skill. Salespeople ask questions for several reasons: to gain information about the buyer's needs; to discover the buyer's definition of value; and to demonstrate a genuine concern by the salesperson for the buyer's welfare. It follows that the questions must encourage the buyer to respond openly and honestly about their needs. This means two things for salespeople.

First, the questions should be open ended. Open-ended questions generally begin with why, how, what, or tell me about. These questions encourage the buyer to offer a lengthy response. When the salesperson's objective is to get as much information as possible, the questions should be open ended. Second, the questions should have a neutral intent. Some salespeople attempt to shape the buyer's thinking by asking questions that are self-serving. Buyers respond predictably to this—they get defensive and feel manipulated. How would you respond to this question by a salesperson, "Quality and service are important to you, aren't they?" Who can say "No" to this question! If the intent is to get the other person to open up about his or her needs, the questions must inspire trust.

A complementary skill to probing is active listening. Active listening is more than the awareness of sound. It is patiently listening and responding to the buyer. This means setting aside one's personal agenda to process accurately what the other person says. This is difficult for salespeople that want to shape the buyer's responses to fit their presentation. If your intent is to give buyers the opportunity to express their perception of the unvarnished truth, you must listen actively and non-judgmentally to what they have to say. This in-depth understanding of their view of things will help you frame your sales message—the topic of next week's Sales Bytes.

Author byline: Tom Reilly is a professional speaker and author of twelve books. Tom is literally the guy who wrote the book on *Value-Added Selling* (McGraw-Hill, 2010), the book that started the value selling revolution. For more information on Tom's presentations, training, and products, visit his website www.TomReillyTraining.com or call his office, 636-537-3360.