

Questions Are The Answer: How To Use Questions To Build Connection And Uncover Opportunity

By
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“The person who asks the questions controls the conversation,” according to author Bob Burg in his book *Endless Referrals*. Today, we will be looking at how the right question at the right time can move you closer to your goals. Whether you are preparing for a new business or investor pitch, an interview or building rapport with someone you’ve just met, good questions can set you on the path to accomplishment.

Questions in business have five purposes.

1. The first is to focus attention on the listener, communicating through the question your sincere interest in that person. Your questions put that person in the spotlight and who doesn’t love being the center of attention?
2. The second purpose is to build the relationship. Your interest in others is very attractive and opens the door to likeability and trust, two essential ingredients in any good relationship.
3. The third is to uncover the gap. The gap is the space between where the listener is now and where he or she wants to be. That gap is where all your opportunity lies. Let’s say you are pitching a new client on your services. It’s tempting to launch into a monologue about what you can do but if you don’t know what your prospect is looking for, you could be pitching things that don’t matter or will keep you from closing the deal. The same is true when pitching for money. If you don’t ask the right questions, you could be pitching benefits that don’t match your investor’s goals. That’s why uncovering the gap is so important. Regardless of the situation, uncovering the gap is always the goal, thus making questions your answer for success.
4. The fourth is to clarify your understanding. Questions are the antidote for making assumptions. Assumptions, of course, are the stuff of legends. You surely can remember, can’t you, when you assumed you knew what a client wanted when, in fact, you were way off, even embarrassingly off? Back before I began asking clients how they would measure the return on their investment working with me, I made the mistake of assuming with one particular client that my idea of success was the same as hers. OUCH! What a surprise when that client let me know that my assumption was definitely NOT the right one. So when we are talking about clarifying your understanding, we are including an understanding of what your client values. A question like, "What is most important to you in a relationship with your service provider?" tells you how to manage the business when you get it but also can guide you in how you present your pitch. Knowing what your client values, gives you a chance to build that in from the beginning.

5. The fifth is to test for commitment. Questions that refer to a ranking system or ask for a Yes or No answer work here. For example, you might ask, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely are you to purchase X over the next twelve months?” Or, you can simply ask, “Will you be purchasing X in the next twelve months? In this scenario, which question works better, do you think? Or rather, which question works better for *you* and what *you* want to know?”

Now that you know the five reasons why questions are the answer, I’m going to add one more bonus reason to make questions part of your new business strategy. Good questions can position you as an expert. An L.A. client who was just starting his online ad agency was headed to an industry conference in Chicago where he wanted to stand out and attract new business. The only opportunity he had at the event to showcase his online chops was at an industry roundtable where he would join eight others in learning about a hot topic led by an industry guru. It was our only shot at making the event pay off for him so, on the phone in the cab on the way to his hotel we hammered out a series of questions that would communicate his depth of understanding of the market and make him memorable. Did it work? Two years later, he got a call from a participant who had been at the same table and heard his questions. When this person’s billion-dollar corporation was looking for a new online ad agency, he called my client and invited him to pitch, reminding him of where they had met and that he had never forgotten my client because of the impression he had made with his questions. So, if you asked that client if questions are the answer, he would tell you, “Yes. Definitely Yes.”

OK. Let’s turn our attention now to the questions themselves. While there are many ways to ask a question, there are really only two types of questions you can use.

- The first is the close-ended question, also known as a directive question. A close-ended question calls for a Yes/No answer. “Have you filled the position yet?” is a question that requires a Yes or No answer. Yes/No questions can be useful but won’t give you the whole picture. However, a well-crafted Yes/No question could be useful in positioning you as an expert. If you were to ask a “Would you agree” question, for example, that is followed with a thoughtful comment on a subject relevant to your listener, you might just look like the smartest person in the room, in a non-offensive way, of course. If you asked an entrepreneur, for instance, “Would you agree that the current economy offers many opportunities for wealth building?” wouldn’t you look like you understood the economy, the marketplace and all the subtleties of making money? Just answer Yes or No!
- The second type of question is the open-ended or non-directive question. This question expands the possibilities for a response. Questions that ask who, what, when, where, why and how are open-ended. For example, “What qualities are you looking for in candidates for this position?” will tell you quite a bit about how to present your qualifications to address what the company views as important. Open-ended questions also communicate more about your level of interest in your listener.

The type of question you will use in any particular situation will depend on what you want to know. Here are a few things your questions could uncover.

- Is this my ideal client, job opportunity or project?
- What is the best way to build a relationship with this person? What do we have in common? What passions, hobbies, interests, causes or other drivers are connecting points for us?
- Am I talking to the decision maker or is that someone else?
- How urgent is it? What is the timeframe?
- What criteria will be used to make a decision?
- What is most important to the relationship?
- What is the desired outcome? How will success be measured?

The downside to a questions strategy is, in your excitement, you may forget to ask them. That won't happen if you build questions into a system for responding to opportunity. For example, if you get new business inquiries by telephone, you could create a system for gathering information you can keep near the phone. In my business, I created a series of pre-printed scripts. The first is for the initial contact and conversation, the second is for enrolling a new client and the third is for capturing billing data. Each builds in sequenced questions I want to be sure I always ask like . . .

- How did you hear about my services?
- What is most important to you in your selection process?
- If we were to work together, what would you want to accomplish in the first 90 days? Or the client relationship assumption dissolver question, "If we were to work together, how will you measure the return on your investment?"

Using questions for maximum advantage goes beyond just crafting then creating a system to use them. Here are a few things to remember as you begin to add questions to your communication toolbox.

- **Cultivate curiosity.** A sincere interest in what your listener wants is a very attractive quality. Questions like, "I'm curious about how you started your company" or "I'm curious about what influenced your decision to change vendors" rivets attention on your listener and communicates your desire to understand the world from his or her point of view.
- **Ask questions others will enjoy answering.** People love to talk about themselves. Get them talking with questions they will want to answer. For example, in Bob Burg's book *Endless Referrals*, he asks, "What do you enjoy most about your profession" as one of ten "feel good questions" he has found are very useful in drawing his listener into a conversation.

- **Ask extender questions.** What does Bob Burg do if his listener's answer is too short to build a conversation? He asks an extender question like, "Oh really? Tell me more."
- **Ask questions that will set you apart.** His final advice on questions? Look for ways to build the other person's business or bring that person more of the opportunities he or she is seeking with this one, "How can I know if someone I meet or already know is a good prospect for you or your company?"
- **Know when to stop talking.** Just ask your question and wait. Don't fill up the silence. Let the silence pull the answer. Some people take longer than others to respond. You may be the first vendor or candidate to have taken the time to ask that. Give the other person time to frame a response.
- **Know what you are looking for in a client, business opportunity, investor, or job.** Don't be afraid to be very specific with yourself about what you want. Craft your questions to determine the degree of match between what you want and what is presented.
- **Prepare your questions in advance.** One or two opening questions will get the conversation flowing and help direct your inquiry.
- **Create a script you can easily refer to.** Scripts work very well on the phone but you can use them in face-to-face meetings, too. In fact, a series of questions that are presented in a systematic way can say a lot about you as a professional.
- **Follow where the answers lead you.** Get off your script if the answers are taking you into new territory. You could uncover more opportunity than you first imagined.

Finally, here are my two go-out questions. "Are you currently in the job market?" And if so, "Would you like to learn more about asking questions in an interview situation? If you answered yes, then email me at askus@starmakercoaching.com and I'll send you a copy of my article, "Ten Questions To Ask On Your Interview".

Well, if there are no more questions, that's a wrap!

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