



Consultative Questions: Building The Solution

OVERVIEW

Questions are a powerful tool that allows you to gain insight to the client's situation, problem and potential cures. In order to sell strategically and consultatively, you must become accustomed to asking well phrased, thought penetrating questions. More importantly, you must prepare questions in advance of the meeting.

Studies have shown that a well-phrased question will get the client to think about what you are saying and their situation better than your making a statement. The question forces the client to think and gains their attention. The well-phrased question cuts through all the clutter that is swirling around in their head. Questions also get the client to tell you their biases, preferences and even things they may not be consciously aware of. The question is part of an overall strategy that helps you change the game without the competition even being aware that the game changed. In addition, by asking great questions, the client cannot help but think of you differently, someone who is more consultative, and more experienced.

Every sales person, consultant, advisor, sales support person and executive should have a set of questions that are to be asked in various client situations. No one question or set of questions fits all situations. The questions that follow will stimulate your thinking and help you design your own questions for the client and specific the sales situation.

QUESTION TYPE: SOLUTION BUILDING QUESTIONS

The objective from these series of questions is to build a solution to meet the need of the business priorities and positively impact the performance criteria. However, this is not enough. You must ask solution building questions to confirm your solution "fits" the client's preconceived notion of what the solution must do. This is usually not articulated by the client because it is assumed that



you know. Because of this, the client will become frustrated with you if you do not know and build a solution that is off the mark.

By asking solution building questions you can guide your client toward a specific solution that only your firm can address and put your competitors at a disadvantage.

Further, by asking these questions, you are building a better relationship with the client, as he or she will see you and your firm as more collaborative and consultative, looking for win-win, with the client's needs in mind first and foremost.

We are going to explore through what I call "drill down" questions. Drill down questions to get to the root cause of the client's pain and issues as well as identifying other critical factors that influence the design of the solution. We are also going to use exploratory questions to relate this pain and potential solution back to the business impact and then to the business priorities. In addition, we will address ROI or the return on investment through these questions.

These questions can be used by external and internal account managers, consultants or other professionals on the organization as a whole or within subdivisions and business units.

1. Tell me about this (the specific issue) and how it is impacting your business?
2. Is this (the specific issue) affecting other areas of the business as well - directly or indirectly? (You will want to pause and wait before helping the client. To help the client through this you may ask about; employee morale, accounts receivable, customer impact, channel partner impacts, regulatory, etc. - the areas which could be impacted but not readily apparent).
3. What do you believe is the root cause(s) of this problem?
4. What are the symptoms of the problem? (How is the problem manifesting itself?)
5. What other parts of the business (or other people in the organization) is this affecting?
6. Who else in the organization will be involved in the creation of a solution?
7. Could you describe the impact of the problem in terms of dollars, time, productivity, or other key drivers that your staff and peers are talking about and consider important?
8. What funding has been earmarked to solve this problem?
9. What is the timeframe that this solution needs to be in place by?
10. What does the ultimate solution look like in your mind?
11. What are the key areas that this solution that you just described, address first?
12. Do the other people you mentioned (from the question above) have a different view of the solution?
13. What are the underlying technologies and processes the solution leverages or creates?



14. From your point of view, are you looking to make this a multi-phased project, with specific issues addressed first?
15. How are you going to measure the performance of the investment? (ROI measures)
16. What if the solution could also do this - would that be of benefit?
17. If we did the project this way (explain the approach), we address these issues (describe the issues), quickly (explain the benefit) - would this be a benefit to you? (Or, do you see it the same way?)
18. What are your thoughts if we created a solution that looked like this (then explain the solution)?
19. What are the top criteria you are going to use to measure and evaluate the proposals?
20. Who is going to be involved in reviewing the proposals? What are their criteria to evaluate the solution?
21. What items would you not want to see as part of the solution?
22. Are there any standards or corporate compliance items we need to address?
23. Do you view our experience in this area (technology, experts, past experience, methodology, pricing capability, etc.) as a benefit in terms of this solution?
24. Are you available to spend thirty minutes to make sure we captured the essence of the solution you described as well as some of the ideas we may have come up with that may be of benefit to you and your organization later this week?

If your solution is strategic, is a big ticket item, or involves multiple people in the organization to make the decision, your strategy must be to tie the solution back to the top business priorities and the key performance metrics. You will have to ask these questions (or a subset) of multiple people who are involved in the use of your solution. Through the use of these questions, you can begin to tie your solution to the key performance metrics which in turn support the business priorities of the company.

By asking the questions above, you are helping the client build the solution out so that they can vocalize their preferences and biases. The client more than likely has done a lot of research on the solution possibilities, either from other companies like themselves, your competitors, articles, industry conferences or through the internet.

Your ability to get the client's solution out on the table or better yet - a visual description or diagram on a whiteboard will help you and your ability to design the right solution without over engineering it or missing key elements.



You always want to have a straw-man solution that you can run by your prospective client. This allows you and your client to “get on the same page” by noting the differences.

Last, you want to go back and regroup and then “redraw” your solution and present it back to the client. This allows you to reconfirm the critical aspects of the solution. It also allows the client to see their influence on the solution. Bottom line, getting more time and attention from the client, is an investment from them, which in turn is an emotional connection you want to establish that will disadvantage your competitors.

By developing a mutual vision of what the solution will look like and how it will address the needs of the specific individuals, you bias the client favorably toward you and your solution.

