1 ENQUIRY BEFORE ADVOCACY

'Judge others by their questions, rather than their answers.'
Voltaire

When you meet clients, the temptation to impress them with what you know, what your company offers, whom you know – and the rest – is very strong. Ask most clients about first impressions and they say that bad salespeople 'talk too much', whereas what impresses them is that they 'asked really good questions'. Expertise is most powerfully demonstrated when it is in the service of the client – in other words, when it is used to frame a good question.

Good questions build relationships and enable you to listen and observe. They indicate that you want to help but on the client's terms. In the solutions world, where outcomes are what clients value, questions reveal this to the salesperson. Armed with the answers, you can write better proposals and price solutions more effectively. All successful salespeople say that good questions are your competitive advantage in the market of people who like to pitch.

ASK QUESTIONS TO ESTABLISH CONTEXT

Here are some favourite opening questions from the sample of successful salespeople interviewed:

- 'I've read the papers but, in your view, how's business? Would you have predicted that answer when you took the job?'
- 'What are the biggest changes you've made over the last 12 months? Were these your choice or a reaction to the environment?'

- ‘How have these changes made the company stronger?’
- ‘How have your team taken it?’
- ‘And you? Sounds quite exciting. Or maybe a bit stressful?’
- ‘In your view, where is the company still a bit complacent?’
- ‘Why are we having this conversation now (rather than six months ago)? What are the really pressing items on your to-do list?’

Questions about the possibilities for change

Interest in and readiness for change generally have to precede any specific vision of the future and therefore a need for your solution or service. These questions relate to a meeting you have initiated with a target client:

- ‘What are your priorities?’
- ‘As how important do your colleagues see your list?’
- ‘Which do you personally feel most commitment to? Why?’
- ‘Which of these are easier and harder to deliver? Why?’
- ‘What level of disruption does such a change imply? How keen are people to do that?’
- ‘Which company do you envy most? Why? What do you think your company could learn from x?’
- ‘What do you see as the missed opportunity here?’
- ‘This is a leadership challenge, of course. Where does your company possibly compromise too much?’
- ‘What’s the 5 per cent here which will deliver the 80 per cent improvement you want?’ (Be prepared to answer this yourself.)

Questions to explore the value of change

The value of change is either the problem resolved or the dream achieved, or the difference between the two. As no change is always the easiest option, you start by understanding the motivation:

- ‘If this continues unchecked, what are the likely consequences?’
- ‘What is the short-term impact of this (problem)? And longer term?’ (Explore the financial, political, human, competitive and other sorts of negative impact.)

- ‘Are there any silver linings to this cloud? How do you ensure that this (good stuff) happens?’
- ‘Under such circumstances, what would success look like to you? Are you sure this isn’t a little under-optimistic/too pessimistic?’
- ‘If all goes according to plan, what does the company get in return?’
- ‘What sorts of outcomes are realistic in the current climate? What sort of financial improvement are you hoping to achieve?’
- ‘Is your budget fixed or variable?’ (‘If it is fixed, tell me and I will tell you if you can afford us and that will save us all time. If it is variable, let’s talk about the scope of this project and I will quote you a fair price and you will decide.’)
- ‘Are you all really brave enough to tackle this?’

ASK QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE THE SOLUTION

The underlying assumption you make in these questions is that the client is both committed and competent. By framing the questions positively, you wait for them to tell you that not everything in the garden is quite as rosy as you might imagine.

- ‘Exciting strategies are seldom without risk and I guess you have evaluated them. What are the main ones right now?’
- ‘You use words like [“new”, “innovative”] to describe what you’re planning. This sometimes indicates some gaps in competence or experience. What are you doing to plug any such gaps?’
- ‘The company must have undertaken big complex changes like this many times… What has been your experience of how well they do this? What did you learn from the experience?’
- ‘Whose heads are on the block over this? Or maybe that’s the wrong thing to ask. Who gets the bouquet if this all goes well? How positive are they feeling about this initiative?’
- ‘Can you tell me something about the options you have considered for how to do this? Which one did you choose? Why?’
- ‘Do you think you will end up compromising, or are the right people brave enough to push through the best option?’

- 'What *don't* you know about this particular change? What difference would it make to have a good answer to that question?'
- 'What might either improve the chances of success or the speed at which you can make the transition?'
- 'Which competitor do you envy?'
- 'I'm sure you have discussed this, but some of this will involve moving into new territory. Which parts of all this may turn out not to be core competencies or processes for your business?'

ASK QUESTIONS TO ENGAGE THEM WITH YOUR SOLUTION

You need to get permission before firing off your expertise or opinions. Possible questions to ask include:

- 'Would you like an outsider's view?'
- 'Can I share some of our experiences in this area?'
- 'We have done some thinking about this whole topic. Would you be interested in hearing some preliminary conclusions?'
- 'A lot of this – particularly some of the dilemmas and decisions you have highlighted – sounds similar to what we encountered on [name project/client]. Can I tell you something about what we have discovered working with other clients on similar themes?'
- 'I guess you must have considered that there might be some advantages to partnering with others on this journey or I wouldn't be here. Is there anything specific in either our communications or what you know about our company that piqued your curiosity?'

Once you have got this permission, your aim is to continue the dialogue. (Imagine you have provided a case study or story about another (anonymized) client or some researched analysis and conclusions.) Again, you do not wish to 'teach' them until or unless they give you the green light:

- 'That was our/my experience. Does this sound anything like what might happen here?'
- 'What do you think of that story?'

- 'Some of this looks relevant to your situation. What do you think?'
- 'Obviously, this is a different company, a different time and one context will never be identical to yours, but is there anything I've said that's relevant to your situation?'

Follow-up

Follow-up is generally a range of actions. The key is to make sure that any action you take is matched by some reciprocal action from them – even if this is only token. This establishes a 'working with' relationship, not the 'working for' relationship associated with product sales. Typical goals will be:

- to secure a follow-up meeting, possibly with other stakeholders – if you think they are really interested (and you have the means), this could be a more formal offer of a workshop to discuss the issue with some experts from your team
- to provide more information – for example, other case studies – with the commitment from them to review these with people who were involved in the situation
- to introduce a specialist who can ask more detailed technical questions – perhaps engaging with the technical people on the client side
- to get a meeting with their boss about the subject.

Questions to get to the next stage

Possible questions to ask include:

- 'I've found this conversation really interesting. I hope you have, too. There are a number of ways we could take this forward…' (Make suggestions.)
- 'If you are interested in this topic – and this is completely without obligation, of course – what would be a good next step? I will send you my notes from this meeting and maybe you could indicate any of your colleagues who might also have a view we should understand in order to see if there may be a way we can assist you with what you are trying to do…'
- 'Where would you like to take this conversation?'

- 'Thank you for your time. I can see some things here we might be able to help you with, but I'm wondering what you think would be a good next step.'
- 'Obviously, we would like to find some area in which we could make a proposal to help you achieve what you want. But at this point I don't have a clear enough idea what that might look like. I can suggest some options if you would like, but usually this is less helpful to people than some other examples and material. If I send you some more targeted material, can we agree a date to discuss this?'

Putting it all together

Questions open up and close down areas of enquiry, but they are more use in relationship-building terms than statements. Although each solution needs a set of questions with which to ascertain the client's potential needs, these may not always be useful in the first meeting.