

The Most Powerful Sales Tool Ever Invented

By Barry D. Caponi

Over the last fifty or sixty years there has been an explosion in the development of sales productivity tools. The computer really began fueling that explosion. With it, we could store, manage and mine data much more rapidly. The cell phone and the Internet then allowed for us to communicate that data much more rapidly and from virtually anywhere. Sales force automation tools that followed the computer allowed us to handle much larger territories and many more customers or prospects simultaneously. If we wanted to, we could also include the evolution of the automobile and airplane which provided us the ability to get around more quickly and economically.

In my opinion, none of those however, hold a candle to the granddaddy sales tool of them all; the question. Think about it. I can collect, store and sift through terabytes, petabytes, or even exabytes (spell check didn't even have either one of those last two in the dictionary) of data to mine information to help me sell. But what I am I actually doing when I am mining the database? Data mining tools call them queries, but in reality, we are doing nothing more than posing questions. Ask the wrong question, you'll get no answer at all, or worse, the wrong answer. Don't ask the necessary questions and you're liable to waste a great amount of valuable time.

Communication and transportation advancements allow me to talk with, send information to, and see many more people in a shorter amount of time. But what information should I communicate? How do I know it is the right information? How do I know that this is not a waste of my time (no matter how little I need to invest)? Simple; I constantly ask questions of myself, others within my own organization, and of course, my suspect or prospect in order to determine whether they are right for my solution, within my timeframe.

But this seemingly simple tool is even more powerful than that. It transcends sales. Questions are how we find compatibility with a mate; determine where we're going to go to lunch today, or what's bothering a child that doesn't seem to be feeling well. There is virtually an unlimited use for the skill of asking good questions.

Every year when I take assessment of what personal skill I want to improve upon in the coming year, the skill of asking better questions invariably bubbles to the top of the list. In my book, there is no more powerful tool or skill.



In her book, *The 7 Powers of Questions*, Dorothy Leeds presents the most powerful book on questioning I've ever encountered. Even though it is not a sales book per se, I use it as the foundation for my Basic and Advanced Selling Skills workshop. (Click here to order a copy on the Resources page of my website through Amazon.com - <http://www.caponipg.com/books-info.htm>.)

She lists the following 7 reasons to hone this skill:



1. **Questions demand answers.** From the time we are small children, we are taught to answer other's questions. Our parents direct us to answer other adults and teachers ask us questions all day long in school. We are conditioned to answer the questions of others. Because of this, the question becomes a great equalizer of stations in life. And according to CSO Insights annual survey of Chief Sales Officers, more and more prospects are expecting sales people to understand their business well enough to couch the advantages of their solutions in terms of how it compares to their competition's and the prospect's own environment. They are no longer looking for rudimentary feature information. They can get that themselves off your website. They understand that the only way you can do that is by asking enough questions to understand their business.
2. **Questions stimulate thinking.** Edwin Land, the inventor of the Polaroid Land Camera tells the story of the geneses of the idea for his invention. He said his young daughter one day, when on the beach with him taking pictures asked, "Daddy, why can't we see the pictures right away?"
3. **Questions put us in control.** Ms. Leeds tells the story in her book of the time Barbara Bush, as first lady, had chosen literacy as her crusade. One time she was put in front of a group of literacy experts for a 'talk' she knew nothing about. Obviously being unprepared, she calmly got up and asked the group, "If you were married to the President of the United States and had the opportunity to really make a dent in the field of illiteracy, what would you do? How would you go about it?" Needless to say, the group came alive with ideas. People like to talk about what they know, what they do, and who they are.



4. **Questions get people to open up.** Remember, people buy on emotion and then find the facts to back up their decision – even in business situations. A well thought out question, by its very nature, can force us to go beyond what we know and into the realm of what we feel.
5. **Questions give us valuable information.** In his book, *Bargaining for Advantage*, G. Richard Shell asks the question, “What do skilled negotiators do that average negotiators do not?” They ask more than twice the number of questions that average negotiators ask. They are also questions with a purpose, designed to elicit specific information. In the sales environment, the successful sales people are the ones that get at the information below the surface.
6. **Questions lead to quality listening.** Why do we ask questions? To get an answer is the obvious answer. But too many of us do not take the time to listen and understand the answer. There should be a reason for the questions asked, and if there is a reason for the question, then a total understanding of the answer should be the goal, not just the asking of the question. And since people think in terms of generalities, follow up questions are necessary in most instances to make sure the understanding is complete. You can not assume you understand what the other person *meant* by what they said. How do you know what follow up questions to ask if you are not listening intently?
7. **Questions get people to persuade themselves.** All of us can tell a story of a situation where they were trying to convince someone to do something and they just couldn't get them to do it. Then sometime later, the person we were originally trying to convince seemingly came up with exactly the same idea on their own and were all for it. What's the difference? People believe what *they* say, not what *you* say. Most of us resent when someone tries to tell us what to do. But when they come to the same conclusion as yours on their own, it's the proverbial 'no brainer'.

If you're interested in honing this skill, Caponi Performance Group teaches a questioning skills workshop (Basic and Advanced Selling Skills) that steps you through a structured process to determine what it is you need to know, and what kind of questions to use to uncover it. We have a corporate version and a live instructor web-based version for individuals. Check out your options at <http://www.caponipg.com/workshops.shtml>.

