Three Question Strategies to Make Your Sales Funnel Flow Faster, and How You Should Use Them

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When your company is well synchronized with market needs, prospects buy and money flows. Unfortunately, few companies can maintain a constant flow. Salespeople churn out demonstrations, samples, and proposals. Marketing departments churn out newsletters, ad copy, and brochures. But not enough prospects close.

What makes the sales funnel flow faster? The key is coordinating your sales and marketing efforts—aligning everyone in your organization according to the questions you ask your prospects at different stages in your relationships with them. These questions form the logical connection between the work of sales and the work of marketing.

Marketers need to know the questions that salespeople ask of customers at different points in the selling cycle, so they can provide the correct types of support to make selling easier. Likewise, salespeople need to know when to turn to marketing expertise to build customer knowledge and awareness, especially when customers are not ready to buy.

If you don't have enough prospects ready to buy, review and refine your questioning strategies, then realign your sales and marketing organization around them. Following are three question strategies you can use to make your sales funnel flow faster, and some examples of how to sales and marketing can work together to move customers through the sales funnel.

Strategy #1: Problem/Solution

The problem/solution question strategy emerged to address the old adage, "You can't sell the solution, unless you've sold the problem first." For example, Michael Bosworth's Solution Selling® (Irwin, 1995) offered techniques for motivating prospects by uncovering their pain. Another variation, the "how, how much, what bottlenecks" questions, were popular in computer sales training in the 1980s. These questions help crystallize and dollarize problems and solutions when needs cut across departmental lines or when lifecycle costs count.

If the customer has exactly the problem you can solve, but isn't consciously ready to buy, problem/solution questions can help you show that the fit is right. But don't use them when your customers are not in decision-making mode and need information. These questions will make them uncomfortable. You will seem to be justifying the sale at the expense of understanding that your customer is not ready to close, and your relationship may be undermined.

Strategy #2: Objectives, Strategies, and Issues

The second type of question gets at your prospects' business and departmental objectives. What strategies will they use to achieve those objectives? What issues and/or challenges do they face? Stepping back to get a broader view, you can scope out people's perspectives (including decision makers'), as well as departmental politics and priorities. You can build relationships, steer clear of time-wasters, and start generating a consensus, even before you start "selling."

Of course, simply asking, "What are your business objectives?" won't work very well. Asking questions that reveal some preparation is a different story:

"I read in your company's newsletter that your department received a quality award.

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Nice going! And your annual report said quality was one of your president's key objectives for this year. Tell me, what did you do here to earn that recognition?"

This approach adds value to the relationship, since you show that you know something about the customer's business when you ask the question. In their book, *"Beyond Selling Value"* (Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2002), Dan Kosch and Mark Shonka describe how to ask these questions and leverage the information they provide. Clearly, prospects want relationships with suppliers they trust. Trust can make the sales funnel flow faster. You can earn that trust by taking the time to understand their business.

But these questions can also have a drawback: sometimes they are so open-ended it can take a long time for the salesperson to find what they are looking for. And time is often in short supply.

Strategy #3: Synchronization

Synchronization questions are key to effectiveness. Marketing and selling never work when you ask your prospects to take actions they are not ready for. If the problem you solve is not on a decision maker's radar yet, that person will not recognize the value of your products and services.

Synchronization questions make you focus on learning the decision maker's priorities. That person's business life, like yours, is rife with problems. Which ones require attention now, and which can wait? What are the alternatives, the pros and cons? Who else should be involved, and why? How trustworthy is the available information?

These questions engage prospects where they are. Good salespeople always try to get into that "sweet spot." They know that when a prospect sees the salesperson putting the prospect's best interests first, the prospect will share all kinds of strategically important information. Then they move forward *together…* through the sales funnel.

You know it takes time to build those kinds of relationships. How can you make the funnel flow faster?

Making Your Sales Funnel Flow Faster

Suppose a prospect is stuck because the right people are unclear on the importance of solving certain problems. They would want to hear case studies revealing the dangers and what happened to companies who did nothing, right? Who could provide that information?

Or, suppose that the prospect is considering a "roll your own" approach. Would this prospect be interested in the details, risks, and rewards of what is actually involved? Who could provide those details?

Are these value-adding questions the job of sales? Salespeople may have some of this information, yet are they the ones best suited to provide it? They are not.

Marketing departments are often asked to produce product-oriented communications and promotions in a generic fashion. These talented people work ferociously to produce newsletters that may go unread, leads that might be ignored, and collateral that may not be used. Instead, marketing efforts should focus on making the sales process easier by addressing the specific information needs of your customers in situations like these.

How should you use these three questioning strategies in *your* organization? First, identify the stages prospects go through in solving their problems. Next, identify where they get stuck in their journey, and why. Then jointly charge sales and marketing to devise questioning tactics that help prospects progress through those stages, especially where they get stuck. Do prospects fail to realize they have a problem? Do the risks of taking an action appear greater than the reward? Do they struggle to build a consensus? Some situations may be better solved via marketing tactics such as articles and case studies. Others are better solved via sales tactics, such as the three questioning strategies we've described.

Either way, you will help prospects work on the

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problems they actually want to solve. You'll build relationships. And you'll make the most of the resources you have (both sales *and* marketing) in ways that make the sales funnel flow faster.

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