

Questioning skills

Questioning Skills is an important part of good **communication**. There are several different types of questions that you can use to collect information. However, at the outset of any conversation it is important to establish what you are trying to achieve:

- ❖ Assess/Clarify the customer's need
- ❖ Obtain hard facts
- ❖ Confirm your understanding of a process, issue or problem
- ❖ Sell a new idea or proposition to the customer
- ❖ Provide the solution



Once you have answered these questions you can then employ a wide range of these techniques to elicit customer responses. The ease with which you handle these techniques will come only with confidence developed with experience.

The key to both answering and framing questions is preparation which leads to a systematic process of thinking. Properly asked and answered questions leads to more **effective communication**.

Let us start with the two most important types of questions:

Open-ended questions	Close-ended questions
It is used to gather factual information.	It is used to stimulate conversation.
It evokes a „Yes“ or „No“ response.	It evokes a flow of information about the concerned issue.
A typical closed probe begins with „Do“ „Is“ „Can“, „Could“, „Will“, „Would“, „Shall“, and „Should“	Open probes start with words like „How“, „Why“, „When“, „Where“, „What“, „Who“, and „Which“
The questions are simple, straightforward and direct.	Open questions encourage dialogue by asking for elaboration on an idea.
They push you to take a position or be committed to a cause.	It allows you to express opinions about various points of view on the issue.
Closed questions are easy to answer, and are often used to direct a conversation.	Open probes are harder to answer and cannot be used to direct a conversation.

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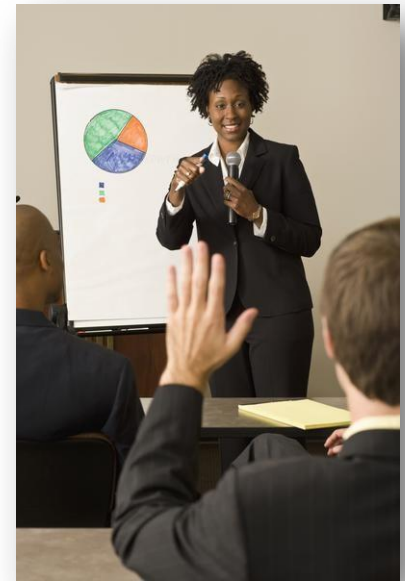
As a general rule, when you meet someone for the first time it is important to ask open-ended questions. This will enable you to get more details because of the flow of conversation. It is appropriate to ask close-ended questions when you know the person and would like get some specific facts or answers. When close-ended questions are used with people you are not familiar with, it can be seen as directive and rude.

Examples of close-ended questions

- ❖ "Do you see a flashing red light?"
- ❖ "When did you return from your vacation?"
- ❖ "How old is the cartridge?"

Examples of open-ended questions

- ❖ "How may I help you?"
- ❖ "What other problems are you having?"
- ❖ "Tell me more about the situation that happened with the client?"



Providing Non-verbal Encouragement during conversation

Non-Verbal Encouragement involves making sounds such as "Ah?" "Oh?" "Uhh?" "Hmm?" "Okay" as your customer talks. This reassures the customer that the agent is giving his/her full attention to the conversation. This is a rapport building technique that encourages the customer to talk further.

Using the Pause

When asked questions, often times people ponder before they speak. But people are uncomfortable with silence and tend to fill the void with either another question or a statement. This could result in a customer failing to offer an important piece of information. On the other hand a pause provides an opportunity for the customer to give more thought to the issue. This enables you to attain more focused answers from the customer. An aptly used pause is a powerful technique.

As Mark Twain once wrote:

"The right word may be effective but no word was ever as effective as a rightly time pause."

Using Summaries

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Summarize regularly throughout the conversation. Summary questions keep the customer focused on the conversation. It also enables the speaker to regain control when the customer's attention has drifted.

This technique is very helpful for the following reasons:

- ❖ Controlling talkative customers
- ❖ Ensuring that your understanding of the facts is the same as that of the customer's
- ❖ Moving from one topic to another seamlessly

Some examples of summary statements involve phrases such as:

- ❖ "As I have understood, what you are saying is that..."
- ❖ "So what I heard you say is.... Is that correct?"

Counter-productive Questions are of two types

- ❖ Multiple Questions
- ❖ Leading Questions

Any question that interrupts the smooth flow of a conversation could be called Counter-Productive.

Multiple Questions:

Multiple questions often confuse the customer. It causes the customer to overlook some of the questions and be selective in their answers.

Example:

- ❖ "What is the best two hour time frame to call and which time zone are you in?"

Leading Questions

Leading questions indicates to the customer that a certain type of response is required. The tone of the voice used with these questions is often judgmental such as:

- ❖ "You've got to admit that...?"
- ❖ "Isn't it a fact that...?"

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❖ “You’ve got to agree that...?”

With these questions the speaker is expecting a “Yes or No” answer from the customer. This would appear to be very controlling to the customer and could very easily breakdown any rapport or trust that was built.

Leading questions should only be used when a person of a higher designation is talking to someone of a lower designation. So if your boss asks you, “Are you planning to stay after the meeting?” – he/she means that you should be staying after the meeting. Hence these questions are seen as very directive and can often interfere with relationships if not used judiciously.

Using the right questions is very important in getting useful information as well as in building relationships. MMM Training Solutions conducts a one day seminar on Communication Skills that extensively trains you on developing your questioning skills. For more information please visit our website at www.mmmts.com

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Vikas Vinayachandran is a certified Coach and Leadership Facilitator. His ability to establish a deep connection with the participants gives him the unique skill to leave an indelible mark in the lives of his trainees. He has over 15 years of experience conducting training programs for various levels of management in Fortune 500 companies. He has an MBA from the prestigious Lancaster University Management School, UK.

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