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| Consultative Selling Principles |
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# Introduction

This guide is designed to help change the way that we approach sales. Sales have evolved from a tactical approach of selling technology to the IT department in support of technical efforts to selling directly to the line of business. When selling into the line of business it is critical that we express an understanding of what they do and what they are trying to achieve. It is no longer enough to just check off the capabilities they are looking. We need to be able to talk with the customer about transforming their business and driving greater returns on their investments and the only way to do this is by gaining a deeper understanding of what their business challenges are and what their vision for growing their revenue is.

As we uncover our customer’s vision and problems we can begin to position a complete solution design to transform the way they currently do work. We are the experts in our field and our customers are looking for more than just software. They are also looking for validation that they are moving in the right direction. If there are gaps in their strategy we need to help guide them in the right direction. If we are not establishing ourselves as a trusted advisor to the customer then we are not going win their business.

Let this document serve as a guide in how to interact with your customers and the types of questions that you should be asking. Of course there are thousands of questions, with many variations, that can be asked and this document will help you to get started on the types of questions to ask.

# Gaining Understanding and Knowledge of Your Customer

## Gaining Understanding

Before we can move forward in any solution selling opportunity we need to have a valid and complete understanding of who our customer is and what their challenges are. Part of understanding who our customer is comes down to understanding their culture and the way they do business. We may not be an expert in their field of operation but that does not mean we cannot have a positive impact on their business outcomes.

The intention of this section is to help devise the types of questions that we should be asking all potential customers so that we have a greater understanding of their business and internal challenges.

## Asking the right questions

1. Tell me about your company.
2. How is your company organized?
3. Describe what your company’s key points of difference are from your competitors and how you differentiate yourself.
4. Describe what your corporate culture is like.
5. Who else in the company should I be talking to?
6. What is the best way for me to learn the most about your company without getting in anyone's way?
7. Describe what your company's business strategy, goals, and objectives are.
8. What are some aspects of your business that few people know or appreciate?
9. What would you say your company's greatest strengths are?
10. What would your boss say your company’s greatest strengths are?
11. What are the greatest challenges your company faces today?
12. How does business really get done in your company?
13. What has enabled your organization to get as far as they've gotten?
14. What are your company’s unique strengths and capabilities?
15. What are the problems and difficulties that are blocking or diminishing your greatest strengths and capabilities?
16. Where do you believe the most progress can be achieved in your company?
17. What area of progress do you believe can be achieved the quickest?
18. Where does your boss believe the most progress can be achieved quickest?
19. What organizations and individuals tend to work together and what might be unique about their working relationships?
20. How do people in the organization respond to consultants? Do they see them intruders or helpers?
21. What specialized information or knowledge might your business benefit from?
22. What is the capacity for them to absorb new information and how quickly can they absorb it?
23. How does the company react to change?
24. What are the tender spots in your business and the key issues that the stakeholders and executives are sensitive or defensive about?

# The Discovery Interview – Going Deeper!

## General Guidelines

If you ask the right questions, people will literally tell you how to persuade them. One model for probing into what clients need and want, and why, involves identifying what gap, if any, exists between where an individual or organization perceives itself to be today, and where it would like to be in some ideal future (or target). If a gap exists, your products, services, insight and advice may serve as a bridge across the gap to reach their target.

## Questions to Draw-Out More Information

**Current Situation:** Open-ended questions that ask for opinions and facts about the present environment.

1. Tell me about how you do now.
2. Describe how it works today.
3. What is happening today and who is involved?
4. What do you like best about ?
5. What do you like least?
6. What are the few things that must go right for you to accomplish your goals? (Critical Success Factors)

**Target:** Questions that look into the "ideal future”.

1. What would you like to have, in the best of all possible worlds?
2. Describe the ideal situation.
3. If they were up and running, what would people be able to do that they can't do now?

**Payoff:** Questions that reveal the benefits of getting to the target.

1. How would reaching that target be of help to you, to your department, and to the company?
2. What exactly do you hope to accomplish?
3. Ideally, what will people say to describe the outcome of the project?" "What benefits do you expect from implementing this?
4. Why do you find this approach so attractive?
5. Why is it important to solve this problem?

**Challenges:** Questions that identify what the roadblock to achieving success are.

1. What are your greatest sources of dissatisfaction with your current situation?
2. What do you like least about how the company/department operates today?
3. What practices/processes/activities do you feel are least efficient/effective/productive?
4. Why do you think this problem exists? Why is that? What enables that to continue?...etc.

**Consequences:** The following are questions that reveal who may be affected by challenges beyond the immediate your contact. These questions may also reveal something about the urgency for (and value of) resolving challenges.

1. What happens if this problem continues?
2. Who in addition to yourself has a stake in this?
3. What does it mean to them to resolve it?
4. What's the effect of delays on...?
5. Given that costs were exactly the same, what else would be important to you in resolving this situation?
6. Tell me a little about how you would like to see changes implemented. What's appealing about that approach?
7. How does corporate management feel about...?
8. How do you feel about it?

# Detail the Problem to be Solved

## What are we trying to accomplish?

In any sales engagement it is vital to understand what we are trying to accomplish. Before we can ever make a recommendation of products to our customers we have to understand what their business problem is and what they want their end state to be. If there is no vision and no problem statement then why proceed?

## Uncovering the Problem

These are some questions to help uncover the problem that we are trying to solve. Of course any conversation with the customer needs to be more extensive than the list questions outlined below. Pay attention to the employees and their reactions to what their leadership is saying the problems are. Sometimes perspectives vary based on their view of the problem.

1. In what areas does the current application excel?
2. In what areas does the current application come up short?
3. What are the main issues that you have within this business unit and application and how frequently do they occur?
4. What is the nature of these issues to the business? (do they affect all users, overall productivity, a certain class of user or activity)
5. What causes them to occur? (System issues, business issues, staff issues training, turnover, accuracy etc)
6. What could be done to prevent these issues or improve the ability to handle them when they do occur?
7. Does management’s perception of the issues align with the individuals interacting with the systems and doing the work?

## The Customer’s Vision to Solve the Problem

Before we move into the solution design we need to make sure that the problems that we have identified align with the vision that our customer has. Part of that process is also making sure that the line of business we are working with has a vision that aligns with the strategic goals and objectives of the company. If it doesn’t we are probably wasting out time on a project that will not be funded.

1. What is the end state that the customer wants to achieve?
2. How can they measure their success?
3. Does the vision of the line of business align with the strategic vision of the company?
4. How will this vision help to move the company forward and achieve the objectives set by the board of directors and CEO?
5. Are the objectives of the vision clear and understandable?
6. What is the impact of the vision on the existing and future customer base?

# Solutions Design – How do I validate?

## Why Validate?

The reason that we validate any preliminary solution design is to make sure that what we are proposing is the right fit for the customer. This is also our time to validate that we are including the right technologies and that they are going to help drive greater value to the customer.

## Technical Feasibility

1. What business problems and client objectives will the solution address? Are they strategic or tactical?
2. How important are addressing these problems and objectives to the client?
3. Are there specific "drop dead" dates to be met?
4. What might work here?
5. What would be unlikely to work?
6. What is the ability and willingness of the client's executives to publicly commit to the goals and results we may propose?
7. How much change, new knowledge could this client absorb at once?
8. What demands can reasonably be made and sustained with those with responsibility for implementation?
9. Have I been in organizations like this before?
10. What did I learn about the forces for and forces against change in those organizations?

## Financial Feasibility

1. What are the budget parameters for this engagement?
2. Where are their opportunities to reshape the client's perception of value?
3. What unique capabilities or advantages can you offer?
4. Is there a clear linkage to the goals and critical success factors for the organization?
5. Is there competition? What is the competition offering or likely to offer?
6. What is this engagement worth to your company? Short term? Long term?
7. What internal resources are available to devote to the engagement?

## Operational Feasibility

1. How does this solution address the wants/requirements of each buying influence (Funding Source, Accountable Client, Gatekeepers, and Application Customers)?
2. What are the risks associated with the engagement? How can the solution approach be structured to avoid, reduce, or share the risks?
3. What implementation activities or responsibilities can the customer assume?
4. What implementation activities or responsibilities can be performed by subcontractors?

# Translating the Customer’s Requirements into Results-Focused Projects

In every customer engagement we need to begin to take the customer’s requirements and link them to the problems or challenges they are currently facing. Once we are able to link the requirements we will be able to articulate the goals or desired results of the customer’s projects.

1. Where's the bottleneck?
2. What could be changed tomorrow?
3. What is the most vulnerable point in the current approach, procedure, and process?
4. What new learning could be put to work at once?
5. What might make for a good pilot or test?

# Pricing Questions – These answers may influence your negotiations!

These questions are designed to help you understand the big picture in your engagements. Where are the customer’s potential issue and here are your potential show stoppers in regards to price?

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| **Value to Customer** | * How important/urgent is your product or service to the customer? * What financial benefits is the customer likely to realize from your solution? * Have we and can we create a compelling financial case for proceeding? * Will the customer achieve a competitive advantage as a result of the engagement? * What is this advantage worth? * How is your price likely to influence the client's perception of the value of your solution? |
| **Budget** | * Is there an identified budget for the project? * If yes, how much is it? * How much has the customer/client spent on similar projects or solutions in the past? * Has the customer ever invested in projects of this size? * How does the size and cost of the project relate to the client's total budget or organizational authority? |
| **Risk** | * What level of risk will the project or solution involve? * What are the potential costs of these risks if a problem arises? (In dollars and reputation) * How much risk is the client willing to assume? |
| **Competition** | * Is there competition for the business? * Has the customer been working with a service provider? * Is the service provider a partner to us or a partner to our competition? * How unique is the solution you offer? * What is competition charging or likely to charge? * How does your relationship with the client compare to that of the competition? * Are there strategic reasons to prevent competitor from winning? |
| **Value to you and your Company** | * What do you and your company gain from winning the business? * What do you and your company stand to lose by losing the business? |
| **Human Resources** | * Do you have the skills and expertise to complete the project yourself within the required time frame? * If not, what is the skill and expertise base you will need to complete the proposed project? * Where will you obtain these resources? For instance, from your account team, business partners, internal PS, subcontractors, or other vendors? * How many people will you need to complete the project on time? |
| **Materials** | * What hardware, software, and other materials will the service require? |
| **Support Services** | * What support services (e.g., administrative, installation, maintenance) are needed? |
| **Schedule** | * What is the project timetable? * How quickly must materials and support services be made available and for how long? * How long will your various human resources be committed to the engagement and for what percent of their time? |

# Questions to Validate Your Solution Concepts

Once you have your Solution Proposal in place you need to be able to validate the concepts that you are using and ensure they align with what your customer is trying to achieve. Below are a number of questions to help validate your concepts with the customer.

## Validate the Concepts

1. If we could do this...how would you feel about it?
2. What problems do you see with this approach?
3. Have we captured the problem?

## Ask for recommendations, e.g.,

1. How can we make it better?
2. What did we overlook?
3. What do we still need to do?
4. Don't want to be heading in the wrong direction
5. Together, how we can best meet the immediate aims and create a foundation for future progress?

# Preparing Your Solution Proposal

This section may seem like it is focused on the consulting aspects of your opportunity. The reason for that is we are approaching our projects as if they are a solution. Part of any solution comes from a greater understanding of the impact on implementation and timelines around their project.

## Validating the Solution

Have you defined who will be the single point of contact (or group) in the client's organization accountable for results and implementation of recommendations?

Have you and the client collaborated on answering questions like:

1. What are the long-range goals of the business to which the project is contributing?(i.e.., reducing costs, increasing turnaround time, new product development, increasing competitive advantage for the client's customers, etc.)
2. What are the project's tangible goals and how will results be measured?
3. Are there any by-product outcomes that would contribute to creating momentum for the proposal and ongoing progress?
4. Is the organization ready, willing and able for this?

Can you "tell the story" of the customers objectives, the issues that challenge your approach, how you will proceed to address the objectives, and what's beneficial about your approach and experience?

Can you describe the roles and contributions of the specific individuals in the consulting team?  
What are the expectations for time and other resource contributions from the client's team?

Have you developed a tentative work plan describing how the project will be carried out, by whom and with a proposed schedule and timetable?

1. How will the project be directed and by whom?
2. How will the various interested parties in the client's organization be involved and kept informed?
3. How often will project reviews by held and by whom?
4. How will changes in direction or scope be handled and who is responsible for raising the issue?
5. How will any changes be accomplished?

# Delivering your Findings

Part of Consultative Selling requires some analysis and then delivering your findings. If we establish ourselves as trusted advisors with the customers we then have the ability to help influence the direction they will proceed with. In order to be effective in delivering our findings we have to be in tune with who our audience is, what the political climate or mood of the organization is, and what the most effective format or the report should be. This section covers those topics and the questions to ask to determine how we would deliver our findings.

## Report Design Questions

### Identify Your Audience

1. Will they understand terms or industry jargon?
2. Is this an executive level group or a technical level group?
3. What are the demographics of the audience?
4. What are their current beliefs about you/your firm and/or consultants?

### Identify a Style and Tone for the Report

1. Should the style be formal or informal?
2. Should the tone be serious or relaxed?
3. Should the voice be first-, second-, or third-person?
4. Should you be writing as an individual, member of a team, or as your company?
5. Should you be writing from the position of an expert or authority?

### Develop a Graphic Treatment

1. What should be the standard page layout or format?
2. What would be the benefits of "landscape" or "portrait" orientation?
3. Will pages be reproduced as overheads or slides?
4. How can you use graphics and illustrations to convey key information?
5. How can you use type sizes and fonts to separate ideas and break up space?
6. How can you use color to focus onkey points?
7. How can you distinguish this report from the competitors'?
8. What tools or resources are available to improve the appearance of the document?

# The Value of Your Presentation

With every presentation we want to ensure that it had value to the customer. Prior to getting in front of any prospect we should ask ourselves a number of questions about what we are going to present. These questions need to come from the perspective of the customer and if for some reason we are not able to answer these questions we should be questioning ourselves in regards to whether or presentation is ready.

## Evaluating and Preparing for the Presentation

1. What was promised to the customer in this meeting and does this presentation address that?
2. What are the benefits or payoffs of the presentation to the customer?
3. What are the key topics that you intend to cover?
4. How much time do you need?
5. Who should attend this presentation (from your company and the customer's)?
6. What style of presentation best fits this audience (formal or informal, interactive or didactic)?
7. What support materials will be needed?
   1. Slides
   2. Reports
   3. Handouts
   4. Other…
8. Describe the role each of your team members will play.
9. What actions can you take to pre-sell your recommended solution?
10. What questions or challenges can you anticipate, and how will you address them?
11. What guidelines or strategies will you use to support other presenters?
12. How do you intend to practice for this presentation?
13. How do you intend to follow up after the presentation to maintain buy-in?
14. How will you measure the success of this presentation?