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Getting to Know Someone

The Art of Asking Good Questions in Interviews and with Client/Prospects

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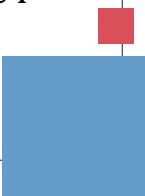
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OK. I'll admit it. I have developed a rather high IQ over the years—but not (unfortunately) in the traditional sense of intelligence but inquisitiveness. Having an elevated Inquisitive Quotient is helpful in both a sales career and social life. It is understandable most people feel comfortable talking about themselves and their experiences, so asking questions generates dialogue and allows you to get to know someone on a deeper level. This conversational talent serves as an essential point within two business spheres: (1) interviewing sales candidates and (2) maturing rapports with clients and prospects.

Interviewing A Sales Applicant

People that hold management positions may not give much thought to the true cost of hiring a salesperson. Some companies hire a recruiting company to conduct the grunt work of personnel searches, reviewing resumes, and phone screening. Then comes management's job of several workers conducting one-on-one interviews with selected applicants and consuming time discussing the merits of each one. There are some companies that slog through the entire selection process. Either way, it's a substantial investment. I have heard estimates from \$50-\$60,000 to make a sales job offer.

For this kind of money, one would expect the employer gains an honest understanding of what makes the candidate tick from top to bottom. Frequently, management makes a critical hiring decision contained within a single face-to-face interview—all in an hour or two. Also, there exists the dependence on the interviewee's veracity. Uh-oh. Dare I call it "bending the truth slightly"? After all, coming across as an extraordinary individual is the main objective.



A business may not uncover severe problem areas until after a new sales rep has been in the field for several months. If coaching doesn't rectify the situation, it's a painful extraction process. Worse yet, management may leave them in the job. It doesn't have the time, nor energy, nor the budget to replace them. The whole process distills down to finding the *right* person through a successful interview.

Superstars

Every organization wants to hire sales superstars. But these choice people are an incredibly rare breed. One needs to fully excavate the individual's psyche and their personality. Background becomes irrelevant. Let me repeat that. Background becomes irrelevant. You can hire someone with no sales experience, but they may have specific personality traits that coalesce well with sales, and they hold the internal drive to immerse themselves to learn the business. I have been fortunate in my career to personally witness this situation numerous times.

Sales superstars typically have a personality trait called *dominance*. This relates to the strength of their ego, a measure of their personal power and desire to control situations. Strong ego is crucial because it means they will have the ambition to close sales opportunities. Someone that exhibits low dominance equates to a more cautious and non-demanding personality.

Superstars have *influence* as part of their personality trait—how they interact in social situations, how well and how much they communicate. People with high influence mention the person's name during the conversation, love networking with others and are naturally empathetic.

A third component pertains to finding someone with patience yet shows persistence and thoughtfulness. I'll use the word *steadiness*. They seek out the likeability about each person they talk to, which helps them make friends within each practice. They maintain drive to learn the business and try to find strategic ways to serve and please the client.

The recipe for a sales superstar contains not simply one high level trait, but rather a formula of different intensities of each attribute. If your candidate's personality profile converges on the above three characteristics, you've got yourself a worthy contender.



The Interview

Getting the person to relax should be a priority. Smiling during the introduction and opening with a general question or two facilitates this intention. After settling down, I give them a piece of paper and request they write down a couple of questions they would like me to ask that shows their best side. This exercise has two positive psychological effects. It not only contributes to the “relax” theme, but it also puts the person in an affirmative state of mind (“Yes! I’ll show *him* how good I am when he asks me ____.”). I explain I will get to their questions toward the end of our interview.

I want the applicant to step back and explain their life from a distance, because it helps gain a holistic view. The following are suggestions:

- If all work paid the same and you could go around again, what would you do?
- What is the gift you have that you currently hold in exile?
- What’s working well in your life?
- Take me back to your high school years (type of student, favorite course, sports, extra-curricular activities, etc.)
- Tell me about your college life.
- Tell me something about yourself that would surprise me.

The answers open a door into the candidate’s current and earlier life and offer broad insights that may amplify subsequent business-related questions. Additionally, by starting a conversation with general topics, you are fostering a certain psychological relationship. People tend to speak freely and provide truthful answers. In turn, this leads to a more candid and factual interview.

Following this segment, I delve into the business side. Here are some suggestions.

- What prompted you to get into sales?
- Previous job accomplishments
- Examples of successful business strategies
- Ego assessment
- Assessment of their empathy (how well they bond with others)
- Territory planning
- Specific questions about previous jobs (likes/dislikes, who was their best boss and why, typical number of customer visits per day, ratio of service to sales calls, their sales ranking vs. other company reps, etc.)
- What motivates you?
- Who is the best salesperson you know?



This last question is significant. The name is not important, but I want to know how this impressive person stood out. The conversation demonstrates honesty and frankness and opens the window to this candidate's potential development areas. Interestingly, one time there was one interviewee that surprised me in a positive way. After asking the question, she paused for a second and then said, "me." After finishing all the interviews, her answer tipped the scale. I hired her. I didn't regret it.

I ask the person to rate themselves from 1 to 10 in these areas:

- Ambition
- Ability to face rejection
- Closing skills
- Establishing rapport
- Time management
- Self-improvement
- Getting around gate keepers
- Patience
- Knowledge of competitors

It's only natural that top producers will highly rate themselves in all areas. But so will those who fantasize about being the very best. It remains important to ask the "why" question and request specific examples.

I then shift to the paper containing the questions the person initially wrote. Following this, I describe the job responsibilities and ask if they have any concerns. I explain it will probably be the most challenging position they would ever hold—filled with industry constraints, medical terminology/conditions, and long sales cycles. I want the individual to appreciate this is not a slam-dunk position, and it's not for everyone. It is OK to admit the job is not a good fit.

At the conclusion, I test the level of their ego by saying, "You seem like a nice person, but I only have one position to fill. I'm sure many other companies would love to hire you. But I need a superstar. We live in a very competitive industry, and I'm not sure your skills and personality will hold up in this assignment." I remain silent and listen carefully to their retort. Some people will crumble and agree. Superstars, however, never collapse to this kind of lack-of-ability statement. They have significant faith in themselves, and nothing can convince them they can't do any job. Their physical and verbal reaction speaks volumes.



Clients and Prospects

Developing relationships with clients and prospects reigns supreme in sales because the standard saying rings true: *people buy you*. There are exceptions of course, but a sales rep—in a first-time call to a prospect—does not typically walk out with a client's commitment to immediately switch vendors. There exist three primary reasons: (1) current supplier satisfaction, (2) unable to speak to the decision-maker, and (3) no representative credibility. However, when interacting with current clients, advancing rapport and credibility helps keep the competition at bay.

Feeling Important

William James, the father of modern psychology once commented, “The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.” Indeed, we all have an invisible tattoo across our forehead that says, “make me feel important.” As a result, it can be effective to bring with you during a sales or service call an educational piece with your business card attached (on occasion, a food goodie always equates to a winner). The material could be a relevant medical abstract, an announcement from the CDC, FDA or USPSTF, information about a test or methodology, or an interesting topic unrelated to healthcare. If you happen to know the outside interests of the person you want to see, it could be an article concerning one of those areas. I have always lived by this aphorism: *sharing creates the relationship and builds rapport*. Over time, you can further your rappsorts simply by transforming your reputation as someone that imparts stimulating, relevant subjects. One does not have to be an authority on the topic—it's the simple, benevolent gesture that counts. You are thinking of *them*. Clients have told me they appreciate my visits because, unlike other sales reps, I always offer interesting subject matter. I want to make people feel important and appreciated. After all, the single most powerful competitive edge equates to *the salesperson*.

Areas to Investigate

When talking to either a prospect or a current client, the following list provides ideas to help you expand your insights into the person's background. In turn, having this knowledge will create a foundation to discuss certain topics on succeeding interactions.

- Special interests/hobbies
- Important people in their life (including names)
- Important places
- Major events (marriage, illness, birthday, a birth, vacations)
- Favorite foods/restaurants
- Schools attended



If you have been in your territory for a while, you know the role of your contacts and their influential status. But do you know what is important to each one outside of work? To facilitate this, you can bridge a conversation by off-handedly touching on a subject you recently experienced (movie, book, vacation spot, restaurant, hobby, recipe, wedding, etc.) and then draw them into the discussion by asking a related question. After you learn this information—on subsequent calls—it gives you license to exploit it, such as “The last time I stopped in you mentioned you and your husband, John, were excited to vacation in Orlando. Did you have a good time?” A word of caution: I suggest not bringing up the theme of politics or religion.

Sending a birthday card can be an effective way to separate yourself from other sales reps. As a sub-point, people may easily e-mail a card. And that’s fine. However, putting a stamp on an envelope and sending a greeting card through the Postal Service makes a stronger impression.

Summary

Abraham Lincoln famously said, “I don’t like that man. I must get to know him better.” Indeed, getting to know people at a deeper level can be particularly helpful when interviewing sales candidates. Once in the field, however, learning your contacts’ outside interests stands as an important job function. But this is not enough. You need to *act* on that knowledge. Providing interesting articles and asking innocuous questions fosters strong relationships. It makes people feel important. Around 2500 years ago, the Greek philosopher, Socrates, held fast to this maxim: “Questions *are* the answer.” After 50 years in the corporate world, paired with an intensifying Inquisitive Quotient, I appreciate how this four-word statement embraces a profuse business ingredient.

Peter Francis is president of Clinical Laboratory Sales Training, LLC, a unique training and development company dedicated to helping laboratories increase their revenues and reputation through prepared, professional and productive representatives. He has published more than 50 articles and presents at national industry conferences. Visit www.clinlabsales.com for more information.

