



Mastering Technical Sales

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Discovery Techniques

The Six Magic Questions

In [The First Law Of Discovery](#) I wrote about my version of the basic law of Discoveryⁱ and how that related to the key business drivers known as The Three Wise Men (and their little Sister) of Increase Revenue, Decrease Costs, Mitigate Risk and Raise Social Profile. When you know what the one important number is, and which of the key business drivers it impacts .. what next?

It is a question of measurement - which in some organizations is very easy, and in others proves to be extremely difficult. Yet like most things in the world of presales, you can create a checklist to get at the finances. It comes down to six simple questionsⁱⁱ.

1. What is the number now?
2. How do you measure it?
3. What would you like it to be?
4. What is the short-term value of the difference? (Say 1 year)
5. What is the longer-term value of the difference (say 3 years)
6. Is the motivation one of gain or one of pain?

Types of Evidence

They may be simple questions but they rarely have simple answers. Some organizations have the numbers readily available - either from the people you are speaking with, or somewhere in finance or operations. That's **hard evidence** - and is absolutely the best kind of evidence. Next in the hierarchy is **presumed evidence** - which is data from reliable third parties (i.e. corporate data will grow by 50x in the next 8 years or the average cost of a self-service ATM transaction is 10% that of a teller at a bank). Presumed evidence is even better when the customer provides it or you find it together. Further in the hierarchy is **soft evidence** (we feel.. we think .. customers tell us..). Often there are metrics you can find with a little work and co-operation from the customer.

Finally, at the lowest of the low is **no evidence**. There needs to be a very strong motivation to spend money based on no evidence.

Pain versus Gain

My favorite question, which I rarely ask the customer, but ask myself based on what I see, is question 6. In my experience, about **75%** of sales happen because an organization is moving away from a pain. The pain is something that has gone wrong, cost them money, or gained them bad publicity. The remaining **25%** are made by organizations moving towards a gain. The gain may be a competitive advantage, opening a new market, preparing in advance for new regulations or adopting a new technology at the innovator stage.

It is an important differentiation because when the inevitable budget crunch comes, pain projects are prioritized over the gain projects. That is because as human beings we are automatically programmed to avoid pain as we consider it a warning mechanism. So *Pain Before Gain*.

The Future

The art of the sale is to convince the customer that you, and only you, are uniquely qualified to solve their business problems (pain or gain) and move them from "now" to the desired state in the future. I am amazed at how often sales and presales teams stop once they understand the present pains and automatically assume that the desired future state is no pain. That is not always true and is why question #3 is so important. It may be a valid assumption - in which case, ask the question and don't guess!ⁱⁱⁱ

The Value

Many sales methodologies focus 100% on the value and overlook the human side of things. Here is an example:

"As a CIO, I was once presented with three projects - and I could fund only one for \$250k. Project #1 resulted in an 8-month payback and ultimately saved the company \$1m. Project #2 had a 3-month payback and gave me a one-time saving of \$400k. Project #3 gave me a 12 month payback, would ultimately save the company \$1m, but also got the VP s of Sales and Marketing off my back. I funded project #3 after adding a column labeled "political risk and capital" to the evaluation. The vendor for project #1 couldn't believe the irrational decision I had made."

Although we always want to prove the value-add of our solution and can make a solid business case with hard numbers, don't overlook the people involved and their personal pains and gains. That

said, you usually need a business value attached to your solution, as the decision maker will have to authorize the funds and prove the value to the CFO, Controller or some other oversight body.

Short-Term vs Long-Term

Getting numbers for the longer-term implications of your solution is always important - even if your project seems an absolute short-term certainty (300% ROI in 6 weeks!). Because this is where the solution is important instead of a product and, as a Sales Engineer, you prove your value. When you can fix the customer's short-term pains (cure their stomachache) and be consistent with their long-term plans (lose weight) you are well on your way to becoming their trusted partner. And trusted partners can then provide the answers to questions #1-5 for the next project - and be trusted!

It all starts with six questions. Five to ask the customer and one that to ask yourself!

"Anyone who thinks there is safety in numbers hasn't looked at the stock market recently." – unknown.

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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ⁱ "Every business problem comes down to a single number. Either that number is too small and needs to be larger, or is too large and needs to be made smaller."

ⁱⁱ I based these questions on "Let's Get Real Or Let's Not Play" by Mahan Khalsa

ⁱⁱⁱ Thanks to Jack Fine @HP for helping me get this straight in my head.