



Mastering Technical Sales
3030 Grand Bay Blvd #333
Longboat Key FL 34228
Phone +1-215-431-1552
John@masteringtechnicalsales.com
www.masteringtechnicalsales.com
John Care, Managing Director

Three Simple Questions

The Three Smartest Questions A Pre-Sales Engineer Can Ever Ask

Every sales-oriented class I have ever attended focuses on questions to ask the customer and how to handle customer questions. Make no mistake; there is a lot to gain by a systematic approach to asking customer questions, and then being quiet and actually listening. However – no-one focuses on the questions that every presales engineer should ask themselves, and their sales team, before preparing for any customer-facing presentation.

If this is the only article of mine you ever read, it will be worth your while because having an answer to these three questions will make a major improvement in all of your customer “pitches”. They are deceptively simple, so just remember W^3 . Anyone who has been through one of our training seminars (or has worked for me) will know these as my favorite questions.

So **W**hat?
Who Cares?
Says **W**ho?

The Basic Premise

Here is how it works. Ask yourself the questions TWICE.

1. First apply the questions at a high level to your entire presentation , THEN
2. Apply the questions to every screen, slide or drawing that you will show the customer. If you are designing a pitch for common use, drill down into every click, button and mouse movement you use.

Let’s look at the three questions in some more detail.

So What?

Why are you showing this artifact (i.e. a screen/slide/drawing/handout) to the customer? What is the purpose? Start with the most basic thought of “*how does this benefit the customer?*” and then move onto “*how does this benefit my company?*”

As a general rule, every artifact and click, bullet point, button pressed need to serve one of these purposes:

E	Engagement - Does it Engage the customer and make them the focus?
X	X - Can you eXceed customer expectations and/or eXpand the sale?
C	Compete – Does it show a business/technical advantage or lay a Competitive trap?
I	Internalize: Does it help Internalize a Feature-Advantage-Benefit for the customer? (“ <i>So in your environment that would mean..</i> ”)
T	Tell: Does it help you Tell your story? This also includes T for Transition, as sometimes you just need to move from one point to the next.
E	Establish – Does it help you Establish your credibility and increase trust?
D	Deliver – Does it help you Deliver on Discovery or other prior customer conversations?

The answer to “*So What*” needs to be as precise and specific as possible. I just watched an SE give a demo where he spent 8 minutes, 18 clicks and 4 menu pull-downs all on the very first screen. Here are his failing answers after the fact.

Q: “So what was the purpose of all that?”

A: “I wanted to show them all those capabilities in our product because we are the only people who can do all that. It was a “Compete”.

Q: “They don’t need any of that functionality based on the discovery call. You didn’t show them anything they said they needed until almost 15 minutes into the demo.”

A: “But John, our stuff is really cool, developers love it.”

Who Cares?

Who, in the customer audience, is going to care about what you show (and why)? If you don’t know Who Cares – why show it? Because you are guessing! The individual answers to all the *who cares* you ask should cover everyone in your audience, with significantly more emphasis on the business and technical problem owners than anyone else. The best answers of all are actual customers’ names rather than positions. I know that many companies have role-based sales booklets and aides which say “*CIO’s care about this and Developers care about that..*”, but names are much, much, better because then you have your audience targeted. Be warned that unless you have a completely homogenous audience (unlikely) an answer of ‘everyone’ is usually wrong!

Says Who?

“The #1 company in the industry”

“By far the widest range of functionality found in the industry”

“A 40% reduction in costs”

Whenever one of these phrases escapes your lips or is present on a PowerPoint slide, ask yourself “Says Who?” If the answer is, *‘my marketing department’* then you may want to rethink making the statement. As a former CIO, all I ever heard when a vendor uttered similar words was a loud buzzing sound! A good answer is an independent third party (like Gartner, Aberdeen, London Times, and Wall Street Journal). An even better answer is *“one of my customers told me that”*. Do not proliferate marketing drivel – repeating propaganda doesn’t work anymore. Your customers are too smart.

So ask yourself the W3 magic questions while you are preparing every customer presentation. The small investment in time is worth a major improvement in clarity. Your pitch will be more focused and have less clutter. Clarity equates to stickiness of message, which leads to an increase in revenue that usually results in an increase in both your personal revenue and your happiness.

“Judge a man by his questions, rather than his answers.”

Voltaire, French Writer & Philosopher

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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