

Closed ended is not a dead end

By Mark E. Gabriel

Have you ever been in this situation? You have spent the past forty-five minutes talking to a great prospect. You have covered all the bases-found needs, determined authority to buy, and discovered that their budget matches your pricing. All you need is to ask for the order...but your prospect wants to keep talking about all kinds of unrelated topics. You can feel your prospect's interest level slipping to the point where you are going to leave with another "I'll think about your proposal and call you." What can you do?

Perhaps you have had this happen: Your prospect cheerfully answers all your questions-at great length. She strays off into topics completely unrelated to your question. It seems that every question you ask is answered by a five-minute monologue that ends up with both of you forgetting what the original question was-you are not even sure if there was an answer. How do you get control of the conversation and keep it on track?

All salespeople are trained to ask open-ended questions. You are told to ask questions that can not be answered by a simple yes or no, in order to keep your prospect talking and sharing their wants and needs. By all means, keep doing this! But when you need to get a specific answer or get back in control of the situation it is time to ask a closed-ended question. Closed-ended questions, by their nature, can only be answered by a yes or no, or a specific reply. Let's look at how and when to use them.

There are situations that call for a yes or no answer. Take the first situation above where you are trying to get back on topic, to asking for the order. Time for a closed-ended question! Without being rude, when the prospect appears to pause, simply say "That is very interesting...now, would you agree that my service would be good for your business?" You re-direct the conversation, gently, back to what you want to talk about-your sale! By asking the closed-ended question you stop the ongoing conversation long enough to change tracks. Of course, with some prospects you might have to do this more than one time. Be patient, never rude, and always acknowledge that you have been listening (that's why you say something like "that's interesting") because you do not want to give the impression that you are bored by their talking. By asking a question that requires a yes, no or specific reply you do not give your prospect the option to carry on-they can only give their answer. You get back in control by asking a closed-ended question.

The same applies when prospects give run-on answers that leave you exhausted and confused. Some people just talk that way. Do not fight it-you will only irritate them. Simply ask questions that do not lend themselves to elaboration. Closed-ended questions to the rescue! By asking questions crafted to elicit short answers, you can get the information you want without unrelated details. For instance, if you ask "How many times a day do you have to re-boot your computer?" the answer might simply be "At least fifteen times." On the other hand, if you ask "Do you often have to re-boot your computer?" you might get an answer that requires the skills of a court reporter to record. Again, be patient-some people cannot give just a plain yes or no for an answer! Closed-ended questions help to get straightforward answers. Just keep asking them.

The next time you feel that your sales presentation is out of control, don't fret. When your questions are answered by long, rambling monologues that leave you dazed and confused, don't worry. Ask closed-ended questions to get the information you need and regain control.

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