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ACCELERATE SALES:

## Power Questioning

A salesperson's most important skill is superior questioning. Make sure your salespeople are asking the right questions to make value-added recommendations that build customer loyalty.

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**A salesperson's most important skill is superior questioning. The right questions build the knowledge that lets a salesperson make a unique, value-added recommendation to the customer—one that creates the memory that generates future loyalty to the salesperson and to the store.**

### **Appraising the Situation**

Salespeople are lucky if they can ask two or three questions before the client loses patience and expects a recommendation. Avoid question that might elicit a “No” or “No thank you” response, which make it more difficult to build rapport and appear insightful.

Here are things to look for in determining how skilled your salespeople are in asking questions:

- Do they ask questions at all before presenting merchandise? Too often I see salespeople simply begin to show merchandise, as though they can somehow divine the customer's dreams.
- Do their questions elicit short, monosyllabic answers or expanded dialogues? Getting a customer to open up and talk is key to learning about him or her.
- What's the ratio of high-risk “No's” or No thank yous” to positive responses?
- How often do you hear question about information not germane to making an initial recommendation?
- Do the questions you hear sound as though they are being asked for the benefit of the customer or the sales associate?

### **Best Practices**

Here are some recommendations to strengthen your questioning technique:

**Think buckets of information, not drops.** Ask open –ended questions designed to elicit information-filled responses, not questions that can be answered in one or two words. Asking, “What is it you have in mind?” or “What brought you in today?” is likely to elicit more information that a question like “Are you looking for a gift?”

**Know exactly what information you need to make a strong recommendation.** Typically, this involves two factors: the category of merchandise and key category attributes (e.g. design, price, fabrication, style). Both have a finite number of answers, do don't waste questions that ask for unneeded information. Think of it this way: If a customer's preferences can be defined by five key elements, for each one you don't know, you reduce your chances of making the best recommendation by 20 percent. Asking, “is this a gift?” doesn't help identify any elements.

**Use summary statements or requests to gain additional information.** Often, a simple statement like, “Tell me more” or “So, you say you’re looking for a very something you could wear day into evening” will be enough to generate elaboration.

**Make sure customers understand that your questions are for their benefit.** Preface questions with a statement like, “To use your time will, let me ask what you have in mind” or “Since we have a wide selection, let me ask you...” Such introductory statements are particularly important when asking sensitive questions, such as those about price.

**Close the loop.** To make your recommendation persuasive, link it back to the customer’s dreams and desires, which your questioning revealed. Point out the benefits of your recommendation’s elements in terms of the customer’s request. For example, you might say, “Since you mentioned that you want a double breasted suit, in an earth tone color and you’d like the weight of the fabric to be appropriate for four seasons, I’m recommending...” But be careful—research shows features and facts that don’t interest them distract customers.

Remember, sales involves helping people find things they would not have found or purchased on their own. Help them by asking questions before making a recommendation. Think of sales questions as pieces of gold. Spend them wisely to gain information of real value. Never waste them to buy unimportant information and avoid those risky negative responses that can undermine rapport.

#### **About Shanker Inc.**

*Martin Shanker is the founder and president of Shanker Inc., a Manhattan-based international management consulting firm for such companies as Burberry, Cartier, The Estee Lauder Companies, Ralph Lauren and Van Cleef & Arpels. Described as a 'behaviorist' by The New York Times, Martin specializes in helping global brands accelerate sales and profit by growing their companies from within. By addressing the tough issues of sales and management teams, and the behavioral dimension of retail relationships, Shanker Inc. offers a unique, multi-dimensional way for companies to achieve success through their own people.*

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