

## **WHY YOU SHOULD NEVER ASK “WHY?”**

Jennifer has just spent two hours attempting to pitch a boatload of products to a vice president of sales. She has shown every piece of marketing literature she carries. She has answered every question the man asked. It is showdown time.

*VP of Sales:* Well, I just don't think we are prepared to make a decision today.

(The man flashes a courtesy smile and shakes his head)

*Jennifer:* (referring to an earlier benefit) Why wouldn't you be interested in giving away some really unique items that will keep your company top-of-mind to your prospects?

The smile freezes on the VP's face, and his eyes narrow with Clint Eastwood-like intensity. Jennifer realizes that she won't be celebrating a big sale over a steak dinner tonight.

What just happened?

Jennifer has made a Tyrannosaurus-sized mistake. She is angry inside. This conversation has been a lot of work. Her stomach acid is burning so badly, it's a wonder this prospect isn't hearing it sizzlin' through the walls of her gut. After all, hasn't she just invested two hours in educating this man about her products?

But she forces a smile and responds, according to her training, with a “why” question. Jennifer just put the final nail in her commission coffin by choosing one wrong word. When she threw the word *why* into that sentence, she questioned the decision-making ability of that decision-maker. *Why* implies that he is stupid.

Think about it. She just gave him thirty-seven great reasons to buy and he said no.

The question she really asked him was; “Are you an idiot? After hearing all of that evidence, could you tell me *why* wouldn’t you be interested?”

*Why* rarely works because, after using it and getting stonewalled, Jennifer will most likely backpedal and defend the greatness of her product, getting argumentative and, in the end, begging for the business. All because she chose to toss out *why* in a question.

Would you like to learn the reasons you and I and all the Jennifers of the world do this all the time? Because you can bet your granddaddy’s farm that tens of thousands of salespeople throw that word *why* at prospects every day.

This little 22-caliber word is a silenced bullet to the head of the person hearing it. Here’s how that occurs:

Take a time-out for some time travel. You’re sixteen years old and have just announced to your parents that you’re going to try cliff diving with some friends. You’ve explained that it’s Spring Break and some buddies and you are hitchhiking to Acapulco. And don’t worry, Pops, because although it’s 136 feet above the water, the water is 9 ½ feet deep.

Dad looks at you and says, “*Why* in the world would you do that? Did I raise an idiot? *Why* would anyone do something that insane? That’s unbelievably dumb, what a stupid decision. *Why? Why? Why?*”

Do you recall having a parent or other adult talk to you like that? In psychology we have a word for that old tape running in our heads. It’s called baggage. Do you think it’s a smart move to throw the prospect’s unconscious mind back to that time when he or she was verbally beaten up for a choice they made?

Back to the present: Does it now make sense that this simple word can be an

extremely risky selection? To use language like that, to question the intelligence of a potential buyer, is simply foolish. You are implying that your solution is so good, so obvious, that only a fool would pass it up. And I grew up in sales being taught to use the word *Why*?

Okay, Dan, you're thinking - thanks for identifying that pothole in my path to sales success. But what do I do instead of asking *why*?

Here's your strategy for removing *why* from your selling vocabulary:

Because the word *why* creates an environment that is argumentative, you'll switch, from now on, to using the word HOW.

First, realize that a *why* question is close-ended, you're getting a brief response (probably an objection or stall). Ask the same question with HOW and you end up offering an open-ended question that will draw some incredibly useful information from the prospect.

This, your now thinking, makes tons of sense. How come my parents never taught me this? We'll it's probably because they've always enjoyed yelling at you and if you'll visit them more often... uh, let's get back to learning.

Let's put our new word to work on this buyer's stall tactic:

*VP of Sales:* Well, I just don't think we are prepared to make a decision today. (The man flashes a stiff smile and shakes his head.)

*Jennifer:* "Oh, *how* did you determine that we're not right, at this time, for you?"

Using *how* discards the "in your face" indictment of the prospect. Using *how* is going to turn the question into a request for the *process* that a buyer has gone through to reach

his or her decision. Understanding this concept is worth the weight of this magazine in gold.

Pay very close attention to the psychology of how this works. You want to draw out of the buyer a process or path the buyer traveled to get to a decision. *How* will help you unpack the buyer's brain and discover how that individual makes up his or her mind.

This is all about processes. And there are always two processes at work in a sale: An external process is the company's way of dealing with the review and potential purchase of products or services; an internal process is the individual decision-maker's way of determining that he or she will buy.

### **External Process**

If you've sold large accounts, you might already recognize the frustration of a lengthy process. Here's an example of the steps a large company might use to screen product or service acquisitions. Like a video game, you must be successful in each step to advance to a higher level.

1. Secretary screens caller on the phone
2. If secretary hears value, literature is requested
3. Literature is reviewed by manager
4. Literature is shared with a team
5. Sales rep is invited in to present
6. Team peppers rep with questions
7. Written proposal is requested
8. Manager and team review proposal

9. Team member assigned to beating up rep calls to do so

10. Rep lowers price

It never really ends, does it?

During this time frame, the rep has married, borne children, and sent them off to university. When the sales finally closes, school loans can be paid off.

### **Internal Process**

We don't all sell to large organizations, but it's good to know that a system like the one described above is in place in every buyer's brain. When responding to a *how* question, here's how a buyer might describe his or her internal process:

“I looked at your literature and was impressed, so I called you in to meet. Next, I ran my impressions of our conversation by some key people. They would normally recommend whether to try out your service. They weren't very enthusiastic. I then discussed it with my boss. She said, “Don't spend any money until we absolutely have to.”

The list would read like this:

1. I read your literature
2. I discussed my impressions
3. I then discussed it with my boss

A pattern is emerging. This pattern reveals the path a buyer takes to come to a conclusion in his or her decision-making process. This buyer's initial step in analyzing information is visually oriented. The next step is to engage in verbal interaction. Noticing these two steps will give you some powerful insights into your prospect's personal

decision-making model. The prospect has just revealed his or her individual blueprint for buying. This can help you sell the buyer more effectively.

What do we do with this information? We want to match that buyer's patterns when we work with him or her (**for additional insights into this, see my September 2006 Advantages Column – TITLE, PAGE???)** For example, this buyer would be very comfortable with a salesperson who said something like, "If I showed you how you could save forty percent of your prospecting time and, after conferring with your colleagues, it sounded like something worth discussing with your boss, would it make sense to have me at that meeting?" In the three point list above, this person first processes information visually (reads), then auditorially (talks to others).

When we travel a parallel decision-making path, we are walking alongside the buyer. This is extremely powerful because we are partnering with that person, not trying to convince him that our way is right or smart or best.

Caution: Most prospects will hear you asking *why*, even when you use the term *how*. They will give the quick answer and not describe the process you want to hear. You'll have to gently ask the question again, perhaps worded differently, but emphasizing *how*. You might need to tell the prospect that you are asking *how*, that is, asking what process he or she engages in to decide whether to take on a new product or service. *When you are doing this, point to your head!* The unspoken message to the buyer is that you're wondering how his mind works.

If you can determine the process a buyer uses to make purchasing decisions, you're light years ahead of your competition.

## **Take This Wisdom and Walk Away With It**

Replace the word *why* with *how*. Do it today, and do it in your vocabulary at work and home. Isn't it a big personal bonus to understand how your family and friends make decisions? Pay close attention to the words you use and the words you feed to others. Your elevated communication skills will make you more money at work and draw you closer to people you care about.