BY MARY DONATO

The structured conversation

How to make your business indispensable to any client

In my previous column [March/April 2008], I highlighted three proven steps to winning more business and getting your clients to open up: moving off the solution, asking effective questions and driving for hard evidence to the problem. Now let's talk about getting out all the issues by structuring the conversation.

Every sales consultant knows you need to ask a few questions before you can start talking about your product or offering. How many times have you asked, "What business problems keep you up at night?" You try to get some information—any information—before you fully launch into your sales pitch and all the great things your company can do for the client. But how often do you really get into rich business conversations where you get down to the problems or issues that are truly keeping your client up at night? At times, you may feel lucky when the client goes into full details of what is really bothering them. You listen intently for 20 minutes but find it very hard to capture all of the information. Still, you feel you have enough that you can justify telling the client how you can help them, so you go into a full launch of what great things your company can do.

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An alternative approach is to structure the conversation, engaging your client in honest client-centered dialogue where you can get to the heart of their problems or results they're seeking. The ability to help clients open up and reveal their most important issues is a critical characteristic that differentiates a trusted business advisor from the average salesperson. Those who practice and do it well make it a natural part of their conversation with a client.

To structure a conversation and mutually explore issues with a client, you will want to follow the next five steps:

1. Get a quick list of all the issues. This will require good listening skills. Capture the key words or phrases that describe a problem (pain) or result (gain). When you ask for the problem, results or issues, the client may give you a long description. Part of the art form is getting this down into a few key words or phrases that the client agrees represents their thinking. Use the client's words when capturing the information rather than your own company's lingo. Most importantly, don't start diving into depth on any of the issues at this point.

2. Make sure the list is complete. It's not uncommon for a client to list two issues immediately, and then our tendency as consultants is to jump right in with the solution. Employ the discipline to ask, "What else?"

3. Find out what matters most. Once you have the complete list, ask which item has the most leverage or impact for the organization if it gets resolved. Many times you'll find the most important issue wasn't even the first one mentioned. Also, 20% of the issues usually drive 80% of the evidence and impact that you'll gather.

4. Go into depth (gather evidence, impact, context, constraints). Take the prioritized list of issues and begin going into further depth, starting with the most important. Gather evidence of how they know it's an issue, what impact it's having on the organization, who else is feeling the impact of these issues and how solving the issue fits into the big picture of the company. Ask clarifying questions as needed.

5. Summarize what you just heard from the client succinctly. You then might ask, "If you could make major progress against these goals, and nothing else, would you have a solution that exactly met your needs?"

Structuring the conversation can be an effective trust-building tool. The ability to get out all the issues and address them in priority can add immediate value to both you and the client—and differentiate you as a trusted business advisor.

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