

PEOPLE, NOT POSITIONS

“Positions ponder, people purchase.”

- TONY MAYO

I hesitate sharing the details of my first breakthrough in selling because I once thought I was the only salesperson with this problem and, to put it bluntly, the reason for the problem makes me look like a jerk. What follows may be of no use to you because you're probably one of the people who learned this in kindergarten or before.

Years ago, my business was going south fast for lack of customers. One of my suppliers offered to become my sales coach to get me through the slump. She was a very effective salesperson, so I eagerly agreed. She had me demonstrate my pitch (I was still doing pitches in those days, but that's another story.). She then tried repeatedly to alter my approach. I kept missing the point and she kept trying to make it simpler and more basic, searching for our lowest common denominator. Finally, she said, brightly, “Tony, do you like people?”

I knew the right answer, but it is foolish to lie to your coach, so I replied, “No, Phyllis, mostly I don't.”

She was astonished into a rare silence. She appraised me cautiously, as if confronting a strange and dangerous beast. “Tony,” she asked, “why do you expect people to buy from you?”

I thought this was a hugely ignorant question. I replied, “My service will save their company a huge amount of trouble, legal risk, and money. It makes perfect sense for them to use it.”

Phyllis was a very forgiving and extraordinarily polite woman, but she obviously thought this was a hugely ignorant response. “Oh, Tony! People can't see what's right for the company until they know you're right for them. Job titles don't buy products. People do business with people.”

I certainly saw her point. But what was I to do about it?

What I do is practice listening, which may sound passive. The “doing” part is to ask

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questions, particularly questions which build on what the person has just said. Three “All Purpose” questions are:

- “That’s interesting. Could you say a bit more about that?”
- “What would you say is the biggest impact of that?”
- “Please give me an example of how that affects you personally.”

While asking such questions I imagine myself moving closer to the real issues, closer to the bone. The first things I hear are usually fairly general statements almost any prospect could make, for example, “We’re under a lot of pressure to do more with less.” I call this B.S., for Business Speak. I drill through the B.S. with questions to get specific details about the impact of the situation on their organization’s plans and problems. I hear things like “Our head count is down by 10% but our quota is up 15%!” Plenty of sales are made on this type of knowledge, but I get even better results by going another step. I ask something like, “What will happen to you if your group doesn’t bring in that extra 15%?” Then I hear things like, “I’ll be out of a job.” or “My bonus won’t cover my tax bill.” That’s a motivated prospect!

A funny thing happened after I learned to listen. I started to mostly like people.

This is an old one. I tell it because it relates so well to today’s point.

A door-to-door salesman approaches a house and notices a small boy sitting on the porch near the front door. “Hi, Sonny. Wonderful weather! Are you having a great day?”

The little boy replies, “Ah-huh.”

The salesman goes on, “Are your folks at home today?”

The little boy replies, “Ah-huh.”

“Okay if I just step by and ring the bell?”

The little boy replies, “Ah-huh.”

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The salesman rings, takes the recommended two steps backward and waits, smiling. No response. The salesman rings again, takes the recommended two steps backward, and waits, not smiling. No response. “Your folks are home, right?”

The little boy replies, “Ah-huh.”

The salesman rings and knocks -- then, irritated, taps on the glass. No response. The boy starts to walk up the road. The salesman calls out, “Hey, where’re you going?”

The little boy replies, “Home.”