

Staple Questions

STAPLE QUESTIONS ARE QUESTIONS THAT you will ask every customer, based on his role and situation. They can be closed or open-ended. Again, we've already shared some:

"Where's a number where I can reach you, should we get disconnected?"

"How did you hear about us?"

The first staple question you ask everyone who calls your dealership or shop. The second staple question you ask only new customers. In this case, that staple question is determined by the customer's situation – is he new?

You should go into an appointment armed with your staple questions ahead of time. You may not ask all of them because they may not all prove relevant or timely as the conversation unfolds. You want to be ready with them, though.

Again, think back to my movie-catalog selling days at West Coast Video. I was ready with my staple questions and asked every customer each of them:

"Would you like to get these movies for free today?"

"Would you like to know now what movies are coming out over the next two months?"

"Would you like \$49 worth of additional free rentals?"

I highly recommend that you choose and review staple questions from time to time at your regular team meetings. Which ones are working? Which ones aren't? Which ones have you or your team members stumbled upon between meetings, and found to be successful?

Here are some samples of staple questions you might add to your

repertoire:

To a purchasing manager: “Do you have incentives to spend under budget?”

To a fleet manager: “What percentage of your fleet is down at any given time?”

To senior staff and owners: “How do your customers determine who gets their business?”

If you’re not sure what staple questions to ask, top-three questions make great standbys:

“What are your top three goals?”

“What are your top three challenges?”

No matter what staple questions make up your repertoire, here’s one you should add early in every conversation with a prospect: “Is there anyone else involved in the decision-making process?” Don’t ask if he is the decision-maker; you could inadvertently insult him. Instead, be sure to ask if there are others involved in that process. If he answers, “Yes,” follow up with questions regarding who they are and at what point should they be included in the process. Involve all decision-makers as soon as possible!

A good way to wrap up your staple questions is to ask, “Is there anything else you think I should know that we haven’t discussed?”

Why Staple Questions?

The purpose of staple questions isn’t to ask a bunch of cookie-cutter questions; it’s to determine which questions are important to ask. Staple questions drive the conversation.

Go back to our staple question to senior staff and owners, introduced in the last section: “How do your customers determine who gets their business?” We’ll say you’re talking to an owner whose biggest customer is FedEx. (Shipping companies such as FedEx and UPS often outsource routes in certain areas to third party fleets.)

You ask the owner, “How do your customers determine who gets their business?”

“FedEx has a point system. Better routes cost more points.”

You don’t move on to other staple questions; rather, you ask follow-up questions.

“How do you get points?”

“By being on schedule.” (This is actually how FedEx awards points.)

“What do better routes mean for you?”

“Driver retention. My drivers can get home to their families earlier.”

See how the staple question – “How do your customers determine who gets their business” – determines which question to ask next? And the answer to that question determines what to ask next, and so on? What are you doing? You are simply listening and responding.

It is imperative you ask questions one at a time. When you bundle questions, you’ll typically only get the last one, or the one your prospect prefers, answered. “What are your top three goals, top three obstacles, and what are you doing about them?” is likely to see only “What are you doing about them?” answered, disrupting the flow of the conversation, your ability to maintain control, and making it harder for you to navigate to the next best question. Additionally, when you bundle questions, you appear less engaged and possibly even rushed.

Frequently, you’ll find you are able to predict the answers to staple questions. When I trained sales teams in the chiropractic industry, I also trained chiropractors. As a result, we added two staple questions to their repertoire for conversations with prospects at an initial, complimentary adjustment in their office:

“If you were coming here for treatment, what are the three things you’d like to get out of it?”

“What are your top three obstacles to getting treatment?”

Nearly 100% of the time the first two answers to the second question were “Cost and time.”

Anticipating these answers enabled the chiropractors to help prospects find better health by already knowing how to frame their follow-up questions, as we’ll see in the “Negotiation” chapter.

Answer Questions with Questions

Sometimes when we are probing, we are asked a question. Our inclination is to simply answer it; we have been taught that to do so is customer service. This, just like the customer always being right, is a fallacy.

There is always a question behind a question – *that* is the question we must answer. We can't do that without identifying it. To find out what is essentially being asked, we must answer the original question with a question.

How do we do it? We soften our response by acknowledging the question, then ask our question in reply.

Take this common question we frequently get about a part: "How much is that?"

Usually, we just give an answer. "\$145.20"

"Okay, thanks."

What just happened? Is \$145.20 good? Maybe. Is it bad? Maybe. We simply don't know. And the customer will now probably call competitors, shopping for the lowest price. Is he even inquiring about the right part? Again, the best we can answer is "Maybe."

Now let's properly answer the question.

"How much is that?"

"Sure, I can help you with that. Let me ask you, is price why you are now looking elsewhere for this part?"

"Yes."

Now we've learned a few things, enabling us to better serve. We've learned price is particularly important to this customer. We've also learned the real question (the question behind the question). The real question is "Can you sell me this for less than what I'm currently paying?" This is the question we want to answer.

Of course, we want to find out what he is currently paying, although we may choose not to approach it directly. A good follow-up question to "Yes" would be, "How often are you changing the part?"

We may learn the part is being changed too frequently, enabling us to ask a few more questions to identify the proper solution – maybe an enhanced version of the part is needed, or an entirely different part. Maybe the vehicle needs to be brought in for a diagnostic.

Never answer a question with anything but a question.

There is No Such Thing as Upselling

UPSELLING IS AN UGLY WORD. It's an ugly word because it makes the mentioning of an item sound optional; like it's an add-on instead of a necessary part of the sale. If a doctor prescribes heart pills after heart surgery, is she upselling? If a waiter brings crackers to a customer to go with her soup even though she didn't ask for them, is he upselling?

There is no such thing as upselling: There is customer service and there is not customer service.

When a customer buys a clutch, is it upselling to suggest he buy a clutch kit, too? If he balks at the idea, is it best to remind him that he would be wise to change all clutch-related components along with the new clutch, as opposed to potentially having one of these other components fail a few hundred miles down the road, resulting in his truck being down again for essentially the same repair?

If someone buys a radiator, isn't it best to remind him to consider adding coolant, hoses, a thermostat and clamps to his order?

If these suggestions are best for the customer, they qualify as customer service, not upselling.

When we don't provide customer service by failing to suggest related parts or service in a sale, we are making two major mistakes. First, we are assuming the customer has knowledge he may not have, such as our service department has availability to install the part, or what related parts should also be purchased along with the one he is buying.

Customers don't pay us for vehicles, parts or service. They pay us for expertise. If we simply give customers the parts or service they

request without alerting them to related challenges they may face (known as being “order takers”), we aren’t providing value. When we don’t provide value, we fail to give customers a reason to be loyal, let alone refer business to us.

Second, we are assuming the customer is entirely focused on the issue at hand. This is rarely the case. He is typically thinking about all the other things he must do while speaking with us. We owe it to our customers to keep them focused; that is part of the expertise we provide. How many times have you made a purchase of paint, for example, only to realize when you got home that you didn’t have any drop cloths? Wouldn’t it have been nice if the clerk at the hardware store had asked if you had the right brushes, rollers . . . and drop cloths? Would you be likely to return to such a store, as well as refer friends to it? Our customers aren’t any different, so why treat them differently?

We’ve already seen the dangers of assuming, in my first sales appointment, when my office supply manager failed to see sales potential in the office manager we visited. Never assume!

Eliminate “upselling” from your culture, particularly if you are a manager. Instead, focus on religiously providing customer service. Doing so will not only lead to far more sales (you’ll never miss the chance to “upsell” again) and satisfied customers, it will also keep you from having to continually reprimand staff who refuse to guide customers to purchase related parts or services, claiming, “I’m not in sales!”