

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

How to Qualify Clients

Qualification. What a terrible term to describe a perfectly wonderful process. In this installment, the customer whisperer considers how to use calm, assertive leadership to help prospects discover their true needs and desires, establish relationships and guide them to the right products quickly.

To the best of my knowledge, the term “qualification” was coined in the auto trade. Cigar-chomping closers, who didn’t want to waste their time on prospects who couldn’t afford to buy, possibly picked up the term from lenders who determined if a person was or wasn’t qualified for credit.

Eventually, mainstream sales training made qualification the first or second rung of the selling ladder. It certainly makes sense to find out who you’re talking to, but unfortunately, poorly trained or less-enlightened associates default to dis-qualifying prospects.

What needs to happen between greeting potential clients and presenting our products is establishing a rapport with them. Synonyms bring rapport into perspective. Affinity, connection, understanding and bonding all lead toward empathy, which is the key to establishing relationships. And a relationship breaks down the barrier between the customer whisperer and his new client. Properly nourished, this relationship can last a lifetime,

for the benefit of all. But, can we establish a relationship in just five minutes?

GET PERMISSION

In short, of course. The customer whisperer knows getting on the right path, right away, is crucial if he’s going to help prospects become customers. His calm, assertive leadership will make the process more pleasant and effi-

cient for everyone.

Progressing elegantly from greeting to qualification can be accomplished with a simple question — a question that will put the customer whisperer firmly in control of the dialogue and a question that will set the tone for everything to follow: “Do you mind if I ask a few questions?”

This simple, honest inquiry is the customer whisperer’s magic potion. Getting permission to ask questions is very important. If we launch into an interrogation, we risk destroying the goodwill we established during

+ CUSTOMER WHISPERER:

A calm/assertive sales associate who gently turns prospects into customers.

the greeting. Our already apprehensive client might sense aggression. Getting permission establishes that the customer whisperer will be asking the questions, and the client will be answering the questions for the remainder of their time together. The balance of power shifts, and the calm, assertive leadership is reinforced.

SIT THEM DOWN

Most clients are agreeable, so the next thing out of the customer whisperer’s mouth must be, “Good, let’s sit down and chat for a moment.” He turns on his heels and proceeds to his “comfort center” (not his desk), where he has chairs, a notepad, diversion for the kids and a few sales aids. Because of his confident demeanor, most clients dutifully follow.

Occasionally, a stubborn prospect will resist and insist on racing to the products. This is a moment of truth for the customer whisperer. To surrender control and yield to



Getting permission to ask a few simple questions is the key to qualifying prospects

the prospect's leadership will be fatal. Confrontation is risky but better than surrender, so the customer whisperer might confidently look the prospect in the eye and say, "Our selection is huge and the total universe of products available to us is vast, so if I can take just a moment to ask a few questions, I'll be able to quickly guide you to the most appropriate choices and save you time." Saving time is irresistible to these Type As, and they usually acquiesce.

If your store lacks a comfort center, sitting on a few piano benches or guitar amps is better than nothing. My dad once said, "No one ever bought anything big while standing."

Sitting clients down is important for several reasons. First, it slows down the process. Customers want to race to the products because, after all, that's what they came to see. Most salespeople want to race to the product because that's where they are comfortable, talking about features and technology rather than establishing a rapport. Sitting down also relaxes clients and focuses their attention on the conversation.

Often, prospects have a disconnect between their conscious demands and their subconscious desires. He may say he doesn't need a very good guitar because he doesn't play well. But in his dream, he's on stage trading licks on his custom Strat with Eric Clapton. Mom may say she needs a cheap, used piano because she doesn't know if little Suzie is serious about playing. But deep down, she has visions of a Steinway baby grand in the parlor.

By asking the right questions at the right times, the customer whisperer knows he

can help his prospective clients reveal their hidden dreams and desires. In doing so, they reveal their true motivations not just to us but to themselves. Self-realization is a much more powerful force than anything we could say. Self-realization isn't going to occur while standing over a product, listening to a salesperson yammer on about the latest technology or some obscure feature. An old-timer once told me, "If we say it, it's just wind. But if they say it, it's the gospel truth."

THE FIVE QUESTIONS

Having received permission to ask questions, the question becomes: What questions do we ask?

I don't remember much from high school, but I do remember a unit on journalism. Every news story had to tell the reader *who, what, when, where* and, hopefully, *why*. The customer whisperer isn't going to just ask five questions; he's going to explore four facets of his clients' needs and motivations, and along the way, he's going to discover the answer to the fifth.

Each exploration is a journey unto itself. A useful way to illustrate the process is to think about a river system. If you sailed up the Mississippi River from the Gulf of Mexico to its headwaters at Itasca, Minn., you would traverse progressively smaller and smaller tributaries until you were wading in a little creek at the bottom of a marsh. Similarly, the customer whisperer will follow each area of inquiry until he reaches its natural end.

THE FIVE QUESTIONS IN ACTION

Our first and most obvious question is, "Who is the instrument for?" But the

answer might not be as simple as we suspect — at least we're not going to settle for a simple answer.

The following is an example of a real conversation with a real customer.

Customer Whisperer: Who is going to be playing the piano?

Prospective Client: My daughter will be playing it.

CW: How old is she?

PC: 8 years old.

CW: Is it her idea to play the piano?

PC: Well, my wife thinks it would be good for her.

CW: Does your wife play the piano?

PC: She played when she was

PC: She wants to do anything her older sister does.

CW: Do you play piano?

PC: No, I play guitar, but I might fool around with it.

CW: So, the whole family might enjoy the piano?

PC: I guess so.

In this 35-second exchange, our prospect revealed the real motivator for the purchase is his wife. There's a history of music on both sides of the family, there's another potential student and the piano will be for the whole family. And he didn't only reveal it to us, the words came from *his* lips and went in *his* ears. If we had just accepted the needs of an 8

+ 7 STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL QUALIFICATION

1. Get permission to ask questions. Don't proceed until you get it.
2. Don't surrender control of the dialogue. Keep asking questions.
3. Sit down. (Have a comfort center.)
4. Start with "who." Never ask "why"?
5. Actively listen to the answers.
6. Let the next question flow naturally from the previous answer.
7. Follow up until you have the whole story.

a kid and through college.

CW: Where is her piano now?

PC: At my in-laws' home.

CW: When you visit, does she play the piano there?

PC: I can't get her away from that piano, and the girls are all over it.

CW: So you have another daughter. Are there any boys?

PC: No, just her little sister.

CW: How old is she?

PC: 3 years old.

CW: And she wants to play, too?

year old, we could be talking about a \$49-per-month rental. Now, a \$25,000 player grand is a possibility.

We've also opened a window to talk about the benefits of music education and to offer help finding a music teacher. From the prospect's perspective, we are talking about his family, kids and interests. Already, a relationship is evolving.

As we proceed to discuss

where the instrument will go in his home, *what* quality level he wants (how much he wants to spend) and *when* they want to get started, we will follow the same pattern: actively listening and letting each question come from the previous answer until we are ready to move on. Our sincere interest in his family and his needs will become apparent. How do you feel about people who want to talk about your family and your interests?

When asked about *what* quality level they want, many prospects tell us they don't know. If we give a brief description of our products, in a good, better, best format, finishing with the question, "Which would you prefer?" most prospects will gravitate

toward the center and respond, "better." A few will demand the very best.

This discussion naturally leads to *how much*, with the customer having brought up the subject. Again, presenting good, better, best options lets your prospects up-qualify themselves. The client asking, "How much do they cost?" is vastly preferable to a salesman asking, "How much do you want to spend?" Very few people will actually say they want the cheapest thing out there if they've been asked what quality level they want first.

The fifth, most important question, *why*, will never have to be asked because within five minutes it will be apparent and obvious. The customer whisperer can use the

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understanding of his new best friends' fundamental motivations to present products and services that will appear logi-

cal and irresistible to them.

Most closing problems have their roots in qualification. By taking a few minutes early on to get to know this future client, we establish rapport and move toward being viewed as trustworthy. Prospective customers are likely to accept the recommendation of someone they view as knowledgeable and trustworthy.

In the next installment, the customer whisperer will look at using presentation to establish yourself as a knowledgeable resource. In the meantime, take a few moments to chat with your prospects before showing them any products. You'll be amazed. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Bonita Springs, Fla.

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