



Asking the Right Questions

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Explore Questioning techniques
- ✓ Discuss ways of delivering bad news and saying no.

Asking the Right Questions

Open Questions vs. Closed Questions

The CCA's ability to ask the right question at the right time is as important as being a good listener. Often, your time will seem to be rushed, so it is important to have some questions ready that will help you through the call to serve your customers and clients.

Closed questions can be answered by either yes or no, or with a specific piece of data, such as your name, date of birth, occupation, etc. These questions restrict our responses and give us little opportunity to develop our thoughts. As a result, they require little effort and can even close down a conversation.

This type of question tends to get over-used, partially because they require very little effort on the questioner's part. They are easy to phrase and we get quick answers. Unfortunately, such questions also can lead us to make assumptions that can be barriers to good communication.

Open questions, on the other hand, encourage people to talk. These questions are phrased so they cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Open questions often begin with a variation of the **five W's** (who, what, when, where, why), or can ask "**how**."

Questions are used to:

- Get information
- Focus conversations
- Solicit opinions
- Gain consensus

Closed questions begin the closing process. The unintentional use of a closed question can often be overcome by following it with a simple open question. For example:

- Q: "Do you feel that was the right thing to do?"
- A: "Yes, I do."
- Q: "Can you help me understand why you feel that way?"

Probing Techniques

When we do not get enough information by using open-ended questions, we can use probes to expand the conversation.

Verbal and Nonverbal Probes

A probe will encourage your customer to add to their previous response. Verbal probes are often a single word or short phrase. Some examples are:

- "Tell me more about that."

- “That’s interesting. Tell me more.”
- “Really?”
- “Why?”
- “Can you give me a specific example of what you mean?”

Nonverbal probes rely on your body language and gestures to get the same results as a verbal probe. Some examples are:

- Raising the eyebrows as if you are surprised
- Nodding
- Frowning
- Pursing the lips

Probing Techniques

There are many ways that you can use probing in your conversations. We’ve provided some techniques for you below.

1. Ask an **open question**, such as:
 - “Can you describe that more clearly?”
 - “Would you give me a specific example of what you mean?”
 - “What do you think we should do?”

You’ll soon recognize that if you ask too many of these questions, your customer will feel like they are under interrogation, so use them carefully.

2. **Pause.** Many of us feel uncomfortable when silence overtakes a conversation, and we will fill the silence by expanding on what was said previously.
3. **Use reflective or mirroring questions.** For example, if the customer says “I just don’t feel that I am getting good value from this product,” you may respond by just reflecting back to them, “Value?” Then pause. Usually, the other person will provide you with an expanded answer without you asking more questions or interrogating. These kinds of statements also serve to focus or clarify and summarize without interrupting the flow of the conversation. They demonstrate your intent to understand the speaker’s thoughts and feelings.
4. **Paraphrase** what has just been said in your own words. “So if I understand you correctly, you…” Using this technique shows that you want to understand your customer and that you want to be accurate. It also allows the sender to hear back what they have said from someone else’s point of view.
5. **Summary questions** are a helpful way of probing and winding up the conversation at the same time. Here is an example: “You have tried returning the product at the store, you have called our representatives twice, and now you are trying for a third time before filing a complaint. Is that accurate?”

Test Your Knowledge

Think of an example at work, home, or school in the past two weeks where a probing question would have been helpful. Write that question below.

Saying No

When We Say “No”

It is not possible to give everyone everything that they ask for. Sometimes the kindest thing we can do is say no. In the past, customer service rules stated that “no” was never said, but things have changed. We now focus on relationships with our clients, and serving the people who call us and those we call. Part of serving includes honesty and integrity, which means that we cannot always say yes.

Although it is probably easier to work with your clients when you say yes, there are ways to deliver the word “no” that can maintain and build relationships even when you are unable to deliver.

Partners can be creative and work together to solve problems. Before you say no, consider different ideas and work with your partners to see if there is a workable alternative.

Make it a positive experience. Put the no between two positive statements. This reinforces your relationship. Examples include:

- “I am really glad that you brought this up.”
- “If there is something that you think of that allows us to work together again...”
- “I really appreciate your feedback.”

Working on things that you say no to can be a good way for a company to make **positive change**. Let’s say you have a client that asks for something and you say, “I think that is a great idea, but unfortunately, we do not have the equipment in place at this time.” If you mention that idea to your supervisor and the change is implemented at a later time, you may have a very happy client when you can call him/her to let them know about it.

Delivering Bad News

Test Your Knowledge

The item that the customer is ordering, and needs urgently, has been recalled.

You have to say no to the customer's request for a special bonus.

The supplier has not delivered to you on time and, as a result, you cannot meet your delivery commitments on time.
