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## Whose Stories Really Matter in Prospecting?

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Talk to high-performing sales staff, and you'll learn that one secret to their success is getting prospective buyers to do the majority of the talking by asking them thoughtful questions structured around pain points and problems. To demonstrate their company can solve these issues, conventional sales training wisdom suggests sales professionals tell success stories.

### Why This Approach is Flawed

Three issues arise with this thinking.

First, even great questions may only provide sales staff with narrow slices of information. They often don't get at the complexity of the issues, the context in which they reside, and what opportunities exist within the prospect's company for your firm's solutions. They also miss intangibles—the buyer's values, mindset, and philosophy. Often, sales professionals need to ask so many questions to obtain this information that it's not an efficient use of anyone's time. Topping this off, prospects typically provide a politically correct answer—a filtered response—which means important material is left out.

Second, questions themselves don't establish rapport. Sometimes they can create barriers, such as defensiveness to being "sold" something before a trusting relationship has been established.

Third, why should a prospect listen to success stories when they haven't been asked to share theirs? If sales professionals tell their stories first, does this mean theirs are more important?

So where does this leave us? The true power of stories is not in transmitting your company's stories to prospects; it's in evoking and listening to stories from them to rapidly build rapport and better identify and respond to their needs. These behaviors solidify the foundation for a relationship that will hopefully provide future sales over several years and reduce the cycle time for a sale to occur.

### Evoking Stories through Story Prompts

Consider this example. Imagine you're a consultant that's been asked to provide customer service training to a mid-size call center. Here are some questions you might ask upfront:

- What are your biggest frustrations with your customer service reps?
- What satisfaction ratings have your reps received from current customers?
- How would you define success?

What if you replaced these information-gathering questions with the following "future story" prompt? "Tell me about a customer service day that you would label 'almost perfect.'" If you

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prospect responds with, "A perfect customer service day we've experienced or one we'd like to have?," we suggest you encourage them to tell both stories. Chances are you'll get answers to your three questions without asking them. Plus, you'll learn about the organization's culture—its operating values, philosophies and practices—and pertinent policy, process and systems barriers. These additional insights typically aren't topics you'll get a straightforward answer to if you ask about them directly.

To create story prompts, use the words, "Tell me about ..." or "tell me a story about ...". The latter format is useful with highly technical or well-educated staff who have been conditioned to respond in bullet points. Finish the statement with phrases that get prospects to narrow their focus. "Tell me about your company" is not as effective as "tell me about your company's biggest milestone this past year."

#### **How to Listen to a Story**

We've all been taught multiple ways to listen—from informational to critical, empathic, active, and appreciative and everything in between. However, these aren't sufficient when listening to someone's story.

We suggest Doug's Lipman's "listening delightedly" approach. Listening delightedly is like standing under a waterfall and allowing the story to wash over you. Behaviorally, you'd show interest, make eye contact, lean forward and provide signals that you're tracking with the teller (e.g., nodding your head, saying "uh-huh"). Do not comment in any way or take notes.

When story "tellers" are listened to like this, their stories are far richer since their train of thought isn't interrupted. Plus, they respond afterwards that they feel really good about the experience and transfer these positive feelings to you, thus heightening rapport.

After listening in this manner, we encourage sales professionals to thank the person who shared the story and then tell them what they liked about the story or paraphrase what they heard. Allow the teller to spontaneously add information they neglected to disclose or elaborate on a point because of your comments. Only after these steps do you want to probe into the teller's story for further information.

You do not want to jump into telling a story that was triggered by what you heard. Doing so transfers attention back to you rather than keeping it on the prospect. And you can get into one-upmanship on who has the better or worse story scenario.

#### **Putting It to Work**

In your next sales training, have attendees practice turning traditional sales questions into story prompts. Let them tell a story based on a prompt and practice listening delightedly. Afterwards garner their feedback. While these techniques appear simple, they are not in practice. If you're wondering when it's the right time to share stories about your firm and its successes, stay tuned for Part 2: When Do I Get to Tell Stories as a Sales Professional?



©2010 Lori L. Silverman and Karen Dietz. Silverman is a strategist, keynote speaker and author of



*Stories Trainers Tell and Wake Me Up When the Data Is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results.* She can be reached at [www.partnersforprogress.com](http://www.partnersforprogress.com).

*Dietz specializes in turning leaders into compelling storytellers. Her company, Polaris Associates, provides story work consulting, tools, and coaching.*

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