

Fact Finding vs. Gap Finding: Finding Not Just Facts, but Gaps

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"I know strong benefit statements are important. Customers buy benefits. Sometimes mine don't seem to have the intended impact."

Benefit statements are the heart of our customer solutions. They should be carefully planned and frequently used during our sales presentations. How do we know for sure that our words will have the desired impact? How will we be able to move the customer closer to a positive decision or at least, a significant next step?

High impact selling statements are born early in the selling cycle. Disciplined use of the Exploratory Process helps both the sales professional AND the customer understand the customer's need(s)...Gap(s).

The Exploratory Process is a strategy. Important, well considered questions are critical to helping the sales professional uncover needs. Customer responses to our questions may reveal the desired outcome the customer seeks. The customer's desired outcome is what matters above all else.

Skillful use of a sound, diagnostic questioning process will help customers develop a deeper level of awareness of not only what they seek but most importantly, why they seek it.

Consider a sales professional who works for a major software manufacturer. His or her job is to sell as much software as possible. One productive way of doing this, of course, is to sell to both the commercial and consumer markets on a regular basis. Key to this is identifying prospects that can benefit from the software.

What should the sales professional calling on a large company (in person or via the telephone; Zoom, etc) determine early in the selling cycle? Existing equipment, numbers of computers in an organization, current software in use, and number of locations are high on the list. All are important. These are facts, not Gaps. If a customer says, "We need new, more dynamic software," that is a fact – an important one to be sure, but it is not a Gap. Sales professionals who use the Exploratory Process to uncover only facts will be frustrated in their attempts to make selling statements that will influence the customer. Benefit statements will lack impact, and the sales professional will be forced to be overly dependent on the "bells and whistles" or as we know them - features and advantages - of their state-of-the-art software to influence the decision-maker's decision—a strategy that often leads to a focus on pricing.

Of far greater strategic value to the sales professional is the Gap in the form of desired outcomes—what the customer is ultimately trying to accomplish—the bigger picture of which his or her needs are a part. In a professional, consultative way we need to ask, "You said you want new, dynamic software; why do you want new, dynamic software? What are you hoping it will do?" The customer's responses may include such answers as "to reduce customer complaints;" or "to reduce the expenses associated with pursuing poorly targeted customers;" or "to



increase productivity.” Notice the words, “Increase” and “decrease.” If our solution will help a customer “increase” (productivity; profits; margins; customer satisfaction; market dominance) or decrease (expenses; customer complaints; down time, legal exposure) something, then we are in all likelihood addressing “outcomes.”

Each decision-maker or influencer has a different set of concerns and needs, both as individuals and for their portion of the organization. For example, a CFO will likely be concerned with ROI, versus the Director of Marketing, who may be primarily concerned with advertising impact.

As an example, take a CFO of a company who distributes hardware to industrial accounts. He or she has told you that it is important for the management team to have timely information. Why might timely information be important to the CFO.

Ask yourself:

What kind of information?

Answer: Sales, financial, strategic, comparative data, productivity figures, etc.

Why is that information important?

Answer: It helps managers make better decisions.

If for some reason the information is delayed, what could and does happen?

Answer: Poor or weak decisions are made.

What is the impact?

Answer: It costs the company money. Therefore, it reduces profits and productivity. The real issue and important outcome is that timely information can have a significant impact on the organization's bottom line. This will affect the future of the organization, not to mention the

income of the CFO. **This is what is important to the CFO.**

Too frequently we become so wrapped up in our products that we forget that our customers' or prospects' interests lie in their own business. Their interest in us and our products are incidental to how our solutions will benefit **their important outcomes.**

Facts are important. They help us understand areas of concern to customers. Having discovered “desired outcomes” important to our customer, we can construct a high-impact solution that addresses those desired outcomes.

Sales professionals miss untold opportunities because they fail to encourage their customers to think out loud. Knowledge of our customer's wishes and hopes and why those are important to our customers will add many windows of opportunity for the alert sales professional to exploit for the mutual gain of both parties.

Concentrating our exploratory efforts on facts makes us a “me too” in the marketplace. If a sales professional can link the facts with Gaps with outcomes that a customer seeks then he or she will have what is needed to make motivating benefit statements.

When a sales professional links some aspect of their solution to increased profits or other important outcomes, that statement takes on new importance. It becomes a selling statement. It grabs attention and demonstrates how the solution will close the Gap(s).

The Exploratory Process is one of the most powerful tools to help the sales professional sell. It must be used to help the salesperson, and often times the customer, discover the customer's desired outcomes. Sales professionals who understand the customer's desired outcomes and who use this knowledge during presentations are positioning themselves to dramatically improve their sales productivity.