

The Positional Selling System: The Exploratory Process

Carew International



- If you'll just give me five minutes of your time, I think I can give you an understanding of my product's selling points.
- Please read these brochures describing our services, and I will return next week to discuss them with you.
- Have I got a solution for you!

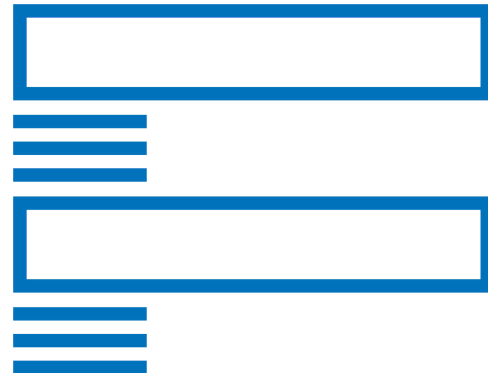
These statements represent “foot-in-the-door” approaches to selling. They also represent a very unprofessional sales technique that is destined to have a low success rate. This type of approach is unproductive because before presenting a service or product to the customer, it is critical that the salesperson:

- Identify critical concerns as they relate to the customer's needs.
- Determine whether those needs are being met and to what extent.
- Seek an opportunity to be a resource and respond to those needs.

These are the purposes of the Exploratory Process phase of the Positional Selling System.

The Exploratory Process is the diagnostic phase of the customer/salesperson relationship. It is a unique and authentic approach to initiating a relationship with the customer. **In the Exploratory Process, the salesperson establishes trust, credibility, and rapport with the customer and creates a climate of acceptance, openness, and willingness to communicate.**

The Exploratory Process is the key strategy used early in the customer relationship and puts the sales professional in a consultative role. It helps the salesperson develop an accurate perception of



the critical elements in the customer's decision-making process and prevent guesswork. Specifically, the Exploratory Process is a focusing tool designed to identify a problem—the GAP that exists between the ideal and the actual situation, or the GAP that exists between what could be and what is. **The GAP represents the customer's area of concern or need.**

The Exploratory Process involves five key data-gathering questions designed to focus on the customer's need: the GAP. These five questions are—the **Overview Question, the Focusing Question, the Realization Question, the Transition Question, and the Dimensional Question.** These five questions can be used in the course of one sales call, or they can be used sequentially over the course of several calls, depending upon the openness and trust that exists between the customer and the salesperson. Through these five questions, the salesperson identifies a GAP and seeks the opportunity to respond to it.

Overview Question

The Exploratory Process begins with the salesperson making positive contact with the customer in a friendly and professional manner.

This is accomplished through a warm greeting and conversation initiated around a subject in the customer's Operating Reality. Once a positive climate and personal rapport are established, the salesperson begins the Exploratory Process with the Overview Question. The Overview Question asks the customer to talk in a general, open-ended way about his or her organization and the role of the salesperson's product or service within that organization.

For example: "In general, what role do creative concepts play in your organization?" "To what extent is your organization involved in productivity-improvement programs?" The Overview Question solicits broad responses that give the salesperson a general overview of the relationship between the customer's needs and the salesperson's product or service.

When the customer has responded to the Overview Question, the salesperson expresses appreciation for the customer's input and acknowledges the customer's reply by summarizing the data and feeding it back to the customer for verification. For example: "In other words, data systems play an important role in improved cash flow, and your organization is quite sensitive to cash flow now that we are in a fluctuating economy. I can understand this need being essential in the current economic climate."

Focusing Question

Following the discussion of the Overview Question, the Focusing Question explores the customer's stated needs more specifically. The customer is asked to list special concerns and provide in-depth information. For example: "What specifically are your critical concerns when you consider a creative concepts program?" "What factors must be present in a productivity-improvement program to be adopted by this company?"

In responding to the Focusing Question, the customer specifies what needs are most important and adds detail. If the customer's response is brief, such as: "I am looking for dependability, quality, and price," it may be necessary to ask the

customer to expand the salesperson's understanding by providing more detail. For example: "Certainly dependability is an important concern. Specifically, to what extent is dependability important?" or "For some people service means an attentive salesperson that can be counted on to free the customer of checking inventory and submitting orders. For others, service means sensitivity to the customer's system and responding to particular customer ordering and receiving procedures. What, specifically, are some of your service requirements?"

The Focusing Question is used to establish what results the customer would consider to be ideal or would provide a 100% level of satisfaction. The customer is asked in the Focusing Question to list those specific critical concerns he or she deems necessary to experience optimum performance.

Once the customer has finished responding to the Focusing Question, and the salesperson has listened and reflected an understanding of the situation, the next step is to establish the possibility of a GAP. On many occasions, the customer will give strong indications that his or her needs are not being realized even while answering the overview and Focusing Questions. However, if the existence of a performance GAP has not already been indicated in the customer's response to the overview and Focusing Questions, the next step is the Realization Question.

Realization Question

The object of the Realization Question is to demonstrate the existence of a GAP between the optimal or ideal performance level established in response to the Focusing Question and the current or actual performance level. Examples of Realization Questions include: "Are the critical concerns you outlined being totally realized, or is there a GAP between desired results and actual results?" "Are the factors you outlined currently present and yielding optimum performance?"

The Realization Question is an attempt on the salesperson's part to identify a problem or a GAP between what could be and what is and determine in what areas the customer is achieving less than 100% satisfaction with the results. An alternative approach to defining the GAP is to ask for the opportunity to study the customer's existing program. This allows the salesperson to identify a GAP independent of the customer and then present the findings in a helpful way. In this case, the salesperson asks for the opportunity to audit the customer's system or experience the customer's operation in such a way that the salesperson — upon developing a first-hand understanding of the operation — can point out a GAP. For example: "Having had a chance to develop a keen understanding of how your current system works, I've identified a performance GAP between ideal results and actual results."

Once a GAP has been determined, either as a result of spontaneous information volunteered in response to the overview or Focusing Questions or as a result of the customer's response to the Realization Question, the salesperson proceeds to the next step in the Exploratory Process — the Transition Question.

Transition Question

The Transition Question is introduced after the customer has acknowledged a GAP between what should be and what is. Establishing a GAP raises the customer's consciousness of a dissonance between what is desired and what is current reality. The resulting sense of dissatisfaction, incompleteness, and lack of closure resembles a vacuum awaiting the salesperson's Transition Question. **The Transition Question is a request for the opportunity to present a program that will narrow, close, or fill the GAP.**

Some examples of Transition Questions include, "There is a performance GAP existing between the results you desire and the results you are currently realizing. May I have the opportunity to work on a solution that will close the GAP?" "Would you give me the opportunity to introduce an idea that will close the GAP?" "May I have the opportunity to present a program, unique to our company,

that will substantially narrow the GAP between what could be happening and what is happening?"

The Transition Question holds out to the customer the promise of a better tomorrow and implies that the salesperson is fully prepared to offer a plan, program, product, or service that will speak to the customer's needs. **The Transition Question prepares the customer to look forward to and be receptive to the salesperson's solutions.**

Dimensional Question

Occasionally the customer will respond to the Realization Question by saying, "Yes, my needs are being realized 100%. I am 100% satisfied." In this case, the salesperson acknowledges the customer's achievement in developing good resources and suggests the possibility of improving upon current results with an added dimension. **The Dimensional Question is an attempt to explore possibilities for enhancing an already satisfactory situation.** It facilitates the customer's thinking a dimension beyond 100% and keeps the door open to further discussion and development of the account. For example: "If due to something unique to our program, we could add a dimension to the level of results you are currently experiencing, would you be willing to consider us as a potential resource?" The Dimensional Question involves perhaps the most creative and challenging aspect of the Exploratory Process.

Summary

To begin a meeting with a new customer by presenting one's program, product, or service is premature. Both the customer and the salesperson must spend some time preparing for such a presentation. The relationship must first be initiated, the customer's needs (the GAP) must be understood, and the customer's awareness of these needs must be heightened. Once these steps have been taken, the salesperson can extend the promise of satisfaction with his or her program, product, or service and ask the customer for the opportunity to present this program, product, or service.

The Exploratory Process of the Positional Selling System offers step-by-step guidelines for preparing the customer for a future capabilities presentation through the use of five key questions—the

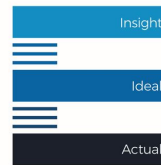
Overview Question, which stimulates a free-flowing customer response; the Focusing Question, which solicits specific customer needs and expectations; the Realization Question, which measures results to date and establishes the performance GAP; the Transition Question, which asks for the opportunity to present a solution and close the GAP; and the Dimensional Question, which offers the possibility of building a dimension beyond the 100% desired results. These questions represent a sound, logical, sequential approach toward initiating the customer-salesperson relationship.

The Exploratory Process creates a realization that something is out of harmony or incomplete in terms of desired results. It sensitizes the customer to the difference between what should be and what is, causing a degree of frustration and stress as it relates to the customer's situation. With the realization of a performance GAP, the customer becomes more receptive to the salesperson's solution.

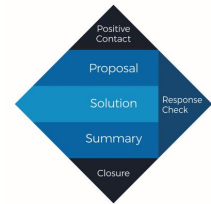
In addition to being a successful tool for opening new accounts, the Exploratory Process represents a powerful reentry vehicle for rebuilding broken relationships and a means of reactivating accounts the salesperson failed to open in the past. The Exploratory Process adds structure to the customer/salesperson relationship and helps the salesperson acquire a keen understanding of the customer's needs. It puts the sales professional in a helping and consultative role and creates the opportunity for passage into the Presentation Process.

Positional Selling System

Exploratory Process



Presentation Process



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GAP: Desired Outcome – Improvement

↑ Increase
↓ Decrease
% Percentage
\$ Dollars

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Exploratory Process	Presentation Process
Overview Question(s)	
Ideal Question(s)	
Actual Question(s)	
Insight Question(s)	
Transition Question(s)	

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Exploratory Process

- All questions may not be used
- You may need to only use one or two questions
- It might take more than one call to determine a Gap
- For a Gap to exist, the customer must "realize" a need
- Similar needs / Gaps experienced differently by different customers

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