

## **The Power of Questions**

One of the major distinctions between mediocre persuaders and highly successful persuaders is the amount of talking they do and the number of questions they ask. We have found that great persuaders ask 2.7 more questions of their audience than average persuaders do. Think about that statistic. An average persuader will ask six questions; a great persuader will ask sixteen. And surprising as it may sound, the highly successful persuaders actually do *less* talking than their not-so-successful colleagues. Why is this? Top persuaders ask lots of questions and then let their audience do the talking. The person asking the questions has control; the person doing all the talking does not. You can control and guide the discussion through questions. As soon as your audience starts grilling you, the tables have turned. You've then lost control.

Consider the following three question-and-answer scenarios and you'll see clearly that the individual asking the questions has control, while, perhaps surprisingly, the one doing all the talking does not have control: (1) An employer interviewing for a job opening; (2) a doctor in the process of diagnosing a patient; and (3) an attorney questioning a witness. Note that in each of these examples, the individual asking the questions is in some sort of authoritative or advisory role. It is not so different when someone comes to you looking for a particular product or service to fit his or her needs. When you are the "interviewer," you glean all the information you need to best guide your audience while still maintaining control over the course the conversation takes. Most importantly, you lead to the final, sought-after conclusion, where your audience jumps on board. And they'll love you for it because they will have done all the talking. Therefore, they will have basically persuaded themselves. You were simply a great listener, sounding board, and concerned advocate!

Another reason the use of questions is effective is because it helps subdue the natural tendency many persuaders have to talk too much. I discussed in Chapter 2 how talking too much is one of the biggest persuasive blunders ever. Nothing kills your persuasive ability more than your inability to stop yakking. Your audience came to get a good deal or solve a problem; they didn't come to hear your discourse on the entire

product line. They may listen politely, but as you monopolize the conversation, spouting off about all kinds of sparkles and pizzazz that have nothing to do with their needs and wants, their minds are wandering to where they're headed next. Then, all hope of successful persuasion is lost before you've even asked for it. Information overload just overwhelms your audience.

A final reason questions are so useful in the persuasion process is that they engage your audience. Great persuaders stimulate thinking and get us involved. Anytime we hear a question, we instinctively start seeking an answer. It's an automatic response. Even if we don't actually voice the answer, we think about it in our minds. As you apply this principle in your persuasive encounters, always engage your audience with "easy" questions first. Let general questions precede specific ones. You want your audience to feel comfortable and relaxed, and people are encouraged by answers that they know are right, that don't put them on the spot, and that don't arouse anxiety.

When someone comes looking for advice or input, to buy something, or to make a change in their life, it is all in an effort to improve or enhance their existing situation. The core issue is an emotional need. The actual product itself is just a means to an end; it is not in and of itself the solution. The emotional satisfaction that the product provides, however, is. This is why asking questions is so critical. It is foolish to make a judgment call about your audience's intentions before you've had a chance to ask them questions and to uncover their hot buttons (i.e., what's really driving them). The potential buyer might want your product, but why does he or she want it? That information is really what you need to know to persuade.

Great persuaders know that when someone is evaluating their product or service, they are looking for every reason why they should not purchase. It's a natural defense mechanism. But once they mentally and emotionally commit to the idea that it's the right decision, they start looking for every reason why they *should* go through with it. When we've invested a lot of time and energy into making a commitment, we want to feel validated in our decision. How does this apply to you as a persuader? Once you've helped

your audience see the imbalance between their current state and their desired state, and once they feel motivated to act, you must be swift to get them committed. They'll search for positive reinforcement to feel secure in the new balance they feel. If you don't maintain that momentum, their enthusiasm and energy will wane, doubts about their decision will creep in, and they'll drift back to their comfortable state.

Great persuaders use open-ended questions. These questions allow your audience to express their feelings and concerns. Your audience wants to feel that you have their best interests at heart. Open-ended questions also reveal more information. Questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no don't give you much to go on. Remember, you're gathering information so you know best how to suggest the alternative that meets the needs and wants of both parties. You need as much information as possible in order to present a win-win situation. Here are some good examples of open-ended questions great persuaders use to help involve their audience:

- When did you start . . . ?
- Where did you find . . . ?
- What do you think about . . . ?
- Have you ever thought about . . . ?
- How do you feel about . . . ?