

The Art of Questioning

Of all the tools in your persuasion toolbox, questioning is probably the one most often used by Master Persuaders. Questions gain immediate involvement. Questions are used in the persuasion process to create mental involvement, to guide the conversation, to set the pace of conversation, to clarify statements and objections, to determine beliefs, attitudes, and values, to force you to slow down, to find out what your prospect needs, and to show your sincerity. Questioning is a very diverse and useful tool. Neil Rackham and John Carlisle observed hundreds of negotiators in action in an attempt to discover what it takes to be a top negotiator. Their key finding was that skilled negotiators ask more than two times as many questions as average negotiators. Larry Wilson also found that four year olds ask 300 questions a day while the average college graduate asks only 20.

Much like movement, questions elicit an automatic response from our brains. We are taught to answer a question when it is posed to us. We automatically think of a response when asked a question. Even if we don't verbalize the answer, we think about it in our head. Most people want to be cooperative. We don't want to be considered rude if we don't answer the questions. In this way, a question stimulates our thinking response.

Let's look a little bit at how to form good questions. First, design your questions ahead of time. The structure of your questions will dictate how your listener will answer them. When asked to estimate a person's height, people will answer differently depending on whether the question asked is "How tall is he?" versus "How short is he?" In one study, when asking how tall versus how short a basketball player was, researchers received dramatically different results. The "how tall" question received the guess of 79 inches while the "how short" question received the guess of 69 inches. Words have a definite effect on how people respond. "How fast was the car going?" suggests a high speed." At what speed was the car traveling?" suggests a moderate speed. "How far was the intersection?" suggests the intersection was far away.

If you are probing for lots of information, it is best to keep your questions unstructured. The more unstructured the question, the more information you are likely to get. In a conversation in which you are asking many unstructured questions, the other person is likely to be doing most of the talking. Along this vein, it is a good idea to ask open-ended questions. It is too easy to respond to a question that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." For example, instead of saying, "Do you wish you had decided differently?" ask, "How did you feel after you made that decision?" Then the person's answer can be used as a device to lead into your more detailed questions, without your seeming intrusive: "Why did you make that decision?" "What do you wish you could change about your decision?"

A good rule of thumb is to start with the easiest questions first. You want to draw your audience into the conversation and help them feel relaxed and comfortable. People are encouraged by answers they know are right. Begin the conversation by starting with a general topic instead of a specific subject. You need to get the wheels in your listeners' minds rolling before you ask them to answer the specific questions.

One facet of questioning is the use of leading questions. Leading questions are questions that give a semi-interpretation to your audience. The best trial lawyers are experts at using leading questions to cross-examine and influence witnesses. Elizabeth Loftus researched how leading questions influenced eyewitness testimonies. In one project, her subjects watched a one-minute multiple car accident. One group was asked, "About how fast were the cars going when they smashed into each other?" The second group was asked, "How fast were the cars going when they hit?" The third group was asked, "How fast were they going when they contacted?" The first group estimated that the cars were going about 40.8 miles an hour. The second group estimated 34.0 miles an hour. And the third group estimated 31.8 miles an hour. The same question led to three different answers just by using alternative phrasing. Leading questions not only alter the way we interpret facts, but they also influence what we remember. In another study conducted by

Loftus, study subjects who were asked, "Did you see the broken headlight?" were two or three times more likely to answer yes than subjects who were asked, "Did you see a broken headlight?"

Questioning can also measure the level of receptivity in your prospects. How receptive your audience is correlates with how many questions or statements arise. So what if there are no questions? What do you do? If there are no questions, it could be because the audience needs time to think about what you have just said, they could be afraid to ask because of what others might think, or they just might not be able to think of a good question to ask. Maybe you went on too long or stepped on a sensitive issue. Perhaps the audience has already made up their minds, or maybe they don't speak English. The best questions draw a person into a conversation and out of being unreceptive. So, it is to your advantage to direct questions at your prospects that will reel them in: What do you think about...? Have you ever thought about...? How do you feel about...? When did you start...? Where did you find...?