



SkillSharpener Web Extra

Are you asking the right questions in the right way?

Not every customer understands or is immediately clear about what he or she needs, so it is up to the customer service rep to uncover that need. That's why effective questioning is such an important part of the rep's work.

"One of the best aids to good listening is to ask good questions," says Nancy Friedman of Telephone Doctor Customer Service Training. "When we ask the right way — and ask the right questions — we can normally get the best answers. Effective questioning not only shows your interest in the customer, but it helps you obtain necessary details about what the customer needs."

Choose the right type of question

There are five basic question types that apply to customer service situations, says Friedman. These are:

- **Open-ended questions.** "Open-ended questions aim at getting you more information and opening up the conversation," Friedman says. "They are generally the type of questions that begin with Who, What, Where, Why, When, and How." Their role is to get the customer to keep talking rather than provide a one-word answer.

- **Closed-ended questions.** Closed-ended questions, on the other hand, will elicit a one-word or another short answer — a yes or no, a date, a name, a serial number, or other specific bit of information. "Usually, when you ask a question starting with a 'd' — Did you see your doctor? Did you fill out

form 10A? — you will get a yes or no," Friedman says. "You should ask closed-ended questions when you need to get brief, specific information or to confirm facts."

- **Probing questions.** Even with an open-ended question, reps may not get all the information they need, so they may need to probe deeper. "Probing questions dig a little bit deeper to identify customer needs," Friedman says. "And it may involve two or more successive questions." For instance: "You said you had a poor experience with the desk clerk at the hotel. Can you tell me more about that? What

Encourage customers to ask questions

While it is certainly important for reps to ask questions to make sure they understand and can meet customers' needs, it is also important to give customers the opportunity to ask questions — at the very least to make sure that they — and you — haven't forgotten something, says Nancy Friedman of *Telephone Doctor Customer Service Training*.

"Getting at customers' questions is very important, especially before you close out a conversation," Friedman says, "and asking a question like, 'Is there anything else I can do for you?' is probably not going to be very helpful. That's a very passive way to ask the question."

Instead, she says, be a little more proactive. Ask something like, "What did I miss?" or "What did I not cover that you might still have questions about?"

Having a checklist of common customer questions can also help: "Do you have any additional questions about billing? Or about returns? Or about the claims process?" Again, the goal is to make sure that you have taken care of all of the customer's needs.





specifically did he or she do or say that upset you?" In general, probing questions are follow-up questions to obtain more detail from the customer.

- **Echo questions.** An echo question basically repeats what the customer just said, but turns it into a question. It's sort of a probing question using the customer's own language. For instance:

Customer: You sent me the wrong product.

Rep: The wrong product?

Customer: Yes, I ordered the red dress, and you sent me a black one.

According to Friedman, "Some people call it parroting, and others call it mirroring, but it's a good way to get a little more information from the customer."

- **Leading questions.** "Leading questions are also called 'tie-downs,'" Friedman says. "And they are used when you are looking to get agreement from the customer." For instance: "So you will get that form back to me by tomorrow, so we can process your return?" They are used to invite agreement and to help the customer say, "yes." And in that sense, they might be used more frequently when reps are involved in upselling or cross-selling. For instance: "So, can I add that matching shirt to your order, Mr. Smith?"

Watch your tone

While asking questions is often useful, it's also important to ask questions in the right way, says Friedman. It's easy for customers to become annoyed if they think they are being asked questions that they have answered already (as on an IVR), they are being asked too many questions, or they are being asked questions that they think are personal or inappropriate.

"Your tone of voice — and the way you ask the questions — can go a long way toward eliminating the chance of annoyance," Friedman says. "For instance, you could say, 'I know you just punched your ID number in via our phone system, but for security reasons, I have to ask you to give me that number again.' In other words, give the customer a reason for having to ask again."

And if you have to ask a question or two that might be deemed personal or inappropriate, it is also helpful to explain your reasons for the question, and how it will help you resolve the customer's issue. "Follow the question with, 'Let me tell you why I need this information.' An explanation will always be helpful."

If you have to ask several questions in a row, Friedman says, "try not to make it sound like an interrogation. Slow down, and break things up a little with some casual conversation or chit-chat." ■

