

QuickTips

The concept of Open & Closed Questions has been a foundation of the craft of selling for some time, and can be as valuable today as it has always been.

Definitions:

An **Open** Question is one that invites a long and descriptive answer. For example: “can you tell me more about this project?”

A **Closed** Question is one that invites back either a “yes”, a “no” or some other specific answer. For example: “how many users do you have on the system today?”, are you satisfied with the current arrangements?”

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.
The Elephant's Child
Rudyard Kipling

When to use

Open Questions are generally used towards the start of a conversation as they encourage free expression, build rapport and can give you a sense of what is important to the speaker. They are also very useful during conversations to break up what might otherwise be an interrogation, and to get the customer more involved.

Closed questions will clearly be used when seeing commitment, when qualifying and also when you need to gain specific information. Closed questions are also a great way of changing the shape of a conversation and steering towards particular areas. For example if your customer is giving a long explanation of something and going into irrelevant areas, a short but very polite closed question such as “what did you say the timescale is?” or “how many of your users are super-users?” can serve to get back on track.

Closed questions can also be used to spark interest very early in a conversation

Applying the concept of Open and Closed questions to our Sales Call Model, you will find:

<i>Preliminaries</i>	Often Open Questions; Closed questions used to gain credibility
<i>Information Gathering</i>	Mostly Open Questions
<i>Clues</i>	Mostly Closed Questions gaining specific pieces of information
<i>Volunteered Issues</i>	Very Open
<i>Uncovered issues</i>	Mostly closed, as you seek to gain acceptance for a particular customer pain
<i>Extended Issues</i>	Closed questions can give back up to quantify the issue, for example “how much is that costing you?”, while Open Questions allow the customer to ‘wallow in the pain’ with for example “how does that effect the rest of the team?”
<i>Confirmed Explicit Wants</i>	You will be using mostly highly leading Open Questions, together with specific Closed Questions.
<i>Advocacy</i>	You are mostly making statements in this stage, perhaps backed up by Closed Questions that seek confirmation of interest and relevance.
<i>Confirmed Action Outcome</i>	As you seek to close the conversation you will mostly use confirming Closed Questions

Open and Closed Questions can be useful, although care needs to be taken as they are often well understood by customers, who will not always respond in the way that you desire.

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