

Networking on a Beermat

by  Mike Southon

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Many people are intimidated by selling, but everyone should be an evangelist for their company. Everyone should be able to enthuse about their company in a social situation and pick up any buying signals.

So what are the personal characteristics of the successful salesperson? Some are obvious: optimism, determination, thick skin, good listening skills, product knowledge, credibility, honesty and so on.

Of course a good salesperson has to have an engaging personality and the ability to create empathy. We take that even further, and say the number one attribute of a successful salesperson is to be liked.

The skill of the successful salesperson is to be able to work out quickly who 'gets you'. It's rare to be utterly disliked immediately. What's more common is indifference; people say "this sounds very interesting. Leave a brochure, and I'll get back to you if I'm interested."

Indifference is the curse of the sales process. You don't really know if they are prospects or not. Should you spend more time chasing them up?

It's not difficult to spot if someone likes you if you know how to spot the signals. Imagine a networking event, where you might to chat to 30 people, each for a few minutes. Which ones are worth following up afterwards? It is, of course, very intimidating to be faced with a room full of strangers. The best line to use to break into a group is the classic "may I join you?"

Then, the key is to ask questions in a specific order. Good questions to use at the start are simple and factual: 'Where', 'What' and 'How'

1. Where?

This is a standard conversation opener: 'where are you from?', or to use the script favoured by royalty, "have you come far today?" This invites a simple, factual answer, typically a place name, which in itself can often spark off the conversation.

2. What?

You ask them what their company does, and their own specific role. This again invites a simple, factual answer.

3. How?

'How' is a slightly more probing question; you're asking them to describe in more detail their particular job, or their company's day-to-day activities.

When they ask what you do, you should offer an appropriate ‘happy customer’ case-study, delivered in a narrative style: the customer problem, and how you solved it. Having asked the first three questions, ‘Where?’ ‘What?’ and ‘How?’ it’s time to take a mental pause and consider how the conversation is going.

If it’s been hard work even at this early stage, then it’s time to swap business cards and disengage, using a polite script like: “Nice to chat to you; if you don’t mind I’m going to head off and get another drink...”

You may be disappointed; you were hoping they were going to be a better prospect, but never mind, there’s plenty more people in the room. And, frankly, the person you’ve been talking to will also be happy to see you move on, so don’t feel too guilty about it!

But if you reckon the conversation is going well, you can make a big leap from ‘factual’ questions (which have simple answers) to ‘emotional’ ones, which invite the listener to share their feelings in a modest way. It’s time to ask the crucial ‘Why?’ question

4. Why?

Why are they at this networking event? Are they trying to improve their business in some way, perhaps by meeting new customers or suppliers?

They may blank the question: “I’m here because my boss told me to, and I’m going to leave this event as soon as possible”. No problem: just disengage politely and move onto the next person.

But if they like you, they’ll open up a little and tell you about some challenge their company faces, such as winning new customers or finding new solutions to their technical problems. In sales language this is called ‘a buying signal’ and should be agreed with, to create empathy: “Yes I can see how that would be important to your company”.

Then you offer a ‘fact’, perhaps a web site, magazine article or book you’ve seen which might help them. Offer to provide this ‘fact’, and see what happens. If they refuse it (“Thanks, I’ve already got plenty of information on that subject...”), then again politely move on, but more often than not, they’ll accept the offer of help. Then you can go for the big question: Who?

5. Who?

Who can you offer to introduce them to, who might be able to help them? Maybe it's a member of your technical staff; perhaps it's someone from your network who has expertise in this area. You should offer a business meeting or "a coffee sometime" to see if they're interested. If they accept this meeting, then you're an important step forward in the sales process.

If you ask these simple questions in this order, then you'll exit a networking event with a good collection of business cards, many marked up for later follow-up, or even an actual meeting.

This is a basic sales activity which everyone in your company can do, and they should be rewarded appropriately. Even your most introverted software engineer or accountant will enjoy networking with other software engineers and accountants. They should be enthusiastic about your products and services, and gather the business cards of people they enjoyed meeting.

You might call this 'being a good ambassador for your company'. **I call it 'good selling'.**

About Mike



Mike Southon has a weekly column every Saturday in the *Financial Times* and is co-author of *The Beermat Entrepreneur*, *Sales on a Beermat* and other business books.

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