

The Ten Questions You Dread By Olin Thompson

Your heart misses a beat. A lump rises in your throat. If you are a pro with years of experience under your belt, no one sees your discomfort. If you are new at this game, the prospect smells the fear. We all recognize the symptoms. You have been asked one of the Ten Dreaded Questions.

What are the Ten Dreaded Questions? They vary by person, by product, by company, by industry and by competitor. They can change monthly or even daily. They are the questions that you feel you cannot answer effectively or maybe at all. They are the questions that lead to a deal being lost.

Do these questions exist only in sales situations? No, they exist in most jobs. A customer support person will have his or her own list, as will somebody in accounts payable, shipping or any other customer-oriented position. A meeting with your boss, an interview or many other situations will also create this list for most of us. The sales person's list can break a deal.. What can we manage the list?

What questions are on your list?

You know the questions on your list. You need to be prepared to answer them. Think out the answers in advance. Ideally, your answers should turn the questions to your advantage or at least neutralize them. Your answers should be rehearsed and should come out naturally. If you are prepared for the Ten Dreaded Questions, they may still be dreaded, but they will not terrorize you and you will not stumble on the answer.

The questions fall into a few categories. Some are personal: "How much experience do you have?" Some have to do with your product: "Is it true that one of your customer is suing due to product problems?" Some deal with your company: "Your financial results are suspect, why?"

The answers to the product and company questions must be addressed by company management and marketing. They will not be delivering the answers, but they should establish the best answer and communicate them to all involved. Management and marketing need to know what the questions are and how they are changing. Your job as a sales person is to communicate new questions as they arise. It is the responsibility of management and marketing to provide the answers.

Personal questions need answers also. It can be helpful to consult with other to get ideas and feedback in developing the most effective answers. You can answer the question, "How long have you been with your company?" with a simple number, or you can provide an answer that sells both your personal experience and your company.

How should these questions be answered? While there are no answers that will work for everybody in every situation, we can explore approaches to developing answers which best suit you and your needs. .

Approaches

Be Preemptive Since you know the questions you dread in advance, the best defense may be a good offense. If you are almost certain the question will be asked, bring up the subject before the prospect can. This shows you are not afraid of the question. It shows that you are proactive and straightforward. By bringing it up before the prospect does (or before the competition plants the question and scares your prospect) you can turn the question into a positive.

You probably should not say, "I know you are wondering about our financial stability." But you can bring up the subject in other ways. For example, talk about the various initiatives being taken by your company. In the list, add in what is being done about your financial stability. If, for example, you are being sued for product problems, talk about your efforts to improve both product quality and customer service. Even bring up that, sadly, not 100% of your customers are totally satisfied. (Don't worry; the prospect's customers are not totally satisfied either.)

Make it a positive Turn a negative into a positive. One of my clients consistently had the "You're too small" problem. Not only did the client bring up its size as early as possible in the sales cycle, it accentuated the benefits of focus and a personal touch that its size ensured. It even changed its mission statement to set an objective of being the right size to give customers the personal service they deserve. The company turned the negative of size into the benefit of focus and personal service.

Recognize the challenge If you recognize a problem and proactively address it, you are in command of your business. This is an opportunity to sell the changes that are being made or planned for the good of your customers and your company. The answer starts with, "We certainly understand that issue and have been actively addressing it. Let me share what we are doing and why." The answer continues with activities and why they are of benefit to the prospect.

Provide a different view Can the issue be redefined into one that is less negative or even positive? The answer starts with, "I understand your concern, but we see that issue differently. We see it as an opportunity to ..."

Finally, some golden rules about the Ten Dreaded Questions.

- If you are prepared, you will not be surprised, shocked or nervous. You will convert that question into the best possible result, but only if you are prepared.

- Never react negatively to one of the Ten Dreaded Questions. Don't swallow hard, close your eyes or look at the ceiling. Put on your poker face. Prospects smell panic and a panicked sales person loses the deal.
- If you do not have a good answer, say so. But ask if you can get back to the prospect with an answer, and then do it.
- Always tell the truth. Prospects smell lies even faster than panic. This is not just a rule when facing the Ten Dreaded Questions. The truth may not be the easiest in the short term, but it is the right strategy for long-term success.

The Ten Dreaded Questions will always exist. Only by being prepared can you turn the Ten Dreaded Questions into an opportunity to sell, and not a need to panic.

About the Author

Olin Thompson has over 25 years experience as a corporate executive in the application software industry. As a consultant, he provides business strategy, sales, and marketing guidance to application software providers. For more details, see www.olinthompson.com

He can be reached at OT@olinthompson.com

