

## **The Open Question Misconception**

Many sales trainers will tell you that there are two types of question. The open question and the closed question. An open question being a question that gets people to open up and talk and a closed question designed to draw a yes/no answer. They will tell you that there are 6 open questions – who, what, where, when, why and how, and even draw silly little diagrams of a large H with five little W's on – just in case you get stuck whilst speaking on the telephone and can't think of a question. You can look at your silly little diagram and suddenly regain the power of speech. And anyway – who, what, where, when, why and how – are not open questions.

Without wishing to belittle sales trainers too much, let's just say that there's a lot they can learn from the world of journalism here.

A journalist interviewing someone of fame or other significance operate with the same initial agenda as a sales person – getting to know their 'customer' and extracting information from them. They just have nothing to sell them at the end so they tend to gather more information than the average sales person because they are not distracted by the ulterior motive – closing a deal.

### **So what is an open question?**

An open question is a question that allows your customer to tell you the full story from just an initial prompt. A journalist knows how to ask one question instead of at least six (there can be more than one who's and when's etc in a situation).

The first question an interviewer will ask will usually begin; Explain... Describe... Tell me...

For instance, 'Please tell me more about your company...'

The interviewee can then open up to speak about the situation as they see it. The interviewer will then ask *fact-finding* questions to fill in any gaps – who, what, where, when, why, how.

### **How can this help my sales?**

Imagine the impact of really allowing your customers to open up. What difference would the phrase, 'tell me about your ideal car' make to those sales that usually start 'what sort of car are you looking for?' 'erm, not sure' or 'how much are you looking to spend?'. Opening your customers up is the ideal way to understand their requirements (see previous article on Customer Focused Sales if you haven't already) and is key to building rapport. You then use your fact-finding questions to fill in the gaps, 'that's sounds fantastic, what colours do you prefer?' and your closed questions to close the deal, 'are you happy to sign today?'

### **Try it...**

Next time you are speaking to a prospective customer try using an opening statement (after 'hello' of course) that begins with Explain... Describe... Tell me... (avoiding: Explain what... Describe where... Tell me who... as this defeats the object) and test this against on the next call/meeting against a who, what, where, when, why or how. I'm sure you'll find the results very pleasing.