

# Rounding Second Base

By Cheryl Crumb

(Graphic: Customer Relationship Diamond – highlight second base)

(Think Phil has my photo...if you have space)

Rudyard Kipling delighted many children with Gunga Din, but as a youngster I was more impressed by his poem, "I keep six honest serving men. They taught me all they knew. Their names are WHAT and WHY and WHEN and HOW and WHERE and WHO". I think this simple stanza provoked my life-long personality trait: infectious curiosity. It's an art that service superstars also use to advantage: asking questions.

In our continuing series on service excellence, we've emphasized that process mastery and skill competency go hand-in-hand. If getting our customer to first base requires us to be prepared to host our guest, getting our customer to second base demands we pull out all stops to understand more about what's involved in the purchasing decision. Listening, which we talked about last article, is half of the equation and questioning completes the math.

Opening your mouth with a spirit of curiosity doesn't necessarily result in astute questioning. Listen to the questions that most of the world typically asks: "Do you...?", "Can you...?", "Are you...?", "Have you...?", "Will you...?", "Is it...?" We call these closed questions because they usually yield a yes or no response. What's the matter with that? Think about the results from asking an entertainment system-seeking customer the following questions:

- Do you have a particular brand or model in mind?
- Is price really important?
- Have you considered....?
- Are you more of an audiophile or a videophile?
- Do you want to take this home with you tonight?
- Is this system primarily for you or your kids?
- Is sound quality the most important issue for you?

Notice how little you've learned from the customer responses of: "Not really", "sure is", "no", "audiophile", "if I can", "me" and "no". While some customers might provide you with

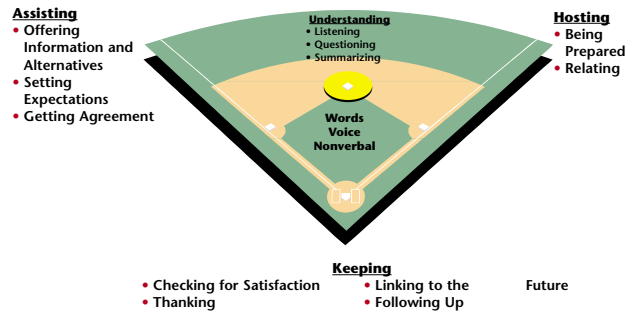
additional information, consider that it's in spite of your questions, not because of them. Too often, there's a crowd of people who obediently answer exactly what we ask.

The real pitfall with the ubiquitous closed question is that it ignores the context surrounding the purchasing decision. To get beyond specific responses, better service providers ask open questions. Open questions are designed to establish a dialogue with customers. Examples include: "What specifically are you looking for?", "What brand do you prefer?", "How often will you use the system?". With open questions, you will gain some information that will be helpful to you.

The highly professional service reps take their questioning skill a step further. They ask the Ph.D. version of open questions, what I call *high value* questions, which get their customers to THINK, make connections, reflect, and reveal feelings, ideas, insights and perceptions. Why do we want to do that? Let's go back to our initial premise: most customers don't know what they want, nor do they necessarily know what is best for them. (What about those customers who know exactly what they want?...Consider, if that's the case, that they really don't need you. In other words, you're adding no value. All they require is an ordering system. For the majority of people who are looking, investigating and considering, the most valuable role you can provide is to help them (and you) get a better idea about what would be right for them. The natural inclination is to tell/sell/pitch/offer and hope something sticks. The true serviceperson puts a muzzle on and discovers by asking open and high value questions. Consider our previous entertainment system-seeking buyer who is "just looking". What if you asked:

- Help me understand what's most important to you in an entertainment system?
- What do you currently have?
- What's your greatest frustration with the present system?
- How is the rest of your family influencing your decision?

Customer Relationship Diamond



- If you could have anything you wanted, what would it look like?
- Tell me more about how this system will be used on a routine basis?
- How have your entertainment system ideas changed?
- What's becoming more important to you?
- What's becoming less important to you?
- Why is it important that you consider an entertainment system at this time?

Lots more insight for you and your customer. The advantage to you is obvious: you learn information you wouldn't have gotten through a customer checklist. The advantage to your customer is more subtle: S/he achieves more clarity through talking it out with you. It's not surprising to hear a customer say, "That was really helpful to me. Thanks." Customers who feel you've helped them articulate and organize their random thoughts are more likely to trust you. Trusting customers are more likely to buy from you than from Mr. Slick who asks only the obvious narrow questions.

So, Rudyard had wisdom beyond the Indian jungle. He knew the key to unlock a person's thoughts...the art of asking questions.

Your "homework" should you choose to accept it:

1. Become aware of all the "do you?", "have you?", "can you?", "will you?" questions that stifle conversation.
  - "Help me understand...."
  - "Tell me...."
  - "What..."
  - "How..."
  - "Why..."
2. When you start hearing yourself ask these interrogative questions, convert them to:
  - "Help me understand...."
  - "Tell me...."
  - "What..."
  - "How..."
  - "Why..."
3. Listen to what they tell you and paraphrase it back to them.