



Top 13 Questions Managers Should Ask Their Sales Reps

The single most important factor that drives sales rep behavior . . . more than comp plans, or processes, or systems . . . are the questions their managers ask them! So, what are the questions we should be asking? Here are 11 really good ones:

1. How was your weekend? (Listen) . . . And the family? (Listen)

Not what you expected, right? This appears at the top of the list simply because your salespeople will relate to you more and want to cooperate with you if they believe you are a real person who's interested in more than just "Where's the XYZ order?" . . . which, by the way, is about of the most self-focused question a sales manager can ask. Engage your people as people first, then as co-workers. Make people feel like they work with you, not *for* you.

2. What's the best thing that happened in your business last week?

Yes. In "their business!" Wouldn't it be great if your salespeople perceived their sales territory as their own personal business? Something they could be proud of and pour their heart and soul into building? By asking "What's the best thing that happened?" you give them a chance to brag a little on what they've done. You try it! Start asking them that every week and watch your salespeople begin looking for possible candidates for the "best thing that happened" all week long.

3. What are you most excited about this week?

Let's face it, some of your salespeople are just not all that excited about anything. But *you* set the tone for the team. You are the leader. Make this question a part of the conversation you have with every person on your team *every* week! There is always ample opportunity to talk about what they are upset about, or confused about, or depressed about. Make it a point to get them to talk about something they are excited about. When you talk about it together, you'll have some things to look forward to and, naturally, something about which you can ask later, "How did it go?"

4. Which account most deserves our attention?

One huge mistake salespeople tend to make is trying to treat every account the same. I'm going to give them all equal attention because, "Hey, you never know where the next deal is coming from." While we can't predict the future, we can look at the facts before us. If one account is growing like crazy, that could very well mean a lot of new revenue potential. If we have access at senior-executive levels in a company, that's an account where we can often develop a partnership our competitors may not be able to match. If one of our accounts is extremely loyal and highly profitable, show 'em the love, man! All accounts are not created equal. Help your salespeople find the 10-20% of accounts that represent the best return on their investment of attention and give them "permission" to give those companies their best efforts. Teach your people to be a "smart investor" of their selling time.

5. Where is the risk in this pipeline?

Much of pipeline assessment is about looking at the best deals. The ones we are confident about enough to forecast, etc. But here's a question we don't ask often enough: "Which deal represents the biggest risk?" Now, you could have a huge deal with a very low probability of winning, but you know that, and you have enough other deals to offset a loss. That's fine. But when you have a deal that is large enough, and shaky enough, and you don't have a ton of other deals that could potentially make up for it, *that's* where your risk lies. Find the deal that can hurt you the most if you lose it and go to work. Put in the effort! Get the right resources involved. Mitigate the risk! At some point, you may need to call it "lost" and move on. But teach your people to recognize risk in their pipeline and teach them to eliminate it.



6. What can go wrong with this deal?

Most of us in sales suffer from the affliction known as “Happy Ears.” We really only hear the good news and we really don’t want to hear anything that suggests a deal could go bad. This is an extremely dangerous habit that you cannot allow your salespeople to tolerate. Teach people to *look* for the bad news! Trouble shoot every deal. Figure out what could go wrong with a deal while there’s still time to do something about it! If you’re going to lose, lose early! That way you can move on to something else. But if you can figure out what can go wrong early enough, maybe you can meet more people, or gain more support, or put together funding options, or come up with some creative and competitive pricing packages to put yourself in a better position to win.

7. What bad thing would happen if the customer decided to do nothing?

A lot of times our biggest competitor is the status quo (i.e., the customer decides to “do nothing”). They keep doing things the way they’ve always done them or buying from the same supplier they’ve always dealt with. It’s very normal customer behavior. But it’s also a leading cause of forecasted deals *not* closing on time . . . or ever! Let’s teach our salespeople to explore that possibility by talking about why the customer might not decide to buy (or change) at all. This can be a very sobering discussion and will definitely cause us to ask more questions to further qualify the deal. It’s sad to admit, but if we can’t recognize some tangible consequence to NOT buying now, then our customer probably won’t be able to either.

8. If we were the competitor, what would we do to beat us?

I believe in playing the game to win. As opposed to just trying to *not* lose! But so many times, when a competitor gets the better of us, they found a weakness and exploited it. It could be a weakness in product capabilities, or something to do with the service we provide, or contract terms, or maybe even the price-to-value ratio. Personally, I think, more often than we admit, it has to do with relationships that they were able to build that we were not able to . . . or we just *didn’t*! Let’s teach our salespeople to think about these things *before* we lose! Of course, we have to sell our strengths. But let’s also identify where our weakness lay and learn to sell around them. And if we are weak in relationships, *do something* about it!

9. Is there a lesson we can learn here?

Things are going to go wrong sometimes. It happens. When they do, avoid asking, “What lesson can you learn here?” That sounds like you think you already know everything and you are just testing them. Notice it’s “Is there a lesson *WE* can learn?” If they can recognize how they might have done things differently that’s a far better learning experience than you point out their faults. Don’t be afraid to let people see *you* learning. And please don’t try to always be smarter than your salespeople. Great managers try to hire people smarter than themselves and even if they don’t start out that way, help them *become* smarter than you, if at all possible!

10. What’s one thing I could do today to better support you?

There’s so much psychology here. Just ask for one thing. Coming up with three things is too hard. Specify “today.” This makes it actionable and offers a quick payback. Use the word “support” instead of help. Saying “How can I help you?” can easily come across as if you think they are incapable or you think you can do it better. Now, some of the things they ask for might be out of your control (“I” can’t really fix it). Some others might be more than you can accomplish “today.” But whatever you hear gives you insight into what your people see as the obstacles standing in their way of success. Whether they are true or not, we’d like to know what obstacles they perceive. Then we can help them get past them whether they are real or imagined.



11. What would a great boss do in this situation?

Yes. Ask *them* that question! Heaven forbid we ever get too good to learn something. And just because they happen to report to you right now, does that mean they can't have some knowledge of what a great boss might do? What we sales managers forget sometimes is that a *huge* part of our job is to teach people how to think for themselves. How to solve problems without you having to get involved every time. AND . . . another huge part of our job is to grow talent. When you get promoted to sales director or vice president, you're going to need some great sales managers. Start growing them right now! If you raise them up with you as you grow, they will probably revere you and become your long-term friend and ally in the industry.

12. Which of your top priorities deserves some of your time this week?

One of the greatest challenges of the sales profession is personal productivity. Everywhere I go, salespeople tell me "I just can't seem to get it all done in a day." That statement is actually quite true! You can't possibly get it ALL done, so we have to prioritize the most important things. Unfortunately, some of the things that we know we need to do, such as consistent business development, research before a new client meeting, or learning about the brand-new product or service our company just came out with get displaced by other things that seem more "urgent." There are so many activities, like billing issues, delivery issues, and internal meetings, that it's hard to find time to talk to customers anymore! Let's help our salespeople remember what is most important and what we can't afford to neglect. If you let them come up with their priorities, they are a lot more likely to give them some attention than if you tell them what they should be focused on.

13. What are our options here? Which path do you think we should take?

To revisit the idea of helping your salespeople think for themselves, one best practice for managers in any discipline is to empower your salespeople to come up with answers to their own questions and solutions to their own problems. Starting today . . . right now . . . the next time someone on your team comes to you for guidance, take a few seconds to ask, "What do you think we should do?" If you make this part of the way you lead, your people will start to develop the habit of better decision making on their own. So, set a new expectation with everyone on your team, "If you come to me with a problem, bring along at least three ways we can solve it as well as your recommendation of which course of action would be best. In 60 days you will be astounded at how much more self-reliant and empowered your people will become.

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