

SANDLER RULE # 12

ANSWER EVERY QUESTION
WITH A QUESTION

*Have you ever answered a prospect's question
– and wished you hadn't?*

- Find the intent behind the prospect's question.
- DON'T answer automatically.
- You put stress on yourself when you make a habit of answering “directly.”

Hey, what does this rule mean?

Why are you asking?

Isn't that obvious?

What do you mean by “obvious?”

Why won't you answer my question?

What makes you think I won't answer your question?

Aren't you avoiding answering my question right now?

Am I?

No, you shouldn't use this rule as an excuse to play silly games with the prospect. But behind the rule is a valid concept: Prospects usually don't ask the real question up-front. (See Rule #38: *The Problem the Prospect*

Brings You Is Never the Real Problem.) Instead, prospects ask “smoke-screen” questions that *hide* the real question and its intent. By answering these “smoke-screen” questions directly, instead of posing questions of your own, you run the risk of boxing yourself in.

WHAT IS THE PROSPECT’S QUESTION SUPPOSED TO ACCOMPLISH?

Here’s an example. Bruce represents a marketing and public relations firm. He is meeting with the owner of a new restaurant to discuss an advertising campaign. The owner asks, “How much experience does your firm have creating advertising campaigns for restaurants?” Bruce’s company has a substantial amount of experience with restaurants. So Bruce answers confidently: “Actually, we have quite a bit of experience with restaurants. We’ve created a number of very successful campaigns.” His prospect then replies, “Well, I hope you’re not planning on presenting me with some recycled ideas.”

DON'T BOX
YOURSELF IN.
FIND OUT THE
INTENT OF THE
QUESTION YOU'VE
BEEN ASKED.

Bruce might recover, but look at all the pressure he put on himself by not finding out the intent of his prospect’s question before answering. Had he discovered the real intent of the restaurant owner’s question, Bruce could have provided an answer more appropriate to the *real* question. Let’s give Bruce another chance. Suppose he answered the restaurant owner’s smoke-screen question with a question.

Owner: How much experience does your firm have creating advertising campaigns for restaurants?

Bruce: That’s a very good question. And, you’re asking because ...?

Owner: We’re a unique restaurant – our menu is unique, our venue is unique – and we want to make sure that any advertising reflects that uniqueness.

Bruce: That makes perfect sense. Probably the first thing I should tell you is that we recognize that each project has a distinctive set of variables. Each project has to support the client's message with the right theme, the right copy, and the right images. We know that no two restaurants are the same, and that's why no two campaigns are the same.

Bruce never answered the owner's smoke-screen question; instead, he answered the real question.

In the example, Bruce got to the real question very quickly. Sometimes, it takes two or three questions to discover the prospect's real question.

Also, notice that Bruce didn't simply "fire back" his response. First, he commended the owner for asking a good question, and then he gave a thoughtful, appropriate answer.

Are there times when you should just answer the prospect's question and not respond with a question? Of course – when you are certain that the answer can help you, or at least can't hurt you. For example, if your prospect asks, "What time is it?" responding with "Good question ... why do you ask?" will most likely get you a funny look from your prospect.

**TEST YOUR
UNDERSTANDING**

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST
DANGER OF OFFERING
DIRECT ANSWERS TO YOUR
PROSPECT'S QUESTIONS?

SEE ANSWER BELOW.

BEHAVIORS

RECALL THREE SELLING SITUATIONS WHERE YOU PROVIDED A PROSPECT WITH A DETAILED ANSWER TO WHAT TURNED OUT TO BE A "SMOKE-SCREEN" QUESTION. FORMULATE RESPONSES THAT WOULD HAVE HELPED YOU UNCOVER THE REAL INTENT OF YOUR PROSPECTS' QUESTIONS.

Answer: Unless you understand the intent of the question, i.e., the "real" question, you run the risk of providing an answer that boxes you into an unfavorable selling position.

SANDLER RULE #37

ALL PROSPECTS LIE,
ALL THE TIME

Have you ever wondered why a prospect led you down the wrong path?

- It's true – they do!
- The variable is *why* ... and *about* what.

Okay, it may be a bit of an overstatement to say that *all* prospects lie *all* the time. But the underlying idea is sound, and worth considering closely.

Let's just say that prospects tend to be less than completely truthful *much* of the time. For example, one prospect proclaims that he is the decision maker, but doesn't reveal that he has to get an approving nod from the CFO. Another prospect says she is eager to move quickly, but doesn't disclose that the timing for the final decision is still three months away.

DON'T BE MISLED.

WHY DO PROSPECTS LIE?

Many prospects feel that it's necessary to mislead salespeople in this manner. Perhaps they believe they are protecting themselves from the

sometimes overeager salesperson who is ready to pounce at the first sign of a “buying signal.” Or perhaps they are covering up vulnerable areas – not the least of which is probably an unwillingness to admit that there are areas they don’t know very much about.

To avoid being misled, you will need to ask a few questions to confirm just about everything your prospect tells you. If the prospect says he is the decision maker, ask who else might play a role in the decision ... or who has the power to veto a decision. For the prospect who is eager to move quickly, ask how soon she needs to make a decision ... and what might happen if it took longer.

The television show *House* offers the example of Dr. Gregory House, a cynical physician with an abiding distrust of patients – a distrust rooted in his firm belief in the willingness of all patients to lie. House knows, from personal experience, that patients are more than willing to mislead the people who are trying to help them, even when their own lives are at stake. “It’s a basic truth of the human condition that everybody lies,” Dr. House opines in one episode. “The only variable is about what.” The parallel between patients and prospects almost makes itself.

No. You shouldn’t use House’s contempt for his patients as your model for behavior in interacting with prospects – but you probably should use his skepticism. Prospects may not lie all the time, but if you proceed as if they did, and then confirm each and every piece of information you receive, you are likely to come away with a more accurate picture of your selling opportunity.

**TEST YOUR
UNDERSTANDING**

HOW CAN ASSUMING THAT
“ALL PROSPECTS LIE”
SUPPORT A PRODUCTIVE
RELATIONSHIP WITH
PROSPECTS?

SEE ANSWER BELOW.

BEHAVIORS

IDENTIFY THREE INSTANCES WHERE DOUBLE-CHECKING THE FACTS, SUCH AS A PROSPECT’S PROCLAMATION, “I MAKE ALL THE DECISIONS” OR “MONEY’S NO OBJECT,” WOULD HAVE BEEN USEFUL TO YOU.

Answer: This strategy requires you to double-check what prospects tell you (or what you believe they told you). Assuming “all prospects lie” will prevent you from acting on false assumptions and misunderstandings.