

Time Warp Questions

Okay – I admit it –I’m a lifelong Star Trek fan. I may not have a set of pointy rubber ears on my dresser and I have yet to take a conversational Klingon class at the local community college, but I know more about the careers of Captain James Tiberius Kirk and Captain Jon Luc Picard than I care to admit. One of the things that has attracted me, and millions of other devoted fans to Star Trek is the way the series writers used the program to address important issues. By setting the stories far in the future they were able to engage viewers with sensitive issues that would have been difficult to discuss in a contemporary setting. In the emotion charged political environment of the 1960’s, Star Trek was able to address racism, religion and war without generating a backlash against the network. What has this got to do with selling advertising? Well, by asking what I like to call “Time Warp Questions” you can use a similar technique to raise important issues with your prospects without putting them on the defensive.

Origin Questions

Origin questions take customers back in time. By doing this you can learn a lot about a customer’s motivations and avoid challenging what they are doing in the present.

For example if you have a prospect that is advertising in a competitive media and ask them “How’s your ad in the daily competitor working?” Most people will answer that it is working “great”. Everyone hates to admit that they made a bad decision, so even if the current program is underperforming, their first instinct will be to defend the decision. Also, they may not have given their ongoing program much thought because it is not one of the most pressing issues on their desk. The natural inclination in this case is to say “great” because no one likes to look like they don’t know what’s going on in every aspect of their business.

Asking the question “What was your thinking when you first starting advertising in the daily competitor?” or “What was your goal when you started your program with the cable company?” requires a much more thoughtful answer. This line of questioning is less likely to be perceived as a challenge to the wisdom of the current program. It is simply a request for information.

The customer may answer “We were looking to build traffic in our store(s)” or “We were trying to make people aware of our new dining room.” These answers provide insight into the customer’s priorities and the goals they have for their business. Our business is helping our customers achieve their goals, the more we understand our prospects’ goals the more influence we will have with them.

A good follow-up question is “Have you achieved these goals?” or “How well do you think the program has done in bringing people into the dining room?” Because you are asking a specific question that is related to their original objectives, prospects are more likely to think about their current program. They may not tell you if they are dissatisfied but you have started them thinking.

The next question is “why”. If they say the current program is not meeting their expectations you can ask “Why do you think that is?” This is your opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of your publication. Example: Prospect – “I haven’t had the time to come up with some good ideas for my ads.” Rep – “Well if you decide to promote your business with me, I’ll work with my artist to bring you new ideas every week. I see helping my clients come up with great ideas as an important part of my job!”

If the client is pleased with the results from their current program, build on that. “Rep – “Why do you think your current program has worked so well for you?” Prospect – “We put great offers in our ad and that really brings people in.” Rep – “I am sure your right. If you could get that same offer into more people’s hands...how do you think that would affect your business?”

Origin questions are useful in determining how a customer thinks. One of my favorite questions to ask prospects is: “What lead you to get into the _____ business?” People love to talk about their professions and their answers can be quite revealing. This question might be posed to two plumbers, one might answer “I was working for another guy and he was gouging people, I knew I could do quality work for much less and still make a nice profit”. With this prospect you can talk about an ad headlined “Affordable Plumbing Repairs” The second prospect may answer “I was working for a guy and he used shoddy materials to keep his prices low. I just didn’t feel right doing poor quality work” His headline might read “Top Quality Plumbing Repairs”

Using origin questions to get inside a customer’s mind is a great way to get their ads inside your publication.

Goal Questions

While origin questions ask a customer to take a look back in time, goal questions ask them to look forward in time. Entrepreneurs naturally tend to be forward-looking individuals. At some point in their life, they decided to go into business because they believed they could build something new or serve their communities better by founding or buying a business. Unfortunately, the endless day to day round of details and duties inherent in running a small business often force the original dream into the background. Our clients are the CEO and the janitor, they handle marketing and maintenance, they are the salesperson and delivery person – they are busy – usually too busy to take time to think about the direction of their business. Even if you are dealing with a manager rather than the owner of a small business, you will find they face very similar challenges.

By asking goal questions, we can help our customers to stop and take a look at the direction they want to take their business. I love asking goal questions because of the effect they have on our customers. Asking goal questions takes a prospect out of the daily grind and reminds them why they got into business in the first place. I have seen a tired stressed business owner light up when they begin talking about the future of their business.

I ask Goal questions in a two part “Where-How” sequence. Part one is “Where” do you want you business to go and part two is “How” are you going to get there. Here is an example of how this sequence works:

Rep: “Where do you see your business going by the end of 2008?”

Prospect: “Delivery costs are way up with insurance and fuel prices going through the roof, I would really like to expand our walk-in and dining room business.”

Rep: “It sounds like you’ve given this a lot of thought, how are you planning to attract people here to the restaurant?”

Obviously this would lead to a discussion of advertising to drive the desired business. By getting the customer to tell you their goals, it becomes much easier to get them to consider investing in making their dreams come true. This also works with more long-term goals.

Rep: “What plans do you have for the business in the next five years?”

Prospect: “Well my daughter is getting out of college next year and would like to get involved in the business. With her to help me I would like to open a branch office in Nexttown.”

Rep: “That sounds wonderful, I am sure you are very proud of your daughter. What plans do you have to increase your sales to raise the money you’ll need for the expansion?”

Goal questions benefit the salesperson in a number of ways – they differentiate you from the run of the mill salesperson. Most reps talk about their own product, a rep that talks about the future of a prospect’s business and who shows a genuine interest in helping them achieve their goals will always be welcome. Asking goal questions puts you in a position to recommend ongoing advertising programs. Long term plans require long-term programs to bring in customers to generate the sales volume necessary to fund the prospects dreams. When revenue gets tight and the customer wants to cut back on advertising, a good understanding of their ultimate objectives will help the rep to convince the customer to maintain their program and “keep their eyes on the prize.” Goal questions enable the rep to partner with the prospect to make their dreams come true.

Conclusion

Asking “time warp” questions allows you to better understand a client, to know where they came from and where they want to go. This “big picture” understanding is invaluable in planning your sales approach and in making recommendations that will help clients reach their goals. Asking these questions will let you reach your goals and as you know your goal is:

“Sales the final frontier...

Your mission...

To explore strange new prospects

Seek out new sales opportunities; new advertisers...

To boldly sell ads where no ads have been sold before!”

(Sorry, I just couldn’t resist)