

A conversation with a point

Many professionals we work with admit to being nervous about asking lots of questions in business development settings. Intellectually they understand that finding out about potential clients is a great way to build and deepen relationships. However, they fear coming across as being a bit like an interrogator. Quite often they revert to talking instead – trying to impress a potential client into working with them.

In other cases, people simply haven't been training in asking really good and progressive questions. We all did when we were children. If I had a pound for every time my daughter had asked me 'why?', I'd be very rich. But we lose this simple curiosity as we get older. And then we add on our professional expertise and the training in knowing stuff – being right. This doesn't encourage us to appear like we don't know what we're talking about.

However, asking insightful questions can build our credibility as effectively as sharing knowledge. We often hear "That's a great question" in our business development meetings. Great questions can really show that you know what you're talking about because you know what to ask about.

The best way to really understand a particular topic is to 'funnel' it – open with broad questions then funnel down to find out more. Exploring in depth avoids the danger of just flitting over the surface level of any issues. This will be familiar to those who do a lot of interviewing – we need to dig deeper if we want to get beyond superficial answers.

So how do we do that? Well we can start with open, general questions:
"How's your marketplace?" , "What's going well?"

Then we can explore their answers with slightly more focused, but still open, questions:
"Which markets are good just now?" "Why is that?" "How do you see that changing?"

Throughout this process the most important thing is to really listen.

Some simple techniques:

- Repeat their last phrase or word (but not like a parrot!): *"New legislation?" , "Changes at the top?"*. This often encourages elaboration.
- Use inviting phrases like *"tell me more"* or *"describe what effect that.."*
- Summarising what they've said – proves you've listened, and almost always leads to more.
- Careful use of closed questions to check: *"so what you're saying is... is that right?"*

So we are gradually bringing this particular subject to a close, confident that we have allowed our clients to fully explain themselves. When done with genuine interest and skill, this approach demonstrates a desire to really understand their world and gives us all the insight we need to add real value.



The PACE Partners
PACE House
Churchfield Road
Walton-on-Thames
Surrey KT12 2TZ

t +44 (0)1932 260062

f +44 (0)1932 260011

e tpp@thepacepartners.com

www.thepacepartners.com