6 Ways to Qualify Prospects

A SALES OPPORTUNITY ROADMAP

PAUL CHERRY • Author of ***Questions That Sell***

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

Table of Contents

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

WHAT DOES "QUALIFYING" MEAN?

It's impossible to qualify a sales opportunity if you don't know what it actually means to do so. For too many salespeople, a qualified sales lead is someone who checks all or many of the boxes next to the criteria you've identified for a promising prospect. Or, a qualified sales lead is someone who was identified by your marketing department and vetted by a member of your sales force.

In order to truly qualify a sales opportunity, you need to do more than review your checklist of criteria for a lead you think is qualified and dig deeper than your sales team did when they initially spoke to your prospect. This may require you to adjust your definition of "qualifying."

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

Qualifying means uncovering needs. It's a process that can sometimes by condensed into a single meeting, or it can play out during multiple meetings occurring over several weeks or months. However long qualifying takes, the goal of the process is for you to identify the specific individual or individuals who have a problem and exactly what their dilemma is. More importantly, you need to identify whether or not the prospect is a good fit. If they are in need of a solution that you can provide and are serious about taking action to correct it, it's worth pursuing. If not, it's best to let them go.

Qualifying is a process that can sometimes be condensed into a single meeting, or it can play out during multiple meetings occuring over several weeks or

Approximately 67 percent of lost sales occur because salespeople don't qualify their prospects sufficiently before they launch into the sales process. Why would you jeopardize any sales opportunity, let alone a significant percentage of them, by not adequately qualifying your leads?

To QUALIFY a sales opportunity– **Ask the right questions!**

The key to qualifying your sales opportunities by is asking the right sales qualification questions. Before you can do that, however, you need to know how to ask sales probing questions. While that makes sense, you're probably trying to think of a good plan of action, a methodology of sorts that dictates what questions you should ask and the precise steps you should follow.

In sales, it's not uncommon for more experienced salespeople to advise "young guns" or struggling sales representatives to ***go for the pain.*** While their advice is well intentioned, what does it mean? How can you go for a prospect's pain without coming across as intrusive, skittish or, even worse, obnoxious? How do you know when it's time to switch gears from asking qualifying sales questions to trying to sell a solution?

A Sales Opportunity Roadmap

The information we're about to cover will provide you with a roadmap that will enable you to zero in on great sales opportunities and recognize those that aren't promising. What does that mean for you? It means the following will prepare you to manage your time better and manage your sales leads more wisely.

It's only natural that every roadmap has a beginning, several middle points and an ending. Our roadmap includes six points that are worth reading about and mastering. If you're doubtful you'll learn anything new by reviewing our roadmap, remember that nearly 70 percent of lost sales occur because salespeople fail to adequately qualify their sales leads. With that in mind, can you really afford to risk not learning how to develop a list of consultative sales questions that could lead to more closed deals?

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

1. Identify if your prospect has a problem or issue

When you're talking to a prospect, ask them about the concerns, frustrations and hurdles they're dealing with. As a salesperson, it's your job to identify the issues your prospect is grappling with. In some cases, you may have to approach the conversation like an onion, peeling away figurative layers before your lead is willing or able to articulate the issue that's plaguing them. In other instances, a prospect may be more than willing and able to discuss their problem openly.

When a prospect is willing to open up and share a frustration or problem they are experiencing, recognize that they are demonstrating a certain amount of trust in you. They are allowing themselves to spend valuable time confiding in you and thus have created an opportunity for you to cultivate a real relationship with them.

If you sense that a prospect is willing to establish a relationship with you, don't rush or force it. As it is with the lasting relationships you have outside of the office, meaningful relationships with prospects and leads turned into clients take time to develop.

While not rushing seems like common sense, salespeople are often rushed. This doesn't mean they're impatient. It just means they have things to do. They have other prospects to see, quotes to prepare, more business to close and sales goals to meet.

Because so many salespeople are in a hurry to produce sales, and they experience so much rejection and indifference on a regular basis, it's often hard for them to resist the temptation to present a solution the moment they learn about a perceived problem. If learning about a potential difficulty isn't the motivation for the premature discussion of a possible solution, salespeople often discuss remedies too soon for other reasons. They want to be respectful and avoid taking up too much of a prospect's time. They don't want to be seen as intrusive or feel like they're interrogating a sales lead. Or, they're afraid that asking too many consultative selling questions will open a proverbial can of worms and they'll have no idea what to do with the information their prospect shares.

To avoid awkward scenarios like the ones mentioned above, many sales reps jump the gun and start discussing their experience, high-profile clients and reputation as evidence of their credibility. Too many salespeople offer information about themselves to prove they can solve a prospect's problem before they have a firm grasp on what the real issue is.

While it's not intentional, the end result of a sales rep jumping in to offer a solution prematurely is the dismissal of the prospect. Instead of doing their job, which is to identify a prospect's problem, salespeople who offer solutions too soon or offer their experience as proof of their credibility only succeed with communicating that their words are more important than what their prospect has to say.

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

When you're qualifying a sales opportunity, your prospect's words, not yours, are the key to your success. You can get your prospects to use their words to communicate their problem by asking consultative sales questions that begin with **"Can you give me an example when _______?"** or **"Share with me an incident when _______?"** These kinds of questions provide context for your prospects to bring their issues to the surface and elaborate on them in detail. When this happens, your prospects will often become animated and excited, and they'll relive the situation they're describing all over again.

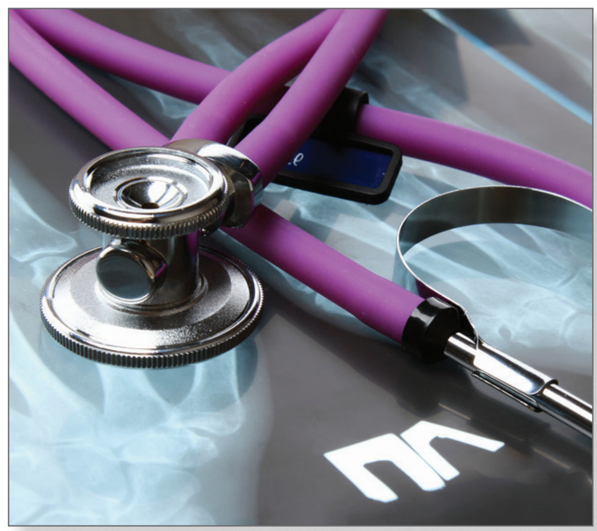
Sales qualification questions that identify a prospect's problem

- **What exactly is the problem?**
- **Can you share with me a recent incident that took place as to why this is a problem (or ongoing problem)?**
- **Can you elaborate on this issue for me?**
- **Will you walk me through what you are experiencing with this problem?**
- **Will you share with me a challenge you're dealing with when it comes to _______________?**
- **What issues are you experiencing with _______________?**

2. Diagnose the root cause of a prospect's issue or problem

Problems and their causes are rarely the same, which means that just about every problem has a separate cause. While that's true, salespeople often want to get to a proposal or quote as quickly as possible without identifying and learning about a problem because they think it will lead to a signed contract faster. In reality, their haste ends up costing salespeople opportunities and alienating prospects.

Before you can present a saleable solution that's appropriate for a lead, you must put together a history for the problem you're trying to resolve so you fully understand it. You must recognize the factors that are in play and responsible for the issue. No matter how long it takes, you must accurately diagnose and understand the root cause of an issue to actually solve it instead of merely putting a Band-Aid over it.



Being a salesperson is somewhat similar to being a doctor when it comes to diagnosing a problem. If you were to visit your doctor because you suffered from diabetes and your sugar levels were skyrocketing or plummeting, what would your physician do? Would they instantly adjust your insulin intake or prescribe an oral medication? Or would your doctor talk to you about lifestyle choices that

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

might be responsible for the swings in your sugar levels? Of course, your physician would talk to you about your diet, exercise regimen, stress and other factors that might be affecting your sugar levels in order to determine the issues that were causing such dramatic swings. In other words, your doctor would diagnose the cause of the problem. As a salesperson, diagnosing the cause of a problem is your job, too.

No matter how long it takes, you must accurately diagnose and understand the root cause of an issue to actually solve it instead of merely putting a Band-Aid over it.

Sales qualification questions that help diagnose the cause of the problem:

- What's causing this to happen?
- What do you believe is the cause?
- You mentioned an issue regarding (service, quality, delivery, performance), can you give me an example as to what happened?
- Can you take me through how and where this problem originated?

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

3. Discover who might be affected by the prospect's challenges

After you discover the root cause of an issue, the next step is find out who is having the most difficulty because of the problem. When you do this, you're identifying the people who have the greatest vested interest in resolving the problem once and for all.

Figuring out who's affected by a problem goes beyond asking, **"Are you the decision-maker?"** You need to know everyone who's affected by the issue and what their thoughts and opinions about the problem are. By learning the perspectives of everyone who's concerned about the difficulty you've identified, you'll understand the bigger picture. This understanding will enable you to position a solution to tackle the problem and get buy-in from the individuals who are affected by the problem at the same time.

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

Sales qualification questions that relate to the people affected by the problem or issue:

- Who else is affected by this problem?
- How is the problem affecting others on your team, and what are they saying about it?
- What are their thoughts about resolving the problem?
- Who is most in favor of getting the problem fixed? Who's not?
- What's the best way to get others involved, sit down and share their opinions with me so everyone's "on the same page" to address the issue?

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

4. Spotlight the actual costs of a prospect's issue

Sales pospects (as mentioned earlier) often get charged up when they're telling you about their problems. They typically discuss their issue in colorful, subjective terms that paint a powerful image of what they're up against, but don't give you any idea of what the problem is costing them.

It's your job to legitimize a prospect's issue by getting cost justification or dollarization of the problem at hand. You need to make concrete numbers part of the conversation you have with a lead in order to get them to wrap their head around what the problem is really costing them. Whether it's lost production hours, reduced productivity, a loss of market share or missed opportunities, both you and your prospect need to know the true, ongoing costs of a problem.

The way to identify the costs of a problem is to ask your prospects consultative sales questions that will produce meaningful, quantifiable answers. When you ask the correct questions, a lightbulb (or several of them) will go off in your prospects' heads, because they'll realize the money and additional resources they're squandering on the problem — and how much more they can achieve by making a change and addressing the issue.

Asking questions does more than lay the groundwork for your prospects to have an epiphany. It also arms them with powerful information they can use to convince their peers that change is necessary. Instead of being seen as complainers, your prospects will be viewed as agents of change who have quantifiable data that justifies the need to take action. When your prospects are knowledgeable, they can wrap their heads around about the true costs of an issue. In turn, they'll gain the confidence they need to sell your solution internally because they'll have verifiable figures that show the fiscal benefits of resolving their problem. They no longer are perceived as folks whining about a problem, but instead can build a viable case as to why corrective action needs to take place, and as a result, saving the company time, money, people, resources, and opportunities. It's your job as the salesperson to empower your prospect to sell your solution to the decision maker by educating them. When they feel knowledgeable about discussing both the issue at hand and your solution in detail to those higher up the chain, you are much more likely to get the buy in you need to close the sale.

When your prospects are knowledgeable, they can wrap their heads round the true costs of an issue.

If, for example, your prospect's problem is turnover, which is costing them $200,000 per year, don't you think their colleagues will listen if they present your employee retention solution which will cost just $15,000 to implement? Of course they will!

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

Sales qualification questions you should ask to uncover the real costs of a prospect's problem:

- What do you think these problems are costing you?
- Based on the problem you've shared with me, what's it costing you in terms of (productivity, performance, people, resources, opportunities, customers, revenue, market share, etc.)?
- How is this problem affecting the bottom line?
- How much (time, money, resources, people, customers, etc.) do you think you end up (spending, losing, wasting, investing) in dealing with this problem?

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

5. Understand a prospect's pain

When you're familiar with a prospect's sense of urgency, you're in a better position to understand the pain they're experiencing as the result of a problem. If they want to resolve an issue immediately, it's great for you and them. If they don't have a timeline to implement a solution to their problem, that's not so good. You need to find out why they're hesitant. Do they have more pressing issues, are they overwhelmed — or is the problem just not that important to them?

You don't necessarily want to present a quote unless your prospect is motivated to act, so it's important to assess the person's urgency and size up the opportunity, if one exists. You need to ask questions such as, **"What if you continued to do exactly what you've been doing?"** and **"If nothing changes, what consequences do you expect?"** Based on your prospects' responses, you'll be able to determine if they're ready to move forward now or they're content with remaining complacent for the time being.

It's basically reverse psychology when a salesperson asks a prospect if they're ready to buy now. Your lead will tell you they are in the heat of pain and need the

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

issue fixed immediately to avoid devastating consequences like laying people off or missing their child's tuition payment. Or they'll say something like, **"We've lived with the issue for a long time. We'll continue to manage fine with it."**

If your prospect does the latter, it typically means one of several things, such as you tried to solve the wrong problem or followed the wrong path. It may also mean they're just not prepared to buy a solution, you're talking to the wrong person or you simply haven't picked up on the clues your prospect has provided during the conversations you've shared.

Sales qualification questions to get a sense of a prospect's pain and urgency:

- **Assuming this problem continues, what's the potential impact on you and your organization?**
- **What if nothing changes? What might be the long-term consequences?**
- **What if this problem were allowed to continue? What do you foresee as the implications on you and your business?**
- **Let's just assume, for a moment, the problem does not get resolved — what concerns do you have for you and your team?**
- **What are the risks (ramifications) if this problem were allowed to continue?**

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

6. Pursue your prospect's gains

Gain is the flip side of your prospect's pain. When in pain, a prospect may cry, weep or pull the trigger on a solution. When they experience gain, prospects are excited, happy and full of dreams and hope. If you've either not pursued the prospect's pain or there's little pain to uncover, understand their gain. You need to figure out what the gain is for your prospects by going after their desires, hopes, aspirations, wants and needs for the future.

To get to a person's gain, ask them how they envision the future, what would happen if they eliminated their problem and what it would mean to them personally if you could help them achieve the results you've discussed. Remember, organizations themselves don't buy — people make purchasing decisions on behalf of organizations.

As a salesperson, you need to know your prospect's emotional drivers. You need to become thoroughly familiar with what moves and motivates your prospects and understand their wants, needs and goals. When you do this successfully, you create an emotional connection that builds trust between you and your prospects.

PAUL CHERRY
302-478-4443

Studies by the Gallup organization show that prospects are 12 times more likely to buy and continue to buy if you can create an emotional connection with them.

> **You need to figure out what the gain is for your prospects by going after their desires, hopes, aspirations, wants and needs for the future.**

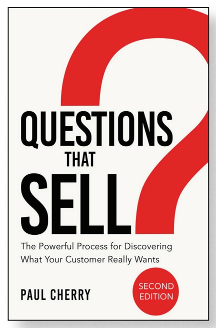
Sales qualification questions to pursue your prospect's gains and establish an emotional connection:

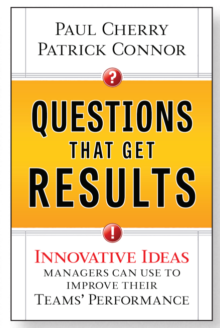
- **What if you could eliminate this problem? What would it allow you to do that you're not doing now?**
- **What if you could fix this problem? What would it mean to you and your business? And what would it mean to you personally?**
- **Assuming you could get this issue resolved, what do you see are the benefits for you and your team?**
- **Imagine that problem going away. What would it look like for you and your organization?**

About Paul Cherry

For over 25 years, sales success expert and author Paul Cherry has helped B2B sales professionals close more deals in all major industries. As a recognized thought leader in customer engagement strategies, he has been featured in more than 250 publications, including **Selling Power, Sales & Marketing Management, Salesforce, Investor's Business Daily, Kiplinger,** and **Inc**.

Paul is the founder of **Performance Based Results,** which delivers intense customized sales workshops, coaching, and leadership programs to companies throughout the USA and Canada.





He has worked with more than 1,200 organizations, including 175 of the Fortune 500, plus more than a thousand entrepreneurial, small to mid-sized, cutting-edge businesses looking to dominate their niche markets. Paul's clients typically get 7 times their sales training return-on-investment (ROI) or better.

His top-rated bestseller, **Questions That Sell** (AMACOM) has been listed on BookAuthority's "100 Best Sales Books of All Time" and has been published in four languages. He is also the author of **Questions That Get Results** (Wiley) and **The Ultimate Sales Pro** (HarperCollins Leadership).

Need a speaker to motivate your sales team for an upcoming conference or event? Call today at **302 478-4443** or visit our website at **pbresults.com**.