

marketfocus

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BRIGHTSPOTS

Rays of opportunity shine through economic clouds

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Each year, Showcase features a variety of seminars led by industry experts. We've interviewed four of those experts to give you some additional insight on their topics.



RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS



Paul Cherry

In sales, on-the-job training comes with the territory. Paul Cherry has parlayed that training into a career helping others hone their sales and leadership skills.

"My first job out of college was selling space for the Yellow Pages," Cherry said. "And I've sold for practically every industry, from high tech to business-to-business to electrical. That experience—and what I learned in those jobs—really prepared me to launch Performance Based Results (PBR) Sales Training & Leadership Development 20 years ago."

Cherry learned early on that asking questions was a good way to establish a relationship with a customer. Asking the right questions enabled Cherry to deepen those relationships—and get more sales.

"Fairly early in my career I read Neil Rackham's *SPIN Selling*," said Cherry, "and it changed my approach. I began asking more probing questions—questions that went beyond superficial to strategic. Customers began telling me more, and buying more."

But where *SPIN Selling* fell short, in Cherry's view, was in the "how and why" of the questions.

"There has to be a balance between the superficial, self-serving questions and the questions that will move the sale forward," Cherry said. "What's more, this approach can be used beyond sales. Good leaders know which questions to ask

employees to motivate and manage to maximize potential."

Asking questions and really listening to the answers are at the heart of PBR's approach and success. The PBR team's first order of business on a new project is pre-training consultation and assessment.

"By asking the right questions, we can learn a lot over the phone," said Cherry. "That enables PBR to customize a program to an individual client's needs." The initial consultation also helps build commitment from PBR clients. "That commitment is crucial to the success of our programs," Cherry said.

Commitment is also crucial to success in sales and management, especially in this economy.

"No matter what kind of business you're in—or what position you hold—the right questions can get you where you need to go, if you listen to the answers," Cherry said. PBR teaches salespeople to ask the questions that cultivate commitment.

For the sales rep, those questions can lead customers to stop fixating on price and start considering value. Sometimes those questions take a salesperson beyond the regular customer contact and into the "C-suite," conducting business with CEOs, CFOs, and other top decision makers.

"Many salespeople feel a sense of loyalty to their primary contact," Cherry said. "This may not be effective from a business standpoint. We guide people in engaging higher-level executives. Very often, this takes people out of their comfort zones. We teach them how to ask the questions that create an emotional connection. That leads to the customer giving more time and more information. And that often results in more and higher-value sales."

In leadership, commitment is a two-way street. There has to be real engagement between managers and employees to keep a business operating smoothly and profitably. It's much more efficient to hire, train, and retain good personnel than it is to repeat the hiring/training cycle over and over.

"One of the things I admire most about many of the businesses I work with, especially the electrical distributors, is that they are family businesses with a strong sense of company history and values," Cherry said. In these businesses, managers are often homegrown, rising through the ranks. And while they've developed very good skill sets for many jobs, they may not have the right skills to manage.

"Not knowing how to grow into a new, higher-level job is one of the biggest challenges I see within companies," Cherry said. "I help people identify which skills to keep and which competencies they should develop and grow. Then they can do the same with their employees."

According to Cherry, one of the best things a business can do is empower people. "Give them the tools to do their jobs, then manage. Don't micromanage."

Cherry recognizes that this can be challenging, so PBR helps businesses focus on the bigger picture. "We help managers become more nimble and creative," he said. "And we guide them toward investing more quality time to management, motivating the sales force, making sure the sales reps are calling on the right people at the customer, and asking the right questions. And listening."

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