

# How much are a couple of questions worth?

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I was coaching a corporate litigator on their selling skills recently, and the prospective client presented them with the following situation:

*The client manufactures a product which is sold around the world. Problems with the way in which it had been packed and stored had created a health and safety risk when the product was opened. The client faced a recall, and the possibility of claims on a number of grounds.*

Doing a good job of following the sales model we were working on, my coachee, I'll call her Fiona, spent some time exploring the concerns and worries of the current situation, and gained an understanding of the consequences of various courses of action, as the client saw them.

These consequences included:

- Cost of recalls
- Cost of various forms of compensation claim
- Loss of repute in the marketplace(s)
- Hassle and time lost to other, better uses.

Fiona had done well to this point, having avoided a basic mistake when selling - one to which professionals in particular are prone. The first thing most lawyers do when confronted with a scenario such as the one above is to ask for detailed specifics: Which countries? How many units? How much does a unit cost?

These details will be important in planning a solution, but they are not motivating. The motivating questions are:

- What does this scenario *mean* to you and your business?
- What are the *knock on* effects of this on the business, its costs, opportunities, repute?
- What if you do nothing about this?

These questions don't ask for boring detail, they ask for *meaning*, and they draw the attention and awareness of the client to the personal significance of the situation – and that makes them highly motivating. They clarify exactly what the client wants to get away from.

So far so good. The next step was to find out what a solution would look like. Fiona asked:

“So, what kind of help would you like with this?”

The client explained thus:

“Well, we’re dealing with multiple jurisdictions, and different rules apply in each case. I’d like to know the way the consequences of doing a recall differ, and get some idea about the speed and hassle of the various claims procedures in different countries”.

At this point (prematurely as it seemed to me), my coachee decided to try to close the deal.

“Why don’t I put together a report to clarify the legislation in each of the jurisdictions?”

The client replied by saying “OK”, but I felt they were hardly bowled over, and sensed a missed opportunity.

I jumped in. “May I ask something, for clarification. You’ve mentioned the need to appreciate the variety of consequences, speeds of procedures and so on...”

The client nodded and I asked my question:

“What will knowing those do for you? Why is it important to the business?”

“Well while we feel a moral responsibility to make good in all countries where this is a problem, I need to plan the order in which we do it. Some jurisdictions are going to be more urgent than others – their rules are stricter, things take longer to get going, require fuller submissions, or are just a huge market where we can’t afford prolonged negative PR. Other places have much slower procedures, award lower compensation and so on, and can be left until later”.

I continued, guessing there was still more leverage to be had: “So the advantage of taking these factors into consideration would be...?”

“Well we can optimise our damage limitation. We can spread cash outflows, take some calculated risks, use our time more efficiently, make sure that we look proactive in our key markets..”.

Now I was ready for my close:

“OK so if you had a report that not only apprised you of the ways the various jurisdictions vary, but also proposed an optimal sequence for dealing with this – taking into account the strictness of regulations, speed of proceedings and likely awards against you – that would be something very useful?”

“Oh, yes, that would be excellent” said the client with a mixture of relief and enthusiasm.

I asked only two further questions than my coachee, but we got to a substantially better place for both the client and ourselves. Now we had a offering to the client which

1. Was tailor-made to their business concerns
2. Differentiated us from other professionals less able to identify their key issues
3. Demonstrated our ability to act as genuine business advisors
4. Provided much higher value to the client, and was therefore much more likely to result in a deal, and at a higher fee.
5. Provided for a more interesting assignment for my coachee.

Not bad for two extra questions.

Details hijack the attention of professionals and technical experts, but clients aren't interested in them for the most part – that's why they're hiring someone else to handle them. Clients are interested in how much better (or at least, less bad) things will be *after* you've done whatever it is you do.

If you can demonstrate your grasp of the value to the client *in their terms* – and it only takes the knack of knowing the right couple of questions at the right time – then your sale will be easier, at a higher fee, and often for more interesting work.

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## If you would like to find out more

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