By Calvin Sun

"There are no stupid questions," as the saying goes. Of course, the cynic will continue by adding, "Only stupid people who ask questions." While I consider that latter view extreme, I do believe that some questions are better than others. Whether you are asking questions of a customer, client, co-worker, or boss, the type of questions you ask can affect how you are viewed. Here are some pointers in this regard.

Distinguish between open and closed questions

A closed question is one that generally can be answered with either a "yes" or "no" by the other person. Examples include "Is your computer powered on right now?" and "Are you running Vista?" Closed questions are good if you want to limit the answers you get from the other person. The danger, however, is that you might miss important information because of assumptions you make when you ask these questions.

Open questions, on the other hand, generally require more than simply a "yes" or "no." They require an elaboration from the person who is questioned, because that question begins with a "who," "where," "why," or "how"? Examples of such questions would be "What were you doing when the problem occurred?" and "What applications are you running right now?" Although the danger of missing information is smaller, asking such questions can result in long-winded answers.

When doing problem determination, both types of questions play important roles. You might begin by asking the customer about the types of symptoms being encountered. Then, while exploring these answers, you might get confirmation by asking closed questions. The process works in reverse as well. You might get a short answer from the customer and find that you must ask the customer to elaborate.

Avoid plain "definition" questions

My general rule is to avoid asking questions if their answers can be found easily via Google or Wikipedia. Therefore, in history class, I would hesitate before asking, "Who won the Battle of New Orleans?" (The answer is Andrew Jackson, and the battle was notable because it occurred, as a result of communications difficulties, *after* the treaty ending the American Revolution was signed.)

Other questions, however, aren't as easily answered this way. These questions generally demonstrate insight on the part of the questioner and are preferable to the "plain definition" questions. Thus, with respect to the Battle of New Orleans, a more insightful question might be, "What do you think would have happened if the *British* had won at New Orleans?"

To avoid misunderstanding and misperception, you might want to make clear that you're asking the second type of question and not the first. For example, you might preface the question above the following way: "I'm not asking who won the Battle of New Orleans, because I know it was the Americans and Andrew Jackson." Then, proceed with the second question.

Making this distinction is critical if you're a level 1 IT support person and you're asking a level 2 person for advice or assistance. You want to avoid giving this impression that you've failed to do your homework. So a request for information might proceed this way: "I know what the registry is, and I understand in general that it can be corrupted. What I need to understand, though, is how this particular patch corrupted it."

Distinguish between "curiosity-based" and "concern-based" questions

People can get defensive over certain questions. But sometimes, they don't need to because you're asking a question only out of curiosity, not because you have a concern. Most people would sense a difference between a boss who asks a subordinate, "Why did you move the file instead of copy it?" and a co-worker who asks another co-worker, "Why did you build a patio instead of a deck?" If you're asking a question simply because you're curious and not because you have an issue involved with the question, make that point clear when you ask. I would preface that kind of question with the following statement: "I have a question, and it's only out of curiosity, because I'm not upset about it. Why did [*nature of question*]…"

Anticipate negative reaction to the "dumb questions"

It does happen, doesn't it, that the computer problem occurred because no power was going to the computer? You don't want to spend half a day with a customer on problem determination only to find that this simple solution was overlooked. Both of you might get in trouble. At the same time, though, you *know* the customer might be upset at being asked a patronizing question, important though it might be. In such cases, I recommend apologizing, and using "the system" as your fall guy. For example, you might preface the question with, "I'm sorry, but I have some standard questions I have to ask. I'm sure you've already done this, but we have to make sure. You have checked, of course, that the power is plugged in?"

Another technique is to acknowledge that your question might sound stupid or ignorant, but then immediately make clear why it isn't. Right now, for example, the cost of a first class letter is 41 cents. Therefore, if someone went to the post office and asked for rolls of 39 cent stamps, one might assume the person was unaware of the rate change. To address this situation, here's what the purchaser might say:

"I know the current rate is 41 cents. However, I do want to buy 39-cent stamps if I can, because I have a bunch of 1-cent stamps that I want to use up."

Set up questions regarding the retraction of a request or assignment

Have you ever asked someone to do something, then later changed your mind? A few moments ago, you were hoping the person *would* do the assignment. But now, you're hoping he or she *didn't* do it. If you're concerned about how the other person will react, it's important to understand the dynamics involved with your asking that person about the assignment. Remember, you're hoping that the assignment hasn't been completed yet. But if you simply ask, "Have you done that assignment yet?" the person probably will think, mistakenly, that you *did* want it done. In that case, they might be nervous or defensive about admitting that the work is undone.

However, if your preface your question with, "I'm hoping you haven't done the assignment I gave you, because our direction has changed," the other person is less likely to withhold information about the missed assignment. By the way, if he or she already did do that assignment, you probably should apologize and say thanks.

Of course, I'm not saying you have to use these techniques. I am saying, though, that being aware of them and the advantages of using them can make you more effective and can is likely to affect how you're perceived.

Calvin Sun works with organizations in the areas of customer service, communications, and leadership. In addition to writing this column, he contributes to TechRepublic's Help Desk Blog. You can contact him at *csun@calvinsun.com*.

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