



THREE WAYS TO START A CONVERSATION AND FINISH WITH A SALE

Ditch your elevator pitch. Zap your infomercial. And whatever you do, keep your carefully worded, painstakingly developed, positioning statement to yourself.

They may make you sound clever, but your elevator pitch, infomercial or positioning statement don't exactly make for good conversations. Which is a shame, because last I checked, even a sales conversation is just that – a conversation.

So what can you say to a prospect sitting across the boardroom table, or someone you meet at a networking event or the beach bum in the next chaise longue? How can you start a conversation in a totally natural, familiar way that doesn't sound like a sales pitch to the other person, doesn't feel like a sales pitch to you, and yet increases your chance of getting your next referral or making your next sale?

Unfortunately, there's no such thing as a magical phrase or headline that will make the other person want to buy your product or services – it just doesn't exist.

What does exist, however, is an approach that will elicit interest from the other person so that he or she will want to engage you in a conversation. As a copywriter, I have adapted several copywriting styles and approaches for use in verbal conversations.

Here are three of my favorites.

#1 The Provocative Question

Chances are, you've seen this technique on websites, flyers and direct mail. It's Copywriting for Direct Marketers 101, and it works just as powerfully in verbal conversations. In fact, it works so well that I'm surprised people don't use it more often!

The best way to come up with a Provocative Question is to ask yourself the following:

"What question can I ask, such that the response from the other person allows me to say, 'That's what I do...?'"

The best Provocative Question pinpoints a problem or a symptom of a problem that the other person has. However, don't get trapped into thinking that the problem has to be a big, generic problem that the category as a whole solves. It can be a small but nagging problem, or even a one that people have when they deal with your competitors.

Many people have a hard time coming up with Provocative Questions because, ironically, the most compelling ones are also the simplest and most obvious. Another thing that people have trouble with is answering a question with a question -- when someone asks us a question, we're wired to answer. What I am suggesting here is that you use that wiring to your advantage.

Here's an example. When someone asks me what I do, I often answer back with a Provocative Question like this:

"Well let me ask you a question. When you go to a networking event or when you have to introduce yourself in public, how confident are you with the way you describe your business?"

Almost every time, the person acknowledges that he or she doesn't feel confident with the way they describe their business. In that moment, I have engaged the other person's interest by presenting what I do in a way that's personally meaningful to him or her. Then, what generally ensues is a conversation about the sales and marketing challenges they have and how I can help.

If, on the other hand, the person responds by saying that they're totally confident with the way they describe their business, that's cool too. I have two choices; I can either move on to another provocative question, (such as, 'That's great, do you get the response you want or would you like more people to ask for your business card, even in social situations?'), or I can talk about how being confident about the way you describe your business shows you have exceptional clarity the true value you offer to your clients -- and how that's the absolute most fundamental plank of your sales and marketing.

It's all good -- it's all about having a conversation around an issue that's both A) important to the other person, and B) related to a core challenge that you help your best clients solve.

#2 The Level-Setting Statement

If you're a financial advisor, consultant, or in any other crowded profession where your prospects are very familiar with -- perhaps even jaded about -- the kind of work you do, this one's for you.

The 'level-setting statement' is a universal statement that gets the other person nodding in agreement and then, WHAMMO! your point of difference hits them like a ton of bricks!

Here's why it's such a powerful technique. You can only be different in comparison to something else. That's what the level-setting statement does -- it establishes what that something else is.

Here's just one example from an event planner I worked with:

"There are five specific areas of expertise that are absolutely critical in major event planning. (Pause -- and wait to see if the other person wants to know what they are.) While there are a lot of excellent event planners who can do a good job in one or two of them, it's extremely unlikely that any one event planner would be an expert in all of them. Because I've been in the business for 15 years -- on both the corporate as well as on the vendor side -- I've developed a detailed planning process around each and every one. That's what enables me to track and manage the myriad of details to guarantee a successful event."

By stating the level-setting statement up front, you educate the other person about the industry you operate in, and establish a frame of reference that gives meaning to the differentiation you want to communicate.

You can use this approach to challenge an underlying assumption that people have about the industry, to illustrate a small but significant problem that generally annoys customers when dealing with your competitors, or anything else that allows you to highlight your solution.

Take a look at your own point of difference. Can you come up with a level-setting statement that will help you stand out even more?

#3 Address The Stereotype Head-on

You know how as soon as people discover you're a _____ (insert your title here), they immediately form an impression about you that's based on a stereotype?

Unfortunately, that stereotype is often negative.

For professions such as life insurance agents or used car salespeople, where the negative stereotypes run strong and deep, I recommend you address the stereotype head-on:

"If I tell you I'm a used car salesman, you'd probably think 'plaid jacket guy who sells lemons to unsuspecting customers', right?"

Pausing here is important here, because you want to give the listener time to move the image of the stereotype from the unconscious part of their brain to the conscious part. They might even want to chime in and give you their negative experience about dealing with 'people like you'.

Perfect -- now their guard is down. Now you can continue on to explain how your business, service or approach 'fixes' the problem that everyone else in your

industry has created.

That's your most compelling differentiator!

Stop selling! And start having real conversations!

Simple as it may seem, everything truly does start with a conversation. You're not trying to tell your entire story, nor are you even trying to get the most important points out of your mouth first. All you want to accomplish is elicit interest from the other person; to have that person say, 'tell me more'.

So don't think of these as sales techniques – think of them as conversation starters.

The rest is up to you. If you are genuinely interested in helping the person you're chatting with, chances are better than excellent you'll finish with a referral or a sale.

Now go out and have some conversations!

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