

An underwater scene with a diver in the upper left, another diver in the middle ground, and a large, dark, textured object in the foreground. The water is blue and slightly hazy. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Insight #1

The Death of **Formulaic** Questioning

Conversations, not interrogations

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If you have been “sold to” in the past, you will remember being subjected to inauthentic salespeople operating from a prescribed list of questions. They were not really listening, just waiting to pounce on anything you said that opened the door to a sale. Those days are over. Sophisticated, informed Buyers are looking for authentic, knowledgeable Sales Professionals who can conduct a meaningful conversation.

Compared to our global findings in 2012, there have been a number of significant changes in Buyer expectations. It is now evident that the thought of being ‘sold’ to or participating in an obvious, contrived sales dialogue is not an experience Buyers enjoy or even respect.

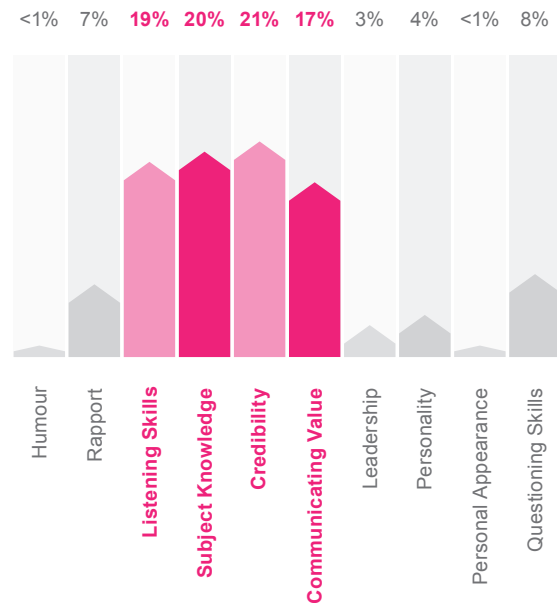
The latest research highlights the need to sell through the art of conversation. Exceptional and effective Sales Professionals must demonstrate both unique knowledge and genuine curiosity about the Buyer - more than anyone else selling to them. In 2015, exceptional sales people are great researchers who leverage the vast ocean of information available to them and turn this into insight that engages and excites their customers. They also use this intelligence to develop better negotiating positions based on value rather than price. All of this is underpinned by the desire and ability to continuously improve the level of discipline they apply to their sales approach.

2015 heralds the death of formulaic questioning. Customers clearly want a conversation, not an interrogation. The research highlighted a spiked difference between the value customers place on ‘listening’ as opposed to ‘questioning’. This reinforces the importance of great conversations skills throughout the customer engagement life cycle.

Good research that identifies topics of conversation, combined with genuine listening, is the ‘mining equipment’ salespeople need to subtly, naturally, and effectively ‘drill down’ in order to understand customers better than anyone else. The ability to gather key nuggets of information and turn them into relevant insights makes the pitch for business much more effective.

Interpersonal Skills

The **most important** interpersonal skills in securing major pieces of business.



“60% of buyers disagree that emotion plays a smaller role in the buying decision.”

Asking questions in a relaxed and authentic manner, rather than in an overly structured and formulaic way, is a fine balance of art and science. Great salespeople will always have a set of carefully crafted questions that demonstrate understanding and prompt insight and they will have the ability to truly listen and carefully probe - essential in today's sophisticated selling environment.

This gives companies seeking to win new business a distinct advantage. In an existing supplier relationship, it is easy to fall into assumptions about the customer's needs and it may even feel uncomfortable conducting deeper conversations because “*we should already know this*”. Existing suppliers need to thoroughly examine what customer knowledge is assumed and what is explicitly known, or find their bread and butter accounts at risk.

At many of our keynote presentations at sales conferences, we pose the question, “Who likes to buy things?”, to which almost every hand in the room goes up! When we ask, “Who likes being sold to?”, the response is much less enthusiastic. As we discuss why this dichotomy of preference exists, there is almost universal agreement that it is mostly down to how the sales conversation unfolds.

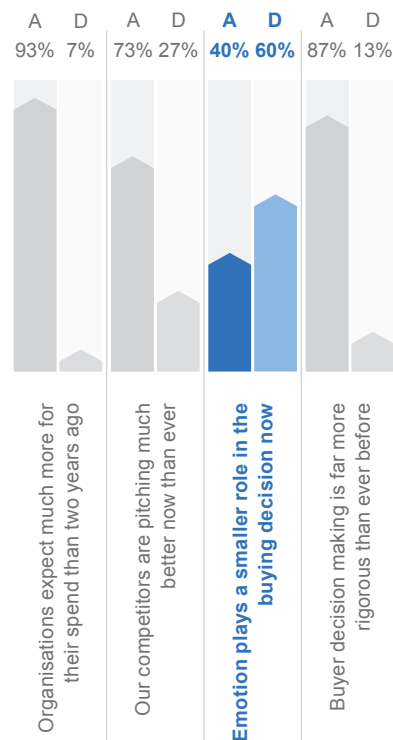
As ‘Buyers’, we want to feel we are in control of the conversation. We ultimately make the decision on what to purchase based on our own preferences, supported by insight and advice. There is a fine line between feeling we have ‘bought’ something and feeling we’ve been ‘sold to’ – ultimately it is about ownership of the decision. An authentic, organic, and professional sales conversation is the key to navigating the Buyer towards owning their decision.

Sales Professionals are often sceptical about the role emotion plays in the sale: “Surely, at the end of the day, it’s about getting the price right?” This is not surprising, given that they continuously find themselves in conversations around price, delivery, warranties, and product or service specifications. To test this belief, we asked our Buyers if they agreed with the statement: “Emotion is playing a smaller role in the buying decision”, 60% of Buyers responded this was NOT the case.

This is a strong endorsement of the importance Buyers are placing on organic, connected conversations, rather than a thinly veiled attempt to sell them something. Price does play a role in the decision, but it is not the only factor.

Trends

Select whether you **agree (A)** or **disagree (D)** with the following statements.

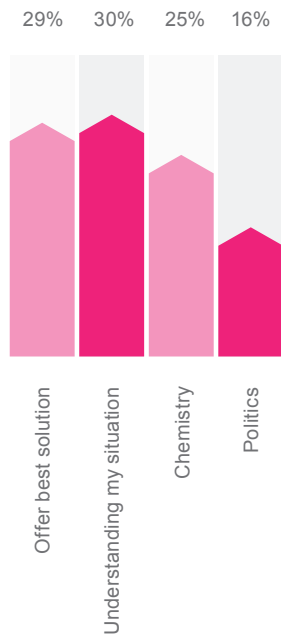


Compared to our 2012 report, 'chemistry' as a key buying criteria is up significantly, rising from 13% to 25%. We believe the verdict is in: formulaic questioning is dead.



Decision Making

2015 Research Findings.
Key factors in the customer buying decision.



One

Teach 'conversation skills', rather than 'diagnostic skills' – focus on listening and drilling down on responses.

Two

Limit the use of contrived, 'formulaic' questions – never ask the customer: "Tell me about your business".

Three

Coach and develop listening skills as a critical competency.

Four

Ensure enquiry is tempered with insight – lead with a point of view, then discuss how this fits with the customer's circumstance.

Five

Practice conversation skills in team meetings – practice difficult conversations.

