

# The ART of QUESTIONS: *It's not only what you ask – but how – that gets you the information you need and saves you time*

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***“It is better to ask some of the questions than to know all the answers.” – James Thurber***

In our time-constricted, multi-tasking, too-much-to-do-with-too-few-dollars environment, every fleeting millisecond counts. So, almost nothing rates higher on the annoy-o-meter than trying to solve yet another problem with an unhappy constituent, customer, co-worker (or spouse) and not being able to discern the true cause of an issue in rapid fashion.

The only solution (short of mind-reading, which, for some reason, may people think we're capable of doing) is to what I refer to as “appropriate questioning,” as much art as science.

Although it's impossible to come up with a single method that always helps you drill down to core issues quickly, understanding the difference and the usage of **OPEN** and **CLOSED** questions can save you countless hours of banging-your-head-against-the-wall frustration.

## **Open Questions**

An OPEN question is one that causes the person answering it to, in effect, “open up.” They are forced to look within at a variety of non-standard choices and describe what they are feeling or thinking, thereby giving you additional perceptions about their thought process. (By contrast, a CLOSED question causes the person to choose an answer from very few options.)

By using open questions at the onset of a problem, it lowers the likelihood that the “questionee” will provide routine or pat answers. This quickly provides insights into what must be done to resolve the issue. It also makes you appear more understanding and caring (which you are of course), further lowering tension.

## **Examples of Open questions might include:**

- Suppose everything was to turn out positively, what would have to happen?
- Picture the perfect solution. What does it look like?
- What do I need to do right now for you to feel that your concerns were met?
- What was the event that prompted you to bring this up this time?

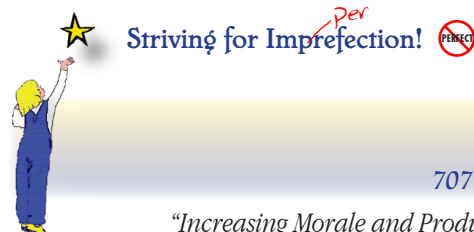
## **A question in sentence's clothing**

Don't get locked in to the standard format of a question. When trying to resolve issues, one of my favorite “questions” is “Tell me more . . .” Granted, the literal grammarian in the crowd might have my head for labeling this semi-declarative statement a “question,” but it elicits answers that guide.

Any time you can cause someone to “create” images in his head, it increases the question's effectiveness. By using words such as “imagine,” “suppose,” or “picture;” the person answering the query is also somewhat removed from the present emotional situation and mentally transported elsewhere. Not only can this help diffuse some agitation that might be contributing to the problem, but it allows for a more creative solution, as well as letting you analyze body language changes.

## **Don't leave things “open”**

Once you feel you have been pointed in a direction that might help you deal with the matter at hand, the next step is to confirm that you are actually heading down the correct path. That is the power of the closed question.



MEMBER  
**NSA**  
NATIONAL SPEAKERS ASSOCIATION

**SCOTT “Q” MARCUS**

707.442.6243 • [scottq@scottqmarcus.com](mailto:scottq@scottqmarcus.com) • [www.scottqmarcus.com](http://www.scottqmarcus.com)

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After understanding where the other person is, we begin to narrow down the options to determine by skillful use of closed questions.

**Examples might include:**

- Would you like me to issue a refund?
- Do you want to talk to a supervisor?
- Would that be satisfactory?
- Aside from that, is there anything else you need to move forward with this deal?

Notice the answer to each of these questions is almost always, “yes” or “no.” Sometimes it might be other choices too; but it is used to narrow down options, confirm understanding, or to build agreements; unlike its cousin, the open question, which is used to open possibilities, expand options, and increase awareness.

**Danger: Too Many Questions**

Be wary of using too many closed questions too closely together. In my communication seminars, many times I will ask participants to ask a partner nothing but closed questions for one minute. In the debrief that follows the activity, the most common reply to “How did that feel?” is “like an interrogation.” Therefore, unless you have the customer in a dark, windowless room under a barren light bulb, strapped to on an uncomfortable wooden chair, peppering him with a slew of closed questions is not the optimal way to illicit information.

**Open it before you close it**

Similar to a door, one must open it to move forward. However, after stepping through it, it’s also important to close it. Therefore, when trying to resolve issues, whether minor or major, remember to “open first and then close.”

Ask the other person to describe a scenario, explain what they saw, or illustrate what they expect. Dig as deep as you need until you think you have a handle on a solution. Then confirm that understanding with a closed question or two. If the answer is not what you expect, repeat the process until it is.

At first it might seem like a lot of thought is necessary to use appropriate questioning, but in less time than it takes to handle a grumpy customer or angry spouse, you’ll discover how powerful and time-saving it really is. And giving yourself a few extra minutes while lowering tension in your life would feel great; wouldn’t it?

***(Notice the clever use of a closed question.)***

About the writer:

***Scott “Q” Marcus refers to himself as a “THINspirational Speaker and Recovering Perfectionist” He lost 70 pounds in 1994 and playfully helps overworked individuals and organizations improve their communication lower conflict, increase productivity, and reduce stress. He is a syndicated columnist, award-winning speaker, and the author of three books. This article can be downloaded from [www.scottqmarcus.com/articles.html](http://www.scottqmarcus.com/articles.html) and he can be contacted for consulting or speaking at [scottq@ScottQMarcus.com](mailto:scottq@ScottQMarcus.com) or 707.442.6243***