



Many years ago in the dark ages, before the laptop, notebook, Palm® Pilot, Blackberry™, PDM, cell phone - indeed all of the wonderful time-saving, labor-reducing, user-friendly, leading edge devices that we just cannot function without - we used to carry around hard-sided briefcases. Hardly a sales rep back in those days did not have one, usually a Samsonite®, and the style and look of these had a fair bit to do with the internal one-upmanship within the sales gang. There was the standard smooth finish model, some opted for the brown pebble-grained look, and the odd brave soul even went for the faux alligator in deep burgundy. You had to be there.

Along with these various potential fashion/ego statements, one feature that just about all of them had was a little space under the handle where you could stick those embossed self-adhesive initials. This feature also spawned a little hierarchal horseplay in the team pecking order. Many of the rookies would have those initials right up there front and center, while most of the veterans coolly ignored them as being just a little tacky. Another mitigating factor of course was those afflicted with the deadly acronym syndrome. You'd never see initials on briefcases belonging to Albert Steven Sanders, Donald Ulrick Davidson, Sally Ann Porter, Fred... well I'm sure you get the picture. And then there were always those few sensible folks who just thought it was a good idea, for identification purposes if nothing else – vestigial traces perhaps from the days of Mom putting nametags on their school clothes.



So one day, I was out on a sales call with one of my sales representatives and noticed the letters *ATQ* on his briefcase. Not too much wrong or outstanding about that until you know that his name was Ray and his initials were RJT. One thing you should know about Ray is that he definitely marched to a different drummer so I assumed that perhaps he had borrowed (stole? inherited?) the case from an Andrew Taylor Quinton or some such person, or maybe he had a little inside joke on the go - I didn't know. However, one thing I did know was that Ray was also an exceptional sales professional – one of the best I've ever known.

A little while later I had a chance to ask him about the briefcase and those initials *ATQ*. He laughed and explained that he'd purposely put those initials on his case. Why? Because *ATQ* stands for one of the most powerful selling tactics I know and it was there to always remind him to “Ask The Question”. As he reached for his briefcase at the end of every meeting, he would always see the initials and be reminded to Ask The Question.

Today the question may be asked in a number of ways, but it always starts with the same four words...”Is there anybody else...”

Is there anybody else I should be talking to?

Is there anybody else that may be interested in talking with me?

Is there anybody else that will be involved in this decision?

Is there anybody else you know that you could refer me to?

What do we find out from these questions? Well, all of us who have been involved in cold calling or prospecting know the value of a warm friendly body. A referral is, hands down, the most effective way to start any new selling relationship. If someone who has already given you their time (and, even better, their business) gives you the name of one of their contacts - it is gold. To then follow up and call on this new contact and confidently state that “Jennifer Client” or “Joe Customer gave you their name as someone that they considered would be interested in talking to you” - this is worth 100 cold calls!



Another great reason for asking the question; if you are into a selling situation and you ask if there is anyone else you should be talking to, you may hear something you don't want to hear or weren't expecting. But it will save you a lot of time and grief by finding out sooner rather than later. You may hear...

“Oh, you should be talking to Jim, he has the budget for this”

“I guess we should go talk to Mary in purchasing, she has to authorize all these purchases”

“Nilesh, my boss, will have to be involved”

These and responses like them can reveal new elements of the sales process that need to be addressed before a successful close. Better to know now who else should be involved.

Two solid reasons to **A**sk **T**he **Q**uestion – you'll find out more about the selling cycle you're in, and you'll find out more about the greatest prospect of them all, the referral.

From Martyn Lewis' upcoming book "Sales Wise - an anthology of selling stories, follies, and fables", each with a *relevant* and *timely* sales message. To be published later in 2003. If you wish to be notified of publication date please email us at saleswise@market-partners.com