

# Understanding the Client's World – Questioning and Listening

“Seek first to understand...then to be understood”

Central to the sales process is the ability to gain an understanding of the client's world:

- Their current business situation, people, customers, products, supply lines
- Their plans for their business and target markets
- Their performance
- Their existing supplier facilities and decision-making processes in this regard

Only with a thorough understanding of these areas will we be able to suggest the most effective solution and ensure that the client sees the value of that solution.

When striving to understand these areas from a client, it is important that we bear in mind the psychological iceberg, recognising the key difference between logical, surface needs and the more emotive wants.

## The ‘iceberg’ principle



Clients do not reveal the under-the-surface iceberg issues easily. These consist of their personal emotive drivers – aspirations and goals, peer approval, desire for control and security. It takes both a high level of rapport (built during the opening minutes) and good questioning skills to draw out these drivers in a client interview.

# The power of questions

Questions are the single, most powerful human communication tool which we have available. Questions enable us to:

- Gain information
- Build rapport (shows interest)
- Understand both needs and wants (both ends of the iceberg)
- Make someone think – a question triggers an automatic search mechanism in the human brain; clients have no choice but to think about a subject if we ask them a question about it

Questions are therefore a crucial method for influence and it is useful to develop a set of tools, designed directly from the features and advantages of your product/service, to aid you in using questions built around your sales proposition in a structured way.

When trying to understand a client's 'iceberg', questions must be open in particular – what, how, who, which, when, where – rather than closed, if we want the client to open up and share with us their real concerns and desires in relation to their businesses. A structured approach to understanding the iceberg would also involve the use of the FOIC model:

*Factual Questions* which are easy for the client to answer (surface level) and give us a width of understanding of the situation eg. *How long have you been in business? What is your turnover?*

*Opinion Questions* which help us to get under the iceberg and begin to understand the client's areas of pain or pleasure (away from pain or towards pleasure are the only human motivators for action) eg. *How's that going for you? What's your view on that? How do you feel about that? Why is that important?*

*Impact Questions* which can make a client think about the full implications, at an emotive level, of the concerns or opportunities they have shared eg. *How is that affecting on you/the business? What impact is that having/could that have? What happens if you do nothing?*

*Change Questions* which cause a client to think about options for change or how things could be better eg. *What could you do about that? How would you like it to be? What would help with that?*

A mix of these types of questions not only enables us to understand the key drivers for a client, but also enables us to build value *in the client's mind* for a solution. The client is much more likely to 'own' a solution which they feel they thought of themselves – skilled questioning can achieve this.