Selling Skills

Sales Tips and Advice

Nina Sunday

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About the author

Nina Sunday is an Australian-born speaker, educator and author.

A Queensland University graduate (Bachelor of Arts, Diploma in Education), Nina is one of approximately 750 professional speakers worldwide to earn Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) accreditation, the highest international speaking designation awarded to members of the Professional Speakers Association.

Nina has been engaged over 2000 times as a keynote speaker and workshop leader in Australia, Singapore, Japan, New Zealand and the South Pacific by more than 500 organisations. She has published two books, produced five training videos, been invited on radio as a guest expert on many occasions and written dozens of published articles.

Nina founded Australian training company, Brainpower Training, specialising in training in Leadership and Engagement, Service and Sales, Productivity and Emotional Intelligence.

Nina served two terms as NSW State President and board member of Professional Speakers Australia. The Australian Institute of Training and Development awarded her an *Innovation in Learning* award.

Contents

Do you ask enough discovery questions when selling?

Whether dealing with a customer or a colleague, it pays to ask questions before jumping to conclusions. No matter what your role, seek first to understand by asking questions. Questions help you avoid making incorrect assumptions.

What's the best way to handle an incoming sales enquiry over the phone? Do you open the conversation with a pitch, or do you take time to first discover their needs by asking questions? Do you take time to diagnose what is the real problem rather than rush into offer a solution too soon?

Most salespeople sell products rather than sell a solution. And the best way to diagnose a solution is to stay curious and ask powerful questions.

There's an art to phrasing questions.

In this article we'll explore the best way to create questions, how to ask them, including how to prime your brain before you even take that call, so you ask the right questions in the right order.

Why Ask Questions?

Questions are engaging. To answer a question requires your prospect to converse with you. It gets the conversational ball rolling and opens up the channels of communication.

Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, (1875–1961), refers to 'positive transference'[(1)], the notion that once someone opens up about their problems or challenges, they direct positive feelings towards their listener, someone who 'understands'. This positive attachment means you become their trusted advisor; cultivates the hope that you will come through with a solution to their situation.

Avoid Talking 'At'

Offering a solution too soon often means you are talking 'at' people about your product or service; you're trying to get them to fit into your solution. But the moment you say, '*Tell me about the problem' or 'How long has that been happening?'* you demonstrate you want to get under the surface and truly understand the situation. You're cultivating the perception you'll come up with a tailored solution.

During that opening conversation you can ask, *'Does it make sense to look at the actual issues you're wanting to solve first, then we can see if we're a good fit.'* The impression you want to give is, *'I don't assume I can help you. Let's first find out what your challenges and issues are; then we can determine if we are a good fit.'* Not only does that approach suggest you are not 'desperate' for the business, but also that you don't automatically say yes to every request for assistance.

This generates trust.

What Questions To Ask?

You might have heard about the difference between open and closed questions? A closed question is one where the answer is either yes or no. We sometimes fall into the trap of asking closed questions. But if you open the conversation with an open question such as, *'Tell me about why you've contacting us today,'* or *'Tell me about the challenges you're experiencing.'*

This approach is superior to greeting a prospect with a pitch.

Framing Questions

Don't just ask them, *'How long has this been going on?'*, add a pain word for emphasis, e.g. *'How frustrated are you by how long this has been going on?'*

More Pain Words

Do you ever feel uneasy when . . . ?
Are you worried by . . . ?
Are you struggling to . . .?

These pain words emphasise the pain of not taking action, which leads to an opportunity to offer your solution down the track.

What-to-say Guide

I don't call it a script; I call it a what-to-say guide. Use a list of questions using conversational wording as a checklist to guide you through a diagnostic process.

And it is only a guide. Many times it feels right to ask questions out of the usual order and use whatever wording feels natural at the time.

Whether over the phone or face-to-face, prospects don't mind if you ask a series of 'get to know' questions. They feel listened to.

Over The Phone

My question checklist is a simple Word table, with a question in the left hand column, and space in the right hand column to insert the response. Using a headset to keep my hands free, I can simply type in the answers as they speak.

Face-to-face

If meeting in person, I take along a printout of my list of questions and handwrite the answers in the right hand blank column with a pen. (In the past I trialled, during face-to-face meetings, to type their answers directly onto my device. I felt a little silly, like I was typing a transcript of an interrogation. The handwritten document is the way to go; it feels more 'personal'.)

Action

1. Use conversational language.
2. Call it a 'diagnostic'.
3. It's okay to tell them you are writing notes as we go, so if they do decide to go ahead, you have it captured. Save these diagnostic notes in your client folder or CRM to refer to later.
4. To improve your chances of making the sale, summarise the key ideas and add it to your proposal.

One option — before sending your proposal — send first only their 'confidential brief'. You can ask them to confirm you captured it correctly. You are drip-feeding them your information which foreshadows the arrival of the proposal.

Top 8 mistakes people make when selling

Here are some errors people make when selling.

Mistake #1: Not Asking Enough Discovery Questions

Research shows a salesperson should encourage the prospect to speak, not even 50/50, but more than the salesperson!

By asking questions you're engaging your customer in a conversation. The worst thing you can do is to rush in with a solution and start telling your customer about your product.

Mistake #2: Being 'Busy' Instead Of Contacting Customers

One of the biggest mistake salespeople make is getting distracted by activity or 'being busy'. It might be spending time on a proposal or fulfillment of an order. Are you getting distracted from customer contact by secondary activities?

Call reluctance is being busy with other things other than picking up the phone to call a prospect because of some, often sub-conscious, emotional hesitation. Any time you're not talking to a customer — phone, face-to-face or email — you are not engaged in income-generating activities. If you notice a pattern of avoiding proactive customer contact, ask yourself, 'Am I suffering from (what's known as) call reluctance?' And be honest with yourself.

The biggest pitfall for anyone involved in sales is convincing themselves that staying 'busy' leads to a sale. Customer contact leads to sales.

When it comes to drafting proposals, avoid perfectionism and get them out quickly so you can move forward to the next follow-up.

The 1 - 7 Method

One way to ensure you fit in your follow-ups is to decide on a number of contacts you're willing to commit to contacting, every business day, come what may. I work with seven.

At start of 'Sacred Contact Time', I write in my daybook numbers 1 through to 7, vertically, down the left hand side. Next I focus on contacting seven priority prospects — whether by email or phone.

If there are 20+ business days in a month, that's 140 touches. That keeps sales momentum going.

Mistake #3: Giving Up Too Soon

So many salespeople give up at the first 'no' or 'we haven't had time to consider it yet.'

A customer might need eleven touches — eleven contacts from you — before they say yes. If you give up and don't call back after touch number ten, you've lost the sale!

Stay In Touch During the Indecision Period

Sometimes it's all about timing. For some prospects, it's not 'no' but 'not yet'. If you stay in touch even when they tell you something else has come up, or we can't move forward, who will they think of when suddenly it comes back to being a priority?

Mistake #4: Not Describing 'WIIFM' — What's In It For Me

When mentioning a product feature it's important to also add, ' . . . what that means to you is . . . ' or ' . . . which means you won't ever have to . . . '

Remember to add the benefit every time you mention a feature of a product or service.

Mistake #5: Not Qualifying

Are you talking to the decision-maker? Are there multiple decision-makers? Remember to ask, 'Is there anyone else involved in making the decision?' Offer to teleconference with all decision-makers.

(It might make sense to get your own web teleconference account for this purpose.)

Mistake #6: Not Managing Buyer Resistance

Create a what-to-say guide of replies to typical customer objections. Don't accept no; find ways to keep the conversation going.

Mistake #7: Not Asking For The Order

In this customer-savvy world, it's not about hard sell or asking closing questions any more.

A simple question like:

- 'So would you like to take the next step?'
- 'How would you like to move forward?'
- 'It makes sense to me to place an order, what do you think?'

posed at the right time can advance the sale and make a difference.

Mistake #8: Not Giving Post-sale Customer Service

Many salespeople get distracted by the next incoming enquiry and completely neglect a profitable area of repeat business — existing customers.

Existing customers are five to seven times more profitable than marketing to new customers. To forget about post-sale customer service is losing an opportunity to cross-sell, upsell and repeat sell.

When is the Best Time to Call (BTTC) by Phone?

Staying in touch by phone

When is the best time to do phone follow-up?

Connect rate

Boston-based performance analytics company, Insight Squared, analysed thousands of sales phone calls and identified days of the week and times of day that generated highest connection rate. They published their results in 2014*.

Best time

Their research pinpointed best time of day is between 10:00 am and 4:00 pm.

(This conflicts with results of the 2007 Odroyd study which concluded that to reach decision makers, ring early, 8:00 am to 9:00 am then 4:00 pm - 5:00 pm.)

But these days, don't you find prospects won't pick up the phone at 8:00 am; their voicemail is on?

And 9:00 am is still too early. The work day is starting in earnest. They're busy checking emails, meeting with staffers or getting the team rolling.

It's all in the timing.

People have to be receptive when you contact them, and latest research shows they're receptive between 10:00 am and 4:00 pm.

Best day

And best day of the week with the highest connect rate? Research indicates Tuesday.

Wednesday is the next best day, followed by Monday, then Thursday then Friday.

How can we apply this information?

If you are a business development professional, would you suggest a face-to-face meeting at a client office on a Tuesday?

If that's your best day to MAKE appointments, why would you DO appointments on that day?

(Unless of course a client specifically requests that day for your meeting.)

Knowing Tuesday is the best contact day, preserve that day for in-office phone or email contact.

Knowing Friday or Thursday are worse for reaching your prospect, schedule your out of office appointments on those days.

Knowing this, you can orchestrate activities around best days and times.

Case study

Let me give you an example of how some sales team members, left unmonitored, do what they feel like doing, instead of doing what's best for getting results.

I was leading sales training in Melbourne with a telemarketing team and asked, 'What's the best time of day to connect with the people on your list?'

They concluded, '10:00 am to 12:15 pm, then 2:15 pm to 4:15 pm.'

I then asked, ‘What time do you go to lunch?’

One staffer revealed she went to lunch after 2:00 pm each day. Why? Just because she preferred lunch between 2:00 pm and 3:00 pm.

We went deeper.

‘So, you’re continuing to call through the lunch hour of most of your prospects, 1:00 pm to 2:00 pm, a time frame with lower connect rate. Then at 2:00 pm when people are coming back from lunch, that’s when you take your lunch?

Is that the best use of your time?

By shining a light on unproductive, habitual behaviour, she was able to commit to move her lunch break forward.

Sacred calling time

In our business, we name the periods 10:00 a.m. to 12.15 pm and 2.15 pm to 4.15 pm 'Sacred Calling Time'.

Outside of those times we fit in operational and admin tasks, compile proposals, or meet as a team. Key contact hours of the day are devoted to staying in touch with people that matter, our valued prospects and clients.

So, what’s true in your business?

Action

1. Analyse the connect rate and BTTC (best time to call) in your business.

2. Ensure your sales team focuses their calling around best days and best times of day.

3. Put up a sign, ‘Sacred Calling Time’, to focus attention and productivity.

4. Make a distinction between sales generating behaviour and operational tasks, then perform each type of task in the right 'time zone'.

Remember to first ask, 'Is this a bad time to call?'

Phoning a client, have you ever felt as if you were an interruption; something about the hurried pace or tone of voice?

With e-mail, your recipient chooses when to check their inbox, but a phone call is an interruption.

It’s only courteous to first ask, before going into the reason for calling, ‘Is this a ***good*** time to call?’

But consider what the response might be if you ask instead, ‘Is this a ***bad*** time to call?’ ***Good*** time vs. ***bad*** time – which is better?

In marketing and in sales - test, test, test, test, test.

If you ask ‘Is this a ***good*** time to call’, you’ve left it open for them to reply, ‘No it isn’t. Can you call back another time please?’. You’ve dialled, but you haven’t moved forward the conversation, or the relationship. In sales, this is what’s called a ‘continuation’.[1]

Compare ‘Is this a ***bad*** time to call?’ Even if it is an inconvenient time, you may find the likely response is, ‘It’s always a bad time, so go ahead anyway.’ Advancement!

As a positive person, my natural inclination used to be to open a call with, ‘Is this a ***good*** time to call?’ But after testing both versions, I’m now convinced, ‘Is this a ***bad*** time?’ is more likely to gain a conversation then and there. This one little word change can make a big difference.

In sales, it saves you time and unnecessary redialling avoids you becoming stuck in continuation and progresses the sale.

How to respond to the Hollywood brush-off, ‘Don’t call us, we’ll call you.’

Do you follow-up possible new clients after they request information? Here’s an easy way to keep the door open to an ongoing relationship until the time is right for them to say ‘yes’.

Perhaps you’ve experienced a possible new client shut the door to telephone follow-up with a brush-off statement like ‘I’ll contact you after I’ve read your information.’ That’s what I call the Hollywood objection, ‘Don’t call us, we’ll call you.’. After auditioning, aspiring actors in Hollywood were often given this cliché response.

If you respond with, ‘OK, I’ll wait to hear from you then,’ you haven’t asked for permission to contact again.

Instead, use this 3-step method whenever they get a DCUWCU – don’t call us, we’ll call you – response, so you easily gain consent to stay in contact.

1. Say ‘that’s fine.’

Your automatic reaction should be to agree by saying, ‘that’s fine.’

2. Ask permission: ‘And If I haven't heard from you in say, 10 days, is it ok to call you then?

Start with ‘and’; never use ‘but’ (which sounds oppositional and creates resistance.)

Judge the right timeframe; if might be one month or three months, whatever feels right.

Nine out of ten clients will say yes, unless they absolutely have zero interest and tell you again, ‘No, please don’t call.’ That’s good to know; you can simply take them off your call-back list.

3. When you call back, remind them they gave you permission

‘When we last spoke in < November >, you suggested I phone around this time regarding . . .’ Now when they hear from you, you are not interrupting them, but following their instructions. This is the elegance of gaining permission.

Actions

1. Remember to end every phone call referring to the best time frame to contact again, and wait for them to agree.

2. Then make sure you make a note of the agreed call-back date in client history and schedule the call-back on your calendar.

How you end a sales-call determines whether the next time you contact your prospect they’ll be happy to hear from you or whether they’ll consider your call an interruption.

Selling today is about continuously asking your customer for permission to stay in contact, so they expect to hear from you, keeping the door open to an ongoing relationship.

In sales proposals do you include an ROI statement?

Have you ever had a sales prospect tell you, ‘I now have to convince my manager’ (or boss or head office, or whoever)? As a buyer, do you ever have to convince another stakeholder?

When multiple decision-makers are involved, do you know how to calculate an accurate and plausible *Return On Investment* (ROI) for a product or service?

More sales are lost to doing nothing, than to a competitor.

One way to move a decision forward is to include an ROI statement in your proposal.

But Business Case templates can be complex and highly structured. What’s an example of a sales technique with a simple and quick cost/benefit statement that’s easy to calculate and easy to understand?

Scenario 1: Library Upgrade

If you are calculating the benefit of upgrading a library’s IT services you might focus on a measurable business problem effecting productivity – time spent by librarians looking for user IDs.

To illustrate how much time is being lost by librarians, (when they could be performing other more useful tasks), you might write:

The Business Case

- If 100 librarians each waste 10 minutes per day looking for user IDs
- that’s 16.6 hours of time lost per day X $37 per hour estimated hourly rate
- = $616 cost per day
- or annual lost revenue: $616 X 235 workdays in a year
- = $144,760 value of lost time per annum.

If improved user ID process saves 50% of time, that’s a saving of $72,380.

ROI (Return on Investment) formula:

(Gain – Cost) ÷ Cost ....Gain minus Cost divided by Cost.

If to implement an improved process is $20,000, then:

ROI formula: $\frac{\textbf{Gain} - \textbf{Cost}}{\textbf{Cost}}$ and in this scenario $\frac{\$72{,}380 - \$20{,}000}{\$20{,}000}$

ROI = 2.61 times or 261%

SUMMARY: For a once-off investment of $20,000 (plus your implementation costs), you can expect to achieve a minimum annual Return on Investment of 261% which will effectively have paid for itself within 6 months.

Scenario 2: Presentation Skills Training

If calculating the benefit of Presentation Skills training for sales representatives, you can draw attention to the value of extra sales due to improved confidence, authority and influence. You might write:

The Business Case

What is one extra sale per person worth in a year?

If, as a result of this training, 10 representatives present with more confidence, more authority and more influence to gain *even one extra client each* in the next 12 months, with average sale worth $24,000*, then return in one year is potentially $240,000

*My average sale might be a bit high, or low, but whatever calculation you use should produce a significant result.

Return on Investment (ROI)

If cost of training is $6,000 plus implementation, 10 salaries for two days, estimate $11,550

ROI formula: $\frac{\textbf{Gain} - \textbf{Cost}}{\textbf{Cost}}$ and in this scenario $\frac{\$\mathbf{240{,}000} - \$\mathbf{23{,}550}}{\$\mathbf{23{,}550}}$

ROI = 9.19 times or 919%

For a once-off investment of $23,550 (plus your implementation costs), you can expect to achieve a minimum annual Return on Investment of 919% which will effectively have paid for itself within a couple of months.

If you then add a statement about *the risk of doing nothing*, you have just created a compelling business case for your prospect to make a decision.

What is soft ROI?

As well as hard ROI expressed as dollars, there's soft ROI – emotional benefits, such as:

reduced stress and frustration
improved customer service
faster response
improved morale.

‘Feel – felt – found: try this classic negotiation tactic using ‘social proof as a reason to take the next step.’

Can you think of a time when a client considered your product or service too expensive or not right or just had any reason not to proceed?

Here's a classic negotiation tactic that can influence your client to change their mind, yet still 'save face'.

To help you remember, call it the 'three Fs':

1. **Feel:** empathise with the other person by agreeing with their point of view.

2. **Felt:** point out many of your clients also once held that view (use the past tense).

3. **Found:** outline the information that caused your clients to change their mind.

Imagine your customer says, ‘We would like to go ahead and buy (your product or service), but it's more than our budget allows.'

Using the Feel-felt-found approach you might say:

1. ‘I can understand how you might **feel** that way.

2. ‘Many of our clients **felt** initially it was more than they wanted to spend.

3. But after they went ahead, they **found** it actually saved money on training, overtime, and shrinkage.’

Here's another scenario

A not-for-profit organisation seeks a regular monthly donation.

They ask, 'Would you consider making a regular monthly gift of $50 per month?'

The possible new donor replies, 'Although I support what you do, I can’t afford $50 a month.'

Using feel-felt-found, the fundraiser replies,

1. 'I can understand how you’d **feel** that way.

2. Many of our regular donors **felt** that way at first.

3. But they decided to give it a go anyway, on the understanding they can cancel their donation any time.

And do you know what? They **found** over time, there always was enough money to continue their pledge.'

[Then ask a question.]

'On the understanding you can cancel anytime, would you be willing to give it a go?'

Why does *Feel-Felt-Found* work more often than it doesn't?

There is a human need to belong, to heed the crowd.

It's what Robert Cialdini in his book *'Influence: The Psychology of persuasion'* calls social proof.[2]

People do things they see other people doing.

Do you enter an empty restaurant, or one that is full of patrons?

If you see a crowd gathered, does curiosity compel you to find out what the fuss is about?

To test this out, try looking up into the sky in a public place. Notice how many others will then look up into the sky to see what you are seeing.

It's a basic instinct.

A tip: Be careful how you say it. Don't say, 'I ***know*** how you feel.'

This choice of words sometimes produces an angry response. You can't ever really know how another person feels.

Say instead, 'I ***can understand*** how you might feel that way.' Or, 'I can imagine how you must feel.'

Another scenario

A customer is concerned if they purchase new computer software it will be too complex and take too much time for staff to master.

They might object with, 'I think it's hard to understand and will take too long to get up to speed.'

Using feel-felt-found, you might respond with,

1. 'I can understand how you might **feel** that way, < name >.
2. Many of our clients **felt** the same way . . .
3. … until they started using the software and **found** it quicker to master than they at first thought.'

What are typical objections with your product or service that could be successfully handled with the 'Feel-felt-found' approach?

e.g. Objection: 'It's too . . . '

Now respond with,

Feel: 'I can understand why you'd **feel** that way ...

Felt: 'Many of our clients **felt** . . .

Found: 'but what they **found** was . . .

Improve your phone voice and make more sales.

How important is your voice when selling? Do you build trust with a voice that displays energy, confidence and reassurance?

Does a high-achieving salesperson use their voice more effectively over the phone?

Research shows salespeople with more inflection in their voices make more sales over the phone.* A bright voice with energy and vocal variety is more persuasive than a boringly flat monotone.

How can we optimise our sales voice for the phone and become more polished in our vocal patterns? Consider these 5 vocal arts:

- inflection
- tone
- tempo
- pitch
- enunciation

1. Inflection

Inflection is the rise and fall of your voice when you speak. Imagine the sound of your voice drawn as a line graph.

A monotone forms a shallow wave line. A voice with energy and interest has a wider range, higher highs and lower lows.

Actors inflect all over the voice spectrum and have energy and drama in their voices.

What is your vocal range? Does your voice have energy?

EXERCISE 1

Here's an exercise to improve inflection.

Read a children's book aloud and over-inflect. Exaggerate it. The kids will love it, and you'll expand your vocal range at the same time. (The famous English thespian, Sir Laurence Olivier, as a rehearsal exercise, used to exaggerate words and actions of a script.)

Put more energy into it, inflect more, add more emotion and feeling.

2. Tone

'Selling is the transference of feeling', according to master sales trainer, Zig Ziglar.** But a voice with vocal variety is only half the equation.

It helps to believe in your product. Enthusiasm permeating your words adds emotional content.

One way to generate passion is to find a BIG REASON why your product or service benefits people.

For example, you are not simply selling stainless steel cookware, you are also improving people's health and wellbeing by moving them away from aluminium cookware to beneficial stainless steel.

Instead of simply selling stocks and shares, you are ensuring your client's financial future.

If you are only lukewarm about your product, that comes through when selling on the phone. Believe in the big picture benefit of your product so your passion shines through.

EXERCISE 2

Repeat the name of your organisation aloud in each of the following ways:

- angrily
- shyly
- laughingly
- despairingly
- passionately
- brightly

Did you notice there's a wide vocal range depending on the emotion?

Consider your voice as a musical instrument. And let enthusiasm and passion come through when speaking to clients.

3. Tempo

A branch of psychology called neuro-linguistic programming or NLP tells us that you create rapport when you actively listen and slow down or speed up to match the pace and style of the person you're talking to. So it's not whether your voice is too fast or too slow. Be flexible enough to speak a little faster or slower depending on the dialogue.

4. Pitch

Voices are high or low. Try humming a few bars of a simple song. That's your natural pitch. Now speak to clients in your natural pitch.

5. Enunciation

Do people not catch what you say and ask you to repeat? It could be you are mumbling and have poor diction.

To resolve this, open your mouth wider when speaking and pronounce your words more distinctly.

Do you drop your consonants? In the following sentence, make sure you emphasise the ends of words (in bold) so they can be heard:

'I'm wondering what you thought about the email I sent you'.

Good diction improves understandability, especially if you have an accent.

EXERCISE 3

And if you observe you slur an occasional word, here's a simple exercise to fix that. Put your tongue in your cheek and say this tongue twister, 'red leather, yellow leather', once or twice each side.

6. Breathe

To increase his lung capacity for singing, Frank Sinatra used to hold his breath while swimming underwater.

EXERCISE 4

Here's a vocal exercise to improve your resonance.

Take a breath, then say each of these vowel sounds while pushing the air from the diaphragm, (the muscle below your lungs).

- ay
- ee
- ah
- oh
- oo

This exercise makes your voice strong and sure.

To avoid your voice trailing off in places, remember to deep breathe when you are on the phone.

7. Pauses

If there's silence after you ask a question, stay comfortable with the pause. Your client is probably thinking.

And if you've asked a closing question (a question to which the answer suggests they are going ahead with an order) then silence is a good thing. Don't break it. Let them think it through uninterrupted.

ACTION SUMMARY

Here are 9 ways to improve your tone of voice:

- Record your voice and visualise the vocal range, the rise and fall. It is a boringly flat monotone? Or does it have energy and vocal variety?

- Listen to radio announcers. Visualise the rise and fall of their voice as a line graph and notice their wide vocal range.

- Smile when you answer the phone, because a smile can be heard through the phone.

- As a way to gain rapport, remember to match your speed and volume to whoever you are talking. Practice varying speed, tone, inflection and volume for vocal variety.

- Gesture. Wear a headset so your hands are free to gesture, which animates the voice; or sometimes stand up when on the phone.

- While on the phone, take frequent sips of water. It lubricates your throat and avoids sounding croaky.

- Display positive statements at your workstation, such as:
    - I enjoy talking to new people.
    - I represent a great company and a great line of products.

- Write out the big picture benefit of your product or service.

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