

AGRICULTURE

The Power of Asking Questions: Do Belief-, Goal-, and Need-Related Questions Shape People's Preference Toward a Product?

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In the marketing world, it is a widespread belief that in order to capture values of potential customers, understanding their needs and wants is the crucial first step. Asking questions is one of the primary means that salespeople use to gather information about their customers. W. Scott Downey states in *ProSelling* (2011) that effective questions often focus on people's beliefs, goals, and needs. This allows sellers to identify value propositions that are helpful in solving buyers' problems and meeting their goals in a manner consistent with their values. It is also a common belief that open-ended questions are more effective than closed-ended questions in getting consumers to give thoughtful responses.

According to Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo in their 1986 article, "The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion," many studies have examined factors affecting people's attention. Yet, few have looked at the impact of the questioning process itself on buyers' perceptions about the value of a product. The purpose of this research is to gain experimental evidence on how open- and closed-ended questions regarding respondents' beliefs, goals, and needs could have an influence on their purchase preference.

A quasi-experimental method was used to gather 258 usable responses from a convenience sample collected using a snowball technique. Survey participants were randomly assigned to five question scenarios:

- (1) Belief (Do you believe that . . . ? Why should people . . . ?)
- (2) Goal (Do you want to . . . ? How to you feel about . . . ?)
- (3) Need (Are you looking for ways to . . . ? What are the steps you take to . . . ?)
- (4) Mixed (versions 1 to 3 combined)
- (5) No question (control group)

Each of the first four surveys consisted of three parts: a pretest that asked participants how much they would pay for the selected product (a reusable bottle); a treatment in which respondents were asked different combinations of questions (survey); and a posttest that asked again the dollar amount the respondent would be willing to pay. Surveys 1–3 each consisted of three closed-ended questions and up to three open-ended questions. Survey 4 included all questions, and survey 5 had no treatment questions at all (just

pretest and posttest). By comparing the pre- and post-responses, changes in perceived value could be directly observed.

It was found that those who responded to both closed- and open-ended questions increased perceptions of value more than those who responded to only closed-ended questions. Among all participants, belief questions resulted in the largest positive change in perceived value, followed by need and goal questions. Interestingly, responses from surveys 1–3 indicated that the more questions people answered, the larger the dollar increase. However, this was not the case for survey 4, in which participants had to answer more questions (nine closed-ended, and up to nine open-ended). Further research is required to see if this is due to participant fatigue resulting from the higher number of questions.

The average dollar change in perceived value (\$ after – \$ before) for each survey group is summarized in the tables below. These results indicate that the questioning process contributes to perceptions of value, consistent with predictions based on theory. Further research is required to determine the psychological factors that inform these results.

Research advisor Scott Downey writes: "This work tests a fundamental, but as yet unstudied, area of marketing. Salespeople are taught that asking questions is important, and yet most salespeople only ask superficial questions, designed to position the seller's solutions. Katherine's work shows that the process of asking higher order questions itself shapes value perceptions."

Survey Version	Mean Change (\$)	p-value
1. Belief (n = 55)	+0.80	0.02
2. Goal (n = 48)	+0.45	0.06
3. Need (n = 45)	+0.65	0.02
4. Mixed (n = 57)	+0.33	0.12
5. Control (n = 57)	-0.07	

Question groups versus control group: Mean increase in dollar amount (\$).

Survey Version	Mean Change (\$)	Closed Only	p-value
1. Belief (n = 55)	+1.36	+0.08	0.03
2. Goal (n = 48)	+0.64	-0.20	0.08
3. Need (n = 45)	+0.96	+0.25	0.14
4. Mixed (n = 57)	+0.32	+0.68	0.22
Overall	-.80	+0.26	0.03

Closed - + open-ended versus closed-ended: Mean increase in dollar amount (\$).