**Ask Smarter Questions for Better Answers (And Results)**

By Brian Jud

Answers are less important than questions. How can that be? Because if you ask the wrong questions the answers to them are irrelevant. The right questions unleash innovation that can lead to more successful implementation and results.

Successful book marketing is based on having good choices from which to choose, and good choices start with strong alternatives. Think back to your recent search for new ideas to solve a problem. If sales are not up to your expectations you might have posed the challenging question as, “How can we sell more books?” The team then settles on the first reasonable answer (“Let’s lower the price.”). However, if you posed the question differently you would stimulate not only multiple strategies, but insights and alternatives into previously overlooked areas. You could accomplish that by posing the question differently, such as, “In how many ways can we stimulate profitable sales to target buyers in new segments?”

The techniques described below can help you escape the gravitational pull of finding and acting on the easy – and potentially incorrect or insufficient -- answers. These methods will help you ask questions that can increase the flow and diversity of better answers, resulting in better outcomes.

There are five general categories of questions that can guide your marketing strategies: Analytical, Expansive, Performance, Explanatory and Examining questions. Here are examples of ways in which you can use these to focus your efforts on resolving the causes of negative circumstances.

1. **Analytical questions** dig deeper to generate non-obvious information and clarify a more meaningful solution. Here are examples of analytical questions.

**Wrong question 1**: How can I get people to buy my book?

* Wrong Answer: Since everybody can use the information in my book, I better post more on social media to reach them.

**Right question 1**: Who are my prospective readers?

* Better Answer: You cannot sell to “everybody.” It would also take an enormous marketing budget to reach everybody enough times to motivate them to buy. Even if your content is truly ubiquitous, different people buy for different reasons, and you have to appeal to those separately.

Define your target readers with the Five **Ws**: **W**ho are they? **W**hat do they want to buy (printed, audio, ebook or other)? **W**here do they shop? **W**hen do they buy? And **W**hy do they buy (problem they want to solve)?

Then organize prospective buyers into groups determined by their specific needs and purchasing habits. For example, if you have a children’s book, segments could include daycare centers, children's libraries, children's museums, home-schooling groups, PTAs, government agencies, military schools, mom's organizations, work-at-home parents, toy stores, airport stores, supermarkets, discount stores, etc. Each of these has a different reason for buying.

**Wrong question 2**: Why don’t bookstores sell more of my books so they aren’t returned?

* Wrong Answer: I should do more book signings since people cannot return autographed books.

**Right question 2**: How can I sell books on a non-returnable basis?

* Better Answer One: Bookstores (and other retailers) don’t sell books, they display books. It’s up to the authors to promote their books so people seek them out when visiting the stores. Use your promotion to describe your competitive advantage and drive prospective buyers to seek your book among others nearby on the shelves.
* Better Answer Two: Sell to non-retail buyers in businesses, associations, schools, the military and government agencies. Non-retail buyers do not purchase books for resale but use them as promotional items. For example, they could purchase X,000 of your books on a non-returnable basis to give away as a gift with purchase or as a gift for customers.

**Wrong question 3**: Should I sell my book at the same price as my competitors?

* Wrong Answer: Books like mine on Amazon cost $14.95 so I should price mine the same.

**Right questions 3**: What are my goals for sales, revenue and profits, and which shod be my primary objective? How is my content different from and more valuable to readers than competitive titles? How much more are they willing to pay for that value?

* Better Answer: There are several strategies for pricing books. A competitive-pricing strategy is the easiest but potentially least profitable one to choose. Instead, consider a skimming or penetration pricing strategy.

With askimming pricing strategy, you start with a high price and gradually lower it over time. The goal is to maximize profit from buyers who are willing to pay a premium for content that is highly relevant to solving their problems. It is also best for highly anticipated or niche books (i.e., celebrity memoirs, technical manuals), books with little competition or for loyal or captive audiences. An initial high price helps you recover development and production costs more quickly, and it creates a perception of exclusivity or premium value.

A penetration pricing strategy is the opposite since you start with a low price to attract many customers quickly, then possibly raise the price later. Your goal here is to gain market share, visibility, and a reader base faster. It is best used by new authors trying to build an audience, those in highly competitive genres (e.g., romance, self-help, thrillers), or for e-books or self-published titles where production cost is low. However, it lowers profit margins initially and may create a perception of lower quality.

**2. Expansive** **questions** help you consider the topic more broadly. Reframe the problem or explore more-creative solutions by beginning your questions like this, “In how many ways can we …?” Your answers force you to consider other scenarios that might exist, or how you could do things differently. Here are examples of expansive questions.

**Wrong question 1**: How can I reach more people on TikTok and Instagram?

* Wrong Answer: Since social media is free and reaches everybody, I better do more of it.

**Right question 1**: In how many ways can I reach my target buyers where they seek information on my topic, and with a message that will motivate them to buy?

* Better Answer One: Describe the social media platforms your target buyers are already interested. Your 25-year-old prospect may be on TikTok, but your 55-year-old buyer may be on Facebook or LinkedIn.
* Better Answer Two: Create and implement an assorted promotional mix. Don’t rely on one technique (such as social media) to reach potential buyers. A more varied combination includes publicity, advertising, sales promotion and personal selling – online and offline.

Expansive questions also point out the distinction between a symptom and the real problem. What is the difference? Think about the difference between a thermometer and a thermostat. A thermometer measures the temperature (symptom), and a thermostat controls the temperature (problem solution). Focusing on the symptoms (low sales) may not solve the problem. Here is an example:

**Wrong question 2**: How can I sell more books?

* Wrong Answer: Sales are down so I should lower my book’s price to get people to buy them.

**Right question 2**: In how many ways can I show target buyers how my content provides the benefits they desire?

* Better Answer One: People do not buy books, they purchase the benefits they receive from reading them. So, the tip is to sell what your product does, not what it is. Think of your book as you would describe Arm & Hammer baking soda. That is used in recipes and for cat litter, deodorizing, toothpaste, etc. But the product remains the same. Similarly, retailers want profit per square foot, librarians want to help their patrons, media people want a good show for their audiences, buyers in businesses want a unique gift-with-purchase to increase their sales, schools want to help their students and associations want to better serve their members. Your content is the same for each target, but the way in which you show how you can solve their problem is different -- that is what you sell.
* Better Answer Two: Create and implement a functional marketing plan. Describe the right product format for each segment and the price at which you can sell it most profitably. Name the places in which you will sell it. Define the promotional mix with which you can communicate the benefits most sought by your various buyers.

**Wrong question 3**: Should I create a printed book or an ebook?

* Wrong Answer: I’ll produce both just to make sure I cover all the bases.

**Right question 3:** In what format do buyers in each segment want my content delivered?

1. Better Answer: Produce the format desired by your different target readers. A printed book may be preferred by an older audience or by people purchasing it as a gift. Some may seek books to display in home libraries. Others may enjoy underlining or writing in the margins physically, particularly if they want to refer to their notes quickly. Certain people may want to reduce eye strain caused by screen glare, making it easier on the eyes during long reading sessions.

There are those who prefer the portability of ebooks, as well as the ability to increase the font size (similar to large-print books for visually impaired readers), or change the background color or layout for better readability. There are built-in tools such as dictionaries, bookmarks, highlights, and search functions make studying or reference easier. The lower cost of ebooks makes them more desirable by students and for people seeking to try new authors. Still others prefer to multitask with audiobooks while driving, walking, cooking, or exercising. Visually impaired readers may prefer audiobooks, too.

**3. Performance questions** focus on execution, forcing you to rethink various implementation techniques by asking questions like, “How can we get it done?” “What is the next step? and so on. Here is an example of a performance question.

**Wrong question 1**: How can I get my book into Barnes & Noble?

* Wrong Answer: I’ll get a new distributor since my current one is not doing its job.

**Right question 1**: How can I make it more convenient for potential readers to purchase my book?

* Better answer: Have your books available where your prospects already shop (bricks and clicks). If your target buyers are women between 25 and 55, they may represent vastly different lifestyles. Your 25-year-old prospective buyer may be starting a family and shopping in supermarkets and discount stores. Your 55-year-old buyer may be traveling for business or pleasure and seeking books in airport stores, upscale department stores or gift shops on cruise ships.

If your book is about pets, have it in pet stores. Books about crafts should be in stores such as Michaels. If your content is about photography, cooking, home/car repairs, etc. where would your buyers seek that information? Your definition of your target buyer tells you where to have your books available for sale.

**4. Explanatory questions** push you to continually redefine the core issue. They force you to go beneath the surface and ask, “What is this problem really about?” They bring you back to your goals by asking, “What are we trying to achieve?” Here are examples of explanatory questions.

**Wrong question 1**: Why can’t I reach my goals?

* Wrong Answer: The economy is bad, my distributor is not performing, and bookstores are not selling my books, so I’ll lower my goals.

**Right question 1**: “Are my current goals realistic, doable, and motivating?”

* BetterAnswer:Blaming others for your performance deficit is like blaming your scale if you are overweight. Instead of setting one annual goal that you evaluate every December 31st, set quarterly goals and evaluate your progress toward reaching them. Then you can make course corrections in time to make an impact on your annual results. Set SMART, multi-period performance objectives*.* SMART goals should be aspirational, designed to motivate employees and authors to come up with innovative ways to significantly enhance strategic performance. SMART objectives are:
* **Strategic**. It is not enough to define the tactics you will employ to achieve your objectives. List them in the order in which you will perform them, realizing that some must be performed before others. For example, the target readers and buyers should be defined and placed in segments before product, pricing and promotion activities can be planned and implemented.
* **Measurabl**e (specific and timely). If an objective is defined as “selling more books than last year,” then the sale of one more book would achieve it. That was probably not your intent. However, objectives to reach an X% increase in sales, a Y% increase in revenue and a Z% increase in profits by December 31, 202X are measurable.
* **Achievable**. The above X, Y and Z percentages must be within the realm of possibility. To set a first-year goal to sell 1,000,000 books for an unknown author is not realistic. Similarly, a goal to sell more books by cutting prices may make reaching your revenue and profitability goals less likely.
* **Relevant**. All planning and implementation activities must be consistent with your mission and vision statements.
* **Targeted**. Each target segment may require a different marketing strategy. For example, buyers in each of the segments for children’s book segments listed above has different needs and purchasing procedures.

**5. Examining** questions follow the answers to your questions in the first four categories by delving into how motivated you are about taking the paths on which earlier answers may lead you. These questions serve to push you to the edges of your comfort zone. Are you willing to put in the time, money and effort to do what is necessary to reach your goals? Here is an example of an examining question.

**Wrong question 1**: “How can I implement all the ideas I have generated?”

* Wrong Answer: Let’s start with those that are easiest to do and least expensive.

**Right question 1**: What do I want my legacy to be? Will implementing the ideas I have now lead me to fulfilling that dream?

* Better Answer: Create or revisit a mission statement that describes your purpose, why you wanted to be an author or publisher. Do the same with your vision statement describing what you aspire to become. Will implementing the answers to your new questions lead you to the place in which you want to be?

How do doctors decide what ailment to treat? By asking questions that give them the proper information upon which to base their diagnosis. Prescription before diagnosis is malpractice. But unlike doctors most authors aren’t trained on what kinds of questions to ask and how to ask them – until now. Asking the questions described above can lead to better answers and perhaps better results. But are you willing to listen to the answers and then evaluate and implement them?