

What Makes Certain Questions So Difficult to Answer?

by Dr. Jean Norris

You'll have to forgive me, but sometimes it's difficult to just give an answer to a question without analyzing the meaning behind the words. So, when asked how I would advise admissions reps to answer difficult questions, the first thing that strikes me is the criteria used to define a difficult question. Here are the two common (and presumably difficult) questions posed:

- How long does the program take to complete?
- How much does it cost?

So what makes these questions hard to answer? Is it because the answer isn't obvious? Well, if an admissions

rep can't tell a prospective student the length of a program or the cost, then s/he certainly needs to brush up on product knowledge.

Are these questions hard because they're asked out of sequence? Admissions reps don't deal with questions until later on in the interview—doesn't everyone know that? Too bad the prospective student doesn't know about the interview framework in the reps' training manual.

Or are these questions difficult to respond to because there is uncertainty in the way the prospect will view the answer (as a positive or a negative). Hmm...maybe we're on to something here. In my experience, admissions reps can serve as their own worst enemies. Oftentimes, it is a preconceived notion



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began her own educational quest in a 10-month medical assisting diploma program. She credits the career college sector with providing her the motivation to continue her own education. Today, she serves as managing partner of Norton Norris, Inc., and leads the training and research division. Jean is one of the leading advocates of the admissions profession and has dedicated her professional career to serving those in this role. Just this year, she became the exclusive licensee to train Facilitating Buying Decisions, which

is the new, ethical way to sell in higher ed, to admissions reps in the U.S. Jean began her career as a high school rep nearly 20 years ago. She has served in a variety of roles in both for-profit and not-for-profit education including Robert Morris College, Argosy Education Group, the University of St. Francis, and Rasmussen College.

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that is holding a rep back versus any real objection.

Truly, I have worked with 70- to 80-something schools across the country, and have yet to meet an admissions rep who doesn't believe his/her school should charge less and their programs should be shorter. So the question behind the question is this:

“What do admissions reps need to believe differently to effectively answer difficult questions?”

The first thing to understand is that questions are a buying sign. To ask a question takes effort, demonstrates interest, and prolongs the interaction. Why in the world would someone who isn't interested in your school even bother to ask a question otherwise? If

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they didn't care and weren't interested then they would simply smile, nod, and say everything is great. Funny thing is, these are the interviews admissions reps pat themselves on the

back about and say were great. That is until the prospect hangs up the phone or leaves the office, never to be heard from again.

Secondly, the rep needs to believe the prospective student will not go running into the night when s/he gets the answer either. After all, the job of an admissions rep is to help the right students start school, so let's not chase them away. One just needs to look into a classroom down the hall or at a list of graduates to realize the cost and length of the program can't be that out of whack.

I also believe admissions reps must get over the notion that everybody that

walks in the door should be enrolled. This causes undue pressure to close a sale versus true discovery and relationship building. These students are the ones who cancel or withdraw anyway, so why not spare everyone the work? Seriously, each prospect creates paperwork, faculty and staff time, as well as mailing and telephone expense. Think about the student here, too. What if your school isn't the right place for them after they spend weeks/months going through the admissions process—not to mention the emotional turmoil? Does this situation benefit anyone? Wouldn't an admissions rep be better serving the student and the institution by making sure it is the right fit early on?

Admissions reps must frame their interviews in a way to allow for true consultation versus a sales interaction. This begins with setting the stage of an interview in a different way than most have been taught in traditional admissions training. Reps will find the number and types of questions they get during an interview to be less of an obstacle and more of an information exchange when the relationship is defined as such. In other words, if reps use facilitative buying skills BEFORE their traditional interview, they enter into an entirely different dynamic with the prospect.

When facilitative buying skills are added to the admissions interview, the prospect will feel more connected, less threatened, and not as if s/he is being “sold.” In fact, when employed correctly, the use of facilitative questions and skills can help a prospect figure out how to manage the change that going to school will bring into his/her life (system). With current sales methods, many questions that are asked by prospects are a result of confusion and fear, and may be totally unrelated to their real concerns. **The fact is, you could**

give away your program for free and you'd still have people turn you down. Do you know why? Because s/he can't figure out how to fit the change that going to college will bring into his/her life (system). The person who can help him/her manage this will enter into an entirely different relationship with the student and have less objections and better results.

Finally, admissions reps need training and skills that take into consideration how people buy in today's environment. Many people do not trust "sales" reps; they have been "sold" since the day they were born. They've heard all the pitches and closing techniques, and, in fact, tend to mistrust even more when they hear common sales pitches or feel the rep is being manipulative or controlling.

So, reps should invest in their own learning and be prepared with product knowledge, communication skill development, and facilitative techniques. And it never hurts to have a few proven phrases to use either. Let me give you a few of my favorites related to the questions posed in the beginning of this article. Let us assume the admissions rep/prospect interaction is face-to-face. I'm going to set the stage a bit differently to give you an example of facilitation techniques.

Rep: "So Mike, thanks for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. I'm really glad you're here."

Mike: "Thanks."

Rep: "Well, let me tell you, I love this school, and I think we have the most awesome programs, facilities, and faculty anywhere. But none of that matters at all if this isn't the right school for you. So, let's talk about what you're looking for, ok?"

Mike: "Great!"

From here the rep goes on to ask facilitative questions/use facilitative techniques to help Mike figure out his own best answer. When done properly, the admissions interview and subsequent questions will become more information giving and less of all that other stuff. It doesn't mean the rep won't run into obstacles, so traditional admissions training is still important. Facilitative techniques guide the prospect through a discovery process and encourage faster decision-making. This is a natural process that anyone who buys something goes through, but the rep can expedite the process and become a true consultant as they do it.

You'll notice there is no reason to assume these questions are negative signs or objections. Be prepared with answers that address a concern, but, chances are, questions asked in the interview can simply be...answered.

Mike: "How long does the program take to complete?"

Rep: "That's a good question, Mike. The business program you'll be in is 15 months long."

Notice the rep doesn't jump in here with lots of "proof" as to why 15 months really isn't that long. The prospect will tell us if he has concerns about it.

Mike: "How much does it cost?"

Rep: "The program is \$4,500 per quarter and takes four quarters to complete. Is this what you expected?"

The prospect will have one of three answers to this question. Either s/he will think it is too low (it does happen); s/he will think it's about right, or that it's too high. The important thing here is to wait for the response to know what the prospect thinks. If s/he says it's lower or right in line with his/her expectations, then simply move on. If the prospect states that it is too high, simply follow up with the question, "Compared to what?"

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Mike: “Wow! That tuition is more than I can ever afford.”

Rep: “It sounds as if you are concerned with how you will pay for the tuition. Is that right, Mike?” (If yes, proceed with financial aid information.)

OR

Mike: “It’s a lot more money than I ever thought.”

Rep: “What are you comparing our tuition to, Mike?”

Mike: “Well, I could go to the community college for a whole year for what it costs to attend one quarter here.”

At this point, the rep now needs to pull in information gained from the prospect about his/her educational goals, and explain the differences between achieving these goals at your school versus the community college system.

On a final note, remember that the length of the program and cost questions are often asked as a result of one of the following reasons:

- The prospect wants to move to the next step and get additional information;

- The prospect is comparing your school/program to something else;
- The prospect is confused and it seems like a logical question to ask; or
- Buyers are programmed to ask for the cost.

In summary, these questions may seem difficult to answer when using traditional admissions training. When facilitative questions and techniques are used prior to the traditional interview, the relationship is very different. This technique enables the prospect to first determine what s/he even needs to consider to manage change effectively. Once it’s determined that s/he can fit change into his/her life, then—and only then—will a prospect be open to seriously considering your school. A decision will not be made until the prospect can determine how to fit change into his/her life.

As I wrap up this discussion of how to answer difficult questions, let me ask one of you:

How will you know when you have mastered the skills and abilities to effectively deal with difficult questions?