

The Top 12 Questions to Ask Every Customer

What you say—and how you say it—can have a big impact on a sale.

The key premise of making a sale is to understand your customer's needs and requirements. In order to achieve this, you'll need to ask a series of strategic questions. With these questions, you'll be able to better understand any specific requirements and desires your customer has and develop a personal connection with them, which leads to trust. Wayne Pratt of Callandoon Studios in Queensland, Australia, a friend and fellow picture framer, once shared this bit of wisdom with me: "Customers don't care how much you know unless they know how much you care!"

Another benefit of asking questions is to help generate engagement and emotion in the customer. The more involved they feel throughout the process, the less important the price becomes at the end.

Over my years, I've observed countless customer interactions with framers over their design counters. I've put together a list of what I consider to be the top 12 questions that best help achieve happy outcomes and happy customers.

1. Hi! What's your name? A key strategy



in creating a personalized experience is to use a customer's name throughout the process. Asking someone's name is always a comfortable conversation opener; even better if you recognize the customer and know their name already. Don't forget to let the customer know your name as well, as this will help develop a personal bond.

Ask your customers questions that aim to gain information about their piece and build a trusting relationship.

2. Have you had work done with us before? If they say yes, then they are happy you've remembered them! You can then ask them about what they had done last time and hopefully strike a positive conversation and tone about this. If they say no, that's okay, too. Just say you thought they looked familiar and ask if they live locally—perhaps you've seen



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Having difficulty getting customers to give you their email address? Try using contact information forms, like this one from Best Framing in Costa Mesa, CA. This form lists “email” right at the top, even before “name,” increasing the likelihood of a response.

them around.

Keep in mind that when making high-value purchases, consumers don't like to feel as if they are just another “faceless customer.” Recognition and acknowledgment go a long way to overcoming this perception and creating a personal experience.

3. How did you find out about us? It's natural to ask this question if they haven't been to your store before. What you can learn from their response can be both interesting and potentially valuable to understanding your marketing strengths.

4. How much time do you have? “I just want to make sure we can give you the time that is needed to go through this.” Liz Barker of Kenmore Gallery in Brisbane, Australia, shared with me that this question is especially important to ask first-time customers who may not know what to expect during the consultation process. Their response also lets you know if they are in any hurry, so you can adjust the process and direction accordingly.

5. Getting the story. Every picture has a story to tell, which is valuable information for directing the design and sales process. At this stage, you can ask a number of differ-

ently phrased questions which all achieve the same goal—understanding why the customer wants to get something framed. Some possible wording choices include:

- “Oh, this looks fascinating. What's the story behind this?”
- “Okay, now this looks interesting! Tell me the story behind this.”
- “Wow, this is nice! Where did you get this from?”

The important thing to do here is listen. Let people tell their story, and be patient. When you demonstrate an ability to take genuine interest in the customer's story, it also helps develop a stronger connection and trust, which can help make the rest of the design process a lot more personalized and natural. The more personal the experience becomes, the less important the price becomes at the end.

6. Could you tell me about where you plan to hang this? Framing an item for a domestic environment versus a corporate office can dictate very different design styles. Likewise, framing for a foyer as opposed to a bedroom can change your thinking for a piece. Asking a question before you commence your design process can help save you from heading down the wrong path and having to back-track. This type of question can also reveal more information, such as whether it is a gift for someone else.

7. Do you have a specific style or taste in decor? Many people like to frame items to complement their style and home decor, so this can be important to know before you commence the material selection process. If they do, ask them about their style of furniture and interior finishes that will visually accompany the framed piece.

8. How long are you hoping for this piece to last? This is what I call the conservation conversation (which is a fun tongue twister!). Many customers don't realize the difference in materials and framing techniques and how those choices can contribute to their longevity of their framed item. In some cases, many uninformed customers just assume if something is surrounded by four bits of wood and a piece of glass, it will last forever.

Campbell Hughes of Matisse Framing in Brisbane, Australia, rephrases this question into a comfortable context that can be more easily understood by most: “Are you hoping this will last a lifetime or just as long as your couch?” This conversation can help you determine if you need to take a conservation-grade approach and spend a few minutes discussing options in further detail or if decorator-grade materials can work if budget limitations come into play.

9. How do you feel about this option? During the design process, no doubt choices will need to be made where there is no evident “better or worse” or “wrong or right.” Whether you’re choosing between moulding or pricing options, you want to allow the customer to make these choices themselves whenever possible so they feel a sense of ownership during the design process.

To encourage good choices, keep in mind that design is not always about rational or obvious thinking. One way to allow a customer to tune into their emotional instincts is by asking them how they may “feel” about different options, rather than using the more rational term “think.” Remember, custom framing is generally something customers want, not something they need; given this, it’s a good idea to avoid encouraging decisions based on need, as you may end up with just a basic black frame.

10. When did you need this done by? This can be a critical question, especially if you’re under any unusual or seasonal time pressures. Custom framing jobs can take time, and it’s vital to be able manage your customers’ expectations. In some cases, it is necessary to know if you need to make any adjustments to achieve their expectations or deadlines. Some framers find it handy to know this before they provide any pricing so they can incorporate any necessary “rush job” adjustments into their quote.

11. How would you like to pay for that today? This question is usually preceded by quoting a final price and can also be used as a natural closing technique. There’s no doubt obtaining full payment up front can help with both cash flow and customer commitment, so try to phrase this question in a skillful way that is conducive to this outcome.

12. Before we finish, I just need to get your details so I can let you know when it’s ready. Email? Name? Phone number? Address? Not only can you contact a customer when their job is ready with this information, but you can also use this technique to harvest email addresses for future marketing promotions and campaigns. Another way to obtain this information without specifically asking is to provide a form for the customer to complete. Medi Bendanna from Best Framing in Costa Mesa, CA, provides every customer with a small paper form with these four basic fields on it for them to complete, starting with “email” at the top of the list.

Finally, I have one more question every framer should ask at the very end of the process. When your customer has returned to pick up their framed piece and finally gets to see it framed for the first time in all its glory, this is the



Wayne Pratt of Callandoon Studios in Queensland, Australia, says customers “don’t care how much you know unless they know how much you care.” Building a personal connection is essential.

peak of the customer’s overall experience. It is generally when they are at their most elated state, which means they are primed for you to ask this final question before they leave: “I’m glad you love this. You definitely made the right choice in the style and design, and it’s going to look great. Before you go, let me ask you—what’s the next thing you want to frame?”

Now, I have a feeling some of you may have shivered upon reading that question. But consider this: how many times have you walked out of a great experience, whether it’s a meal at a restaurant or a live show, and thought, “That was amazing—I want to do that again!” This question is a powerful conclusion to the process that can immediately plant a seed for your next framing job, potentially sooner than you both may have thought otherwise.

At the end of the day, people prefer to buy from people. Asking strategic questions is about getting to know your customers on a personal, human level. When you learn to do this instinctively and well, not only do you help make a customer for life, but also, in many cases, it can lead to something equally as valuable—making a friend for life.

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Want to learn more about connecting with customers? Jared will lead several sales seminars at The National Conference in Las Vegas in January.