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Critical Questions By Robert Gignac

Having spent the last 10 months on an assignment in Switzerland, I have had the opportunity to experience business in a different culture and witness business practices that range from extraordinary to downright dumb.

In this issue, I would like to focus on a short interlude I recently had with a Custom's Agent upon my returning to Canada on business. I greeted him as I presented my passport and custom's forms, and he very efficiently asked me three questions: Where have you been? Why are you here? Where are you going? There was nothing particularly special about the questions, as a Canadian living out of the country I had expected to be asked about my trip. I answered the questions and was quickly on my way with a pleasant "Enjoy your stay in Canada". As I stood watching the circling bags at the carousel, the three questions kept replaying in my head. At times like these, I usually say to myself, "Self, what are you supposed to learn from this?"

The purpose of my visit was to meet with three financial services companies to promote my Canadian best seller "Rich is a State of Mind", and myself as a speaker for their upcoming events. Being an author and speaker is one thing – being able to sell yourself and your services is something entirely different. I decided that a new approach would be to use those three 'simple' questions in order to help focus my thoughts at the upcoming meetings. Let's look at the three questions and how they can help you do the same.

1 Where have you been?

The résumé. The background. What transpired in the past that gave you the skills, the talent, and the ability to be sitting here today? What have you or your firm done to become as good as you say you are? The big wins. Your major successes. Short, to-the point, and factual. Don't be too shy to state why you are good at what you do – but make sure you are as good as you say you are. You had better be able to deliver when you get the business or you will do irreparable harm to your own reputation and that of your firm.

2 Why are you here?

Your prospect or client is sitting on the other side of the table with one thought in mind – WIIFM. What's in it for me? What can you offer them today that will help them build their business? After all, you are not in this just for yourself are you? Your clients and prospects are interested in knowing what you can do for them – so tell them. What are the benefits of using you? What results can they expect to see? How quickly can those results be obtained? What can you deliver that your competition cannot, or is not willing to deliver? What special services or benefits make you the firm to hire? Do not be afraid to ask this question: "What is the biggest problem that you need to have solved today?" Before you even think of speaking again listen, and listen closely. Their reply will yield insight into why you were granted today's meeting.

3 Where are you headed?

No, I do not mean telling them that you are heading over to see their biggest competitor if they do not buy your product or service. However, if the question comes up regarding any work you may be doing, or contracts you may have with their competition, be honest. You will be found out if you are not and that will hurt much worse when your reputation takes a hit. Sometimes the 'where' are the next steps you need to follow-up on; other times it will be that you need to develop more skills or a new service to meet their current and future needs. If you get a 'no thanks' (and you will get more of these than you will want...) do not be afraid to tell them that you will be back when you have what they need.

From a chance encounter in the customs hall in Toronto, I was able to focus my thoughts and change my approach for the upcoming week. The jury is still out on if I am receiving the business that I asked for. Nevertheless, I can tell you that when I left the meetings, the people I met with knew 'where I had been', 'why I was there', and 'where I was headed'. I believe it made a major difference. E