



# Challenge Your Thinking

By  
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Do you regularly challenge traditional methods of thinking?

One of the benefits I have from working in so many different jobs across several industries is the fact that I regularly challenge ways of thinking within any organization.

Sometimes, the stupid questions are the ones that yield the greatest benefit. Just because something "has always been done this way," is a very poor excuse for continuing any sort of bad process or tradition.

For example, when I first became a convention & trade show manager, I questioned everything about the process by which we do everything. I asked a lot of questions and annoyed a lot of people. Sure our department budget of \$30 MM was a drop in the bucket compared to other marketing initiatives, but it was OUR \$30 MM, and I wanted to make sure we spent every penny of it effectively.

A large part of our focus in convention marketing was spent on lead generation. I was appalled when I mapped out our system of processing leads. Here's how it went:

We would spend millions of dollars exhibiting at the conventions. Sales reps in the booth would collect names and addresses from potential customers from the booth traffic. This would be done either manually or automatically with "swipe cards" given to convention attendees that can automatically feed the information to a printer located in our booth. The booth rep would take detailed notes about the prospect and the sales conversation to pass on to the field rep for follow up after the convention.

We then paid a vendor to transcribe the sales call notes into a Word document. The vendor then went through a laborious manual process of matching the customer ZIP code with the proper sales territory. Now, already, I found problems with this. Some convention attendees would register with their home address instead of their business address, so the lead would be routed to the wrong territory.

Also, we had as many as 15 sales reps covering any given ZIP code. Each rep carried a different mix of products. The company was in a constant state of flux and the appropriate sales rep for any given product could change at any given time. Our vendor was working off several static lists, many of which were more than a year old. Often times a lead would go to the wrong sales force, sales rep, or even someone who had left the company.

To make matters worse, the feedback loop was completely ineffective, to say the least. When the lead was emailed to the rep, the rep was also sent a feedback form. This two-page form asked detailed questions about the quality of

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the lead, the helpfulness and appropriateness of the lead, and if the lead was helpful in generating any new business. The rep was given a one-week deadline to complete this form.

Okay, so the problems with this in a nutshell: Reps were often on a 2-4 week routing schedule and may not be able to get to the prospect immediately. Many sales forced reps to adhere to a strict call plan and would actually be penalized for

following up with a convention lead. On top of this, we told them to fill out a lengthy form with no incentive. The sales management did not enforce filling out these forms and did not care about the feedback either way.

Okay, so what did we do when the reps sent back the forms? You're going to love this. The vendor would collect the responses and associate them with the particular convention and make a tally of how many reps responded. We would get a summary each month with the following data:

Convention: APA  
Leads Collected: 835  
Leads Sent: 659  
Responses Received: 8 (1.2%)

The first time I got a report back, I called the vendor to explain to me what the report meant. The conversation went something like this:

Me: Can you please explain the report you just sent me?"

Vendor: Sure, let me pull it up.... OK, so at the last convention, you sent us 835 leads and we processed 659 of them. We then....

Me: Wait a second. How come you only processed only 659 of them?

Vendor: We didn't process some for various reasons. Some we couldn't read. Some were missing information. We couldn't figure out where to send other ones.

Me: Can we sit down together and go over the rejects so we can figure out if there is a problem we can resolve, both for this convention and for conventions in the future?

Vendor: I dunno... we're kind of busy here. Besides, I think we threw the leads away. That's what we always do when we are done with them. Maybe we still have them around here somewhere...

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Me: Well, I would appreciate if you could look for them. Meanwhile, can you explain what the last figure on the report means?

Vendor: Sure, when we send out the leads, we ask the rep to fill out a form. Out of the 659 leads we sent out, we have received feedback from 8 reps.

Me: Isn't that kind of low?

Vendor: Not really, you know how irresponsible these reps are. I can't remember ever getting a response much higher than 2% for any large show.

Me: Wow. It looks like we really need to work on our response rate. I mean, this isn't some direct mail piece here. These are our employees. It looks like we need to get sales management involved... but that's my job. What did the 8 responses look like? Can you forward them on to me or will you summarize those comments in another report?

Vendor: I'm not sure I know what you are talking about.

Me: You said that eight reps emailed you feedback. What did they say? What feedback did they give to us?

Vendor: OH! We don't actually read the feedback. We just track the number of reps that email us back.

Me: So what do you do with the feedback forms they send in?

Vendor: We just delete them.

Needless to say, I was dumbfounded by so many parts of this process that were obviously messed up, yet nobody questioned it. While speaking with colleagues that did trade shows with other companies, I was shocked to find they had similar processes, but never thought to challenge anyone's authority.

Do you have the guts to challenge everyone's thinking... even your own?

My team was able to eventually make significant changes in our process which eventually elevated our convention activities into a significant sales and marketing platform instead of a one-off pile of money watching projects.

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