ADVICE & TRUST

Why it’s hard to question advice from “experts” and people you trust.

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THE MARKETING AT WORK

The persuasion can begin before the recommendation. Sales training teaches people to ask questions that help customers describe the problem—and make the case for solving it themselves. The eventual offer can feel like their own conclusion. With a trusted adviser, another influence can enter: questioning the recommendation can feel like questioning the relationship. This story examines both.

I spent decades studying how the framing of a question changes the answer.

I knew the pitch did not begin when someone asked for the sale. It began earlier—when someone decided what problem we were solving, which comparison mattered, and what I would notice first.

Then I entered medical rooms with a problem I could not solve myself.

I did what sensible people do. I gave expertise weight. More than weight, if I am honest. At times, I gave it the deciding vote.

It was only when the answers stopped surviving ordinary scrutiny—when comparisons narrowed, the evidence did not quite support the confidence, and no one could explain what would change the recommendation—that I recognized the distinction I had spent my career examining elsewhere.

Expertise should inform the decision. It should not quietly become the decision.

Sales training makes the mechanism visible.

Good salespeople are not necessarily trained to talk more. Many are trained to ask better questions.

Huthwaite's SPIN Selling framework, for example, moves through situation, problem, implication, and need-payoff questions. In ordinary language: What is happening? What is wrong? What is it costing you? What would improve if it were solved? Salesforce teaches a related ambition: understand the customer's desired outcome and become a trusted adviser. [1] [2]

Leading questions can be excellent. They can surface a need I have underestimated or keep someone from selling me the wrong thing.

They also do something else.

Here is what that training can look like in an ordinary sales conversation: I am standing in a cold family room with a window contractor.

> "When do you notice the draft most?"

At night, when we are sitting on the sofa.

> "What do you do when it gets bad?"

Turn up the heat. Find another blanket. Complain to whoever is closest.

> "And what would change if this room were comfortable all winter?"

We would use it more. The heating bill might come down. I could stop dressing for the living room as though it were an outdoor sporting event.

Before we have discussed the source of the draft, the possibility of repair, the alternatives, or the price, I have described the problem, enlarged its consequences, and pictured the reward.

The quote will not arrive as one possible response to a drafty room. It will arrive as the answer to a case I have helped build.

That is why the modern sales conversation can feel so persuasive without feeling like a pitch. The facts are mine. The priorities are mine. Even the language may be mine. The seller's skill is in arranging them.

The pitch arrives wearing my handwriting.

And because the salesperson listened, the offer can be structured around the things I have already said matter: the room we avoid, the bill I resent, the budget I named, the outcome I pictured. Tailoring can make an offer genuinely better. It can also make the route to "yes" feel unusually inevitable.

It is not inevitable. It is well positioned.

The person who frames the question shapes the choice.

A recommendation is never just an answer. It is an answer to a particular question.

Should we replace the windows? Which treatment should we try? Is this the right school? What should we do with the money? The expert often helps define the question before helping answer it. That is part of the value. I am consulting them because they know which details matter, which risks are real, and which possibilities I have missed.

But the frame also decides what enters the conversation.

A contractor who begins with "How much are these drafts costing you?" has placed energy loss at the center. One who begins with "What have you already tried?" may open repair as an option. One who begins with "How long will you stay in the house?" may make the same windows look like an investment, an indulgence, or somebody else's problem.

All three questions may be reasonable. They do not lead to the same decision.

This is true well beyond a sales appointment. A stylist can define the problem as maintenance or transformation. A financial adviser can organize a choice around growth, security, tax efficiency, or access to cash. A physician can frame the next step around the likeliest diagnosis, the most serious possibility, or the burden of more testing.

Expertise is partly the ability to choose the right frame. Authority is what makes the rest of us less likely to notice that a choice was made.

Trust compounds.

A salesperson may shape a conversation for an hour. A trusted adviser can shape the way I understand a problem for years.

That is not a sinister plot. It is often the natural result of good work. Trust accumulates through competent advice, returned calls, crises managed, and the enormous relief of not having to become an amateur expert in one more field.

I did not walk into medical appointments unaware that experts influence decisions. I had spent a career inside the machinery of influence. I knew how positioning worked. I knew that the person defining the problem had an advantage.

What changed was the stakes.

When someone I loved needed answers, expertise did not feel like positioning. It felt like shelter. The person with the training could read the scans, interpret the evidence, and see around corners I could not. Giving that person authority was not foolish. It was rational.

But over time, some answers stopped surviving ordinary questions.

Compared with what?

Based on what?

What would change your mind?

I did not conclude that experts knew nothing. I concluded that knowing more than I did was not the same as knowing enough—and that confidence was not a useful substitute for an answer.

More uncomfortably, I saw that I had sometimes allowed expertise to determine not only the answer, but which questions counted.

Trust adds another layer. Research involving established professional advisers found that people could understand the value of another opinion and still hesitate to seek one in their own adviser relationship. Preserving harmony explained part of that reluctance. Separate experiments in medical and financial-advice settings found a related discomfort: rejecting advice even after a conflict of interest was disclosed could feel like telling the adviser, “I do not trust you.” [4] [5]

The second opinion is no longer only information. It has acquired social consequences.

This is how a useful relationship can become difficult to examine. The adviser may be excellent. The recommendation may be sound. Yet comparison can feel disloyal, and a basic question can feel like a challenge to the relationship rather than part of the decision.

Trust should make candor easier. Sometimes it makes scrutiny feel impolite.

Expertise enters the decision before the evidence does.

Research on advice-taking helps explain why this is so easy to do.

In these studies, people typically make an initial estimate, receive someone else's advice, and then revise their answer. Researchers can calculate how much weight the advice received: zero means it was ignored; 100 percent means it replaced the person's original judgment.

A recent meta-analysis combined 346 effects from 129 independent data sets involving 17,296 people. Advice presented as lower quality still pulled people about 32 percent of the way from their original answer toward it. Neutral advice pulled them about 37 percent. Higher-quality advice pulled them about 48 percent. [3]

ADVICE-TAKING RESEARCH

EVEN “LOWER-QUALITY” ADVICE MOVED JUDGMENT.

Average distance people moved from their original estimate toward the advice they received



THE SURPRISE

Even advice presented as weaker moved people nearly one-third of the way toward it.

These were estimation studies, not purchase probabilities. Source: Bailey et al. [3]

The lower-quality and neutral results were not meaningfully different. That is the part worth sitting with: once advice entered the room, even advice presented as weaker moved judgment nearly one-third of the way. Quality mattered most at the top end; access to the decision mattered before that.

These were largely estimation tasks, not purchases, so the numbers do not mean an expert makes us 48 percent more likely to buy. The useful point is narrower and, to me, still somewhat shocking: advice can move judgment before we have decided how much the source deserves. Perceived quality can move it further—especially when the decision is subjective or uncertain.

Which describes medical choices, financial planning, home repairs, school decisions, design work, and nearly everything for which the honest answer begins, “It depends.”

The answer can be excellent. The frame can still be narrow.

None of this requires bad motives.

A doctor may be reasoning from the most probable diagnosis. A contractor may sell replacements because replacements are what the company does. A financial adviser may favor the products, models, or risks they know best. A stylist may hear “I need a change” and quite reasonably fail to consider that what I actually need is sleep.

Experts see more than I do. They also see through the lens of their training, incentives, experience, and available tools. So do I. Expertise does not remove a frame; it gives the frame authority.

Sales makes that easier to spot because the commercial interest is visible. The person asking the questions may benefit from the answer.

In services, the interests are often more complicated. The adviser may care deeply about the outcome. They may have helped for years. They may have no obvious conflict at all. Still, the person diagnosing the problem is often also recommending the solution, defining success, and deciding which alternatives deserve discussion.

That concentration of influence is not proof that the advice is wrong. It is a reason to keep the roles clear.

Understanding my problem is not the same as defining it completely.

Knowing the category is not the same as knowing what matters most to me.

Answering my objection is not the same as earning my agreement.

A well-trained salesperson may treat “That is too expensive” as the beginning of clarification: too expensive for the budget, compared with another option, or for the difference in value? That can be useful. It can also make a resolved objection feel like a resolved decision. [6]

It is not.

An answered objection is not a debt I have to repay with a purchase.

READER TOOL

What happens after you say no

CLARIFY THE OBJECTION	“Is it the price, timing, or value?” Turns a general no into a problem that can be solved.
REFRAME THE COST	“Compared with the cost of doing nothing?” Changes the reference point.
ADD SOCIAL PROOF	“Most clients in your position choose this.” Borrows confidence from other people’s decisions.
REDUCE THE COMMITMENT	“What if we started with the smaller package?” Makes the first yes easier.
CREATE URGENCY	“This price is only available today.” Reduces the time available to compare.
USE AN ALTERNATIVE CLOSE	“Would you prefer option A or option B?” Quietly changes *whether* into *which*.

A useful sales technique can still be a sales technique. The cleanest reset:

> “That answers the objection. I am still deciding whether to proceed.”

Borrow the expertise. Keep the vote.

I do not want to become suspicious of everyone who knows more than I do. That would be exhausting and, frequently, stupid.

I want experts. I want the specialist who has seen the rare case, the adviser who understands the market, and the craftsperson who can identify in ten minutes what I have been staring at for six months.

I also want to remember what their expertise can and cannot do.

It can improve the evidence. It can reveal options. It can expose a risk I have missed. It cannot decide, without my noticing, which tradeoff I should value most.

Three questions have become especially useful:

Compared with what?

Based on what?

What would change your mind?

The first restores the missing alternatives. The second separates authority from evidence. The third reveals whether I am hearing a conclusion or a conviction.

And when a conversation has become beautifully tailored, every concern has been neatly answered, and “yes” is beginning to feel like the only socially graceful ending, one sentence creates room:

> “That answers my question. I still want to compare the complete recommendation before I decide.”

A good adviser should survive that sentence. A good recommendation should improve because of it.

The most useful experts do not need the deciding vote. They make mine better.

▼ Sources + Methodology

Huthwaite International, SPIN Selling methodology
The training originator describes situation, problem, implication, and need-payoff questions. The window conversation in this essay is an original illustration.

Salesforce, outcome-based selling and trusted-adviser guidance

First-party sales guidance showing that trusted-adviser positioning is an explicit sales approach; it is not independent evidence of effectiveness.

Bailey et al., A meta-analysis of the weight of advice in decision-making
Meta-analysis of 346 effect sizes from 129 independent data sets (N=17,296). The reported 32, 37, and 48 percent figures are weights assigned to advice in estimation paradigms, not purchase probabilities.

Schwartz, Luce, and Ariely, Are Consumers Too Trusting?
Health-claims evidence and experiments on reluctance to seek second opinions in ongoing expert relationships. Relationship-maintenance motives explained part of the effect.

Sah, Loewenstein, and Cain, Insinuation Anxiety
Four experiments involving conflict disclosures in medical and financial-advice contexts. The finding is context-specific and is not generalized to every adviser relationship.

HubSpot / Craig Wortmann, objection-handling guidance
Published sales guidance on clarifying and addressing objections. It does not imply that resolving an objection makes a purchase advisable.

This essay examines advice, expertise, and decision-making; it is not an argument against experts. The contractor dialogue is illustrative, the medical passage describes the author’s perspective rather than any clinician or treatment, and the research cited concerns estimation rather than purchases. Sales-training sources establish what sellers are taught, not every seller’s motive.