BEST OF: THE WHY CONVERSATION

10 of the best emails from my daily mailing list on the topic of The Why Conversation

Jonathan Stark

jonathanstark.com

CONTENTS

BONUS: HONORABLE MENTIONS

EMAIL 1

The Why Conversation

At some point in your initial meeting with a prospective client, they will brain dump about the proposed project for about 15-30 minutes.

There is usually very little useful information in this monologue, but you have to let them get it off their chest before you can get down to the heart of the matter, which is this:

Why they want to do the project at all.

Questioning the premise of the project before they do the dump will frustrate or confuse them. They will gloss over the answer so they can jump to the dump.

So... you have to let them get it out of their system. Keep your mouth shut and let them vent. When they finally come up for air, you say:

"Thanks for that. Lots of helpful information here. Can we back up for a sec?"

They'll say, *"Sure!"*

And then you ask some variation of this:

"Why is this project becoming a priority now? Has something changed?"

Typically, they'll have shared something in the dump that you can use to make this question more specific, like:

- *"You mentioned that your cart abandonment rate has been over 80% for 18 months. Why is it becoming a priority now?"*
- *"You mentioned that your main competitor just launched this new feature yesterday. Why not wait a month to see if it's adopted by the market before rushing to copy it?"*
- *"You mentioned that you're not 100% sure what caused the drop off in traffic. Would it make sense to take a few months to research the issue before proceeding with this project?"*

Once you've started asking these sorts of "Why" questions, you keep doing it...

- *"Why do this now? Wouldn't it be better to keep an eye on the issue for a few months?"*
- *"Why hire someone like me? Couldn't you save a ton of money by outsourcing this to India?"*
- *"Why not use something off-the-shelf? Wouldn't that be cheaper than paying for custom code?"*
- *etc etc etc*

Don't stop asking Why questions until you are convinced that you are - or are not - a good fit for the project.

The Why Conversation

For obvious reasons, I refer to this as the "Why Conversation". Having a Why Conversation sort of feels like trying to talk the prospect out of hiring you, because... well, you kind of are trying to talk the prospect out of hiring you.

If you CAN talk them out of hiring you, then they didn't need you that badly (i.e., the perceived value of your engagement was low, which means you couldn't have charged much).

If you CAN NOT talk them out of hiring you, then as they answer each Why question, one by one, they'll be convincing *themselves* that you are the best option.

By the end of a successful Why conversation, you'll have something to base your fee on because you'll have learned:

- Why the project is urgent to the client
- What they think will happen if they don't do the project
- The feared business impact of failing to act now
- Why they think you're a good fit for the project
- Why they don't want to go with a cheaper option

Once you have this info, you can start to wrap the meeting up. At which point, it's pretty common for the prospect to ask:

“Can you give me a ballpark on what this might cost?”

We’ll tackle that doozie in the next installment of “Learn Your Lines” :)

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 2

The Trick to The Why Conversation

...is to keep going.

You ask a question. And then you ask another because you’re not satisfied with the first answer. And then you ask another, because you’re still not convinced. And then you ask maybe five more on the same subject until finally you understand.

But... isn’t this incessant questioning rude? How do you motivate yourself to interrogate your prospective clients like this?

You do it by genuinely caring about them.

You have to *want* to improve their condition. To leave them better off than they were before your engagement. To deliver 110% customer satisfaction.

You ARE NOT trying to convince them to give you their money. You are trying to determine if there’s a good fit between your two businesses. An engagement that is likely to generate a profit for both of you.

And you can only figure this out by asking them deeper and deeper questions about what they’re trying to achieve at a fundamental level. To help them uncover their core motivations. To share their hopes, dreams, fears, and nightmares.

It is only through this questioning process that you will learn whether you can help them move closer to their dreams and farther from their nightmares.

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 3

Should I still have The Why Conversation if the answers are obvious?

One common question people ask about The Why Conversation is:

"Should I still have The Why Conversation if the answers are obvious?"

Yes. Yes, you should.

Why?

Because you want the EXACT WORDS the buyer uses to answer the questions so you can put them in the project proposal.

Using their own words will be dramatically more persuasive than "accurate but generic" language that you would come up with on your own.

For example...

Imagine there's a new government regulation that your potential client has to comply with.

You know this.

They know this.

It’s the whole reason they are talking to you about a potential project in the first place.

So, it might feel awkward to ask the “Why this?” questions because you’re afraid they’ll say something like:

"Duh, it’s a regulatory requirement!"

But if they *did* say that, you could ask:

“Yeah, but are they enforcing it on jobs like you do?"

Or:

“Sure, but paying the penalty on 1 in 10 jobs is way cheaper than hiring me.”

Or:

“Don’t you think the regulations will get rolled back when the new administration is voted in next year?”

See what I mean?

There’s ALWAYS a question you can ask to get closer to what’s going on in the prospect’s head.

And knowing what’s going on in the prospect’s head will seriously increase your chances of closing the deal.

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 4

Q&A: “Do I REALLY have to ask the Why Me questions?”

A question came in regarding The Why Conversation episode of Ditching Hourly. The listener expressed a pretty common concern that I probably should have addressed in the episode. Here’s a paraphrased version of the issue:

I’m afraid that if I push too hard on the “Why Me” questions, I might leave my prospect without solid reasons to prefer me over any other service provider. What if the buyer says something along the lines of “No particular reason, you’re simply the first option that I came across”. Since I’m not yet specialized, I’m finding it hard to set myself apart from any other web dev in a way that could matter to a prospect. What would your suggestion be in such a case?

I have two reactions to this:

1. Ask Anyway

I would still ask the Why Me questions to avoid wasting my time. In fact, they’re even more important in a case like this.

If you proceed without learning that the buyer has ruled out cheaper options, it is highly likely that you will face a price objection once you submit your proposal... at which point you’ll have to articulate why you’re worth more than the other options.

There’s no avoiding the differentiation question, so you might as well get it out of the way up front to save yourself the effort of writing a proposal for someone who will ultimately choose the lowest bidder.

2. Specialize

The sooner you position yourself as a specialist, the sooner you can stop competing with every commodity web developer on the planet. I know specializing can feel scary, but it makes *everything* easier.

The bottom line is this:

If you can't point to some meaningful difference between you and your competitors, then the only reliable way to land work is to be the cheapest.

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 5

Is The Why Conversation compatible with cold outreach?

One reasonably effective way to drum up work in a hurry is to do cold outreach to prospects in your target market.

Pro Tip: When you do cold outreach, your request should be *to set up a meeting to find out if there's a good fit*, as opposed to setting up a call to pitch your services.

If the premise of the meeting is to determine fit, it won't seem weird when you launch into The Why Conversation.

If, on the other hand, the premise of the meeting is to prove your worth, asking the prospect "Why" questions will just confuse them, waste everyone's time, and almost certainly prevent you from determining their perceived value of an engagement.

Whether the sales call was initiated by you or the prospect, you need to have The Why Conversation.

At best, it will reveal massive perceived value. At worst, it will prevent you from getting sucked into work with razor-thin (or negative!) margins.

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 6

What if The Why Conversation doesn't work?

Let's say you have The Why Conversation with a prospective client, and they can't come up with clear answers to your questions.

One of three things is probably going on:

1. You need more practice conducting The Why Conversation. Solution? Get more leads.
2. You're not talking to the real buyer. Solution? Get past the gatekeeper.
3. The buyer is operating on gut instinct. Solution? Propose a paid project discovery session.

Here's the thing...

If you can't figure out what needle the client wants to move, then you can't be reasonably confident that you'll succeed.

And if you aren't reasonably confident that you'll succeed, then why would you take their money?

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 7

Example of The Why Conversation for a rebrand

Rebranding is not something I've ever bought or sold, so the following hypothetical dialog might be a little off-kilter.

However, there should be enough here to give an actual branding expert some pretty interesting ideas.

Bob: Hey, thanks for jumping on a call. I heard from Carol that you did a great job with her rebrand.

Alice: That's so nice to hear! I'll have to thank her for the intro :-)

Bob: We are in a similar situation and need a rebrand.

Alice: Gotcha. Is it OK if I ask you a few questions to get started?

Bob: Yes! That sounds great.

Alice: Rebranding is typically a lot more difficult and expensive than people expect. Are you *sure* a rebrand is the only option?

Bob: I think so, but we can talk through it.

Alice: What else have you considered?

Bob: Well, we could do nothing, but that seems like a bad course of action.

Alice: Bad how?

Bob: We are just finishing a merger with another company that is going to expand our service offerings into new areas. The old brand won't accurately represent our expanded portfolio.

Alice: Couldn't you train the sales team to navigate that on a case-by-case basis with existing accounts and new prospects?

Bob: Maybe, but that would be an expensive way to handle it.

Alice: How so?

Bob: The problem would never go away, so it would probably double our sales efforts in perpetuity.

Alice: And you have, what... about a dozen salespeople right now?

Bob: Basically, yes. I think we have ten at the moment.

Alice: Okay, I see what you mean. Addressing this by doubling your sales efforts would be super inefficient.

Bob: Exactly.

Alice: Could you hold off on a rebrand and have the existing sales team explain the "portfolio disconnect" for the next six months? At that point, you'll have a ton of information from the market about how serious the disconnect really is, and could decide then if a rebrand was the best option.

Bob: I've been working in this space for 30 years. Before I started this business, I worked at BigCo, which is our biggest client now. I know everyone there, and I know how they're going to react to the merger. I'm 100% confident that we need to get out in front of this and take a leadership role in the marketplace.

Alice: So this merger and the associated rebrand is a key strategy for the year?

Bob: Yes, we're pretty much betting the business on the idea that our new product/service mix will be an industry-leading differentiator that unlocks exponential growth.

Alice: Understood, thanks for that. Let's say, just hypothetically, that we do a big rebrand. How long do you predict it will take to know if you made the right bet?

Bob: If our forecasts are correct, we'll 3-5x our year-over-year profits in the first 12 months post-launch, and it would go up from there.

Alice: Yeah... that would be a decisive win. Thanks for walking me through this. Ethically, it's important to me to "first do no harm," like a doctor. Lots of people ask me for a rebrand when really, it's not what they need. But you've convinced me that you're right... a rebrand is the right prescription in your case, and you have good reason to do it now and not put it off.

Bob: I appreciate that approach.

Alice: In a rebranding process, there are usually lots of stakeholders and, therefore, competing opinions, motivations, and objectives. What criteria do you think we could use along the way to ensure that we stay on track toward your ultimate goal of 3-5x YoY profits?

Bob: I'm not sure what you mean...

Alice: Imagine that today is the day we launch the new brand. What would you hope happens?

Bob: I hope everyone loves it!

Alice: Who's everyone?

Bob: Well, obviously, I want to love it. And the executive team. But it's more important that the sales team is completely bought into it.

Alice: What about BigCo?

Bob: Well, yes, obviously that's the most important. The rebrand needs to be clear and compelling to companies like BigCo. That's the most important metric of all. If they get it, everyone else in the market will follow suit.

Alice: Who at BigCo will probably be the biggest influencer of whether or not the rebrand is a huge success?

Bob: Probably my ex-boss, David.

Alice: Do you think we could loop him into a few progress meetings for feedback along the way to help ensure our success?

Bob: For sure. We're still pretty tight.

Alice: Great. What sort of reaction would you be looking for from David in those meetings to tell us that we're on track for a successful rebrand?

Bob: Oh, David is incredibly direct. If he hates it, we'll know, in no uncertain terms.

Alice: That sounds a little... harsh?

Bob: The upside is that if he says he likes it, I can trust him. He doesn't blow smoke.

Alice: So, in your opinion, if David gives our progress thumbs-ups along the way, we can be highly confident that the overall effort will be a success, right?

Bob: Yes, I would agree with that. Our internal stakeholders do need to be bought in as well, but David giving his blessing will actually help influence that.

Alice: Assuming we decide to move forward, do you think David would agree to join us as a client avatar representative for a rebrand kickoff meeting?

Bob: I think I can make that happen.

Alice: That's fantastic. I need to go over my notes and give it some thought, but I think I see three different ways we could engage. I could put together a proposal with prices and have it to you by Wednesday. Would that work for you?

Bob: Yeah, that'd be great.

Alice: Perfect. I'll email over a PDF on Wednesday.

And with that, Alice has everything she needs...

1. To write a three-option, value-priced proposal
2. To guarantee something she can directly control
3. To measure progress toward the goal during delivery
4. To control scope creep during delivery

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 8

Reader question: "How do you have The Why conversation when you're cold calling?"

Reader Howard Fore wrote in recently with a question I get fairly often after talking about The Why Conversation *(shared with permission)*:

> *Ok, but (and you've probably talked about this already) how do you have the Why conversation when you're cold calling a potential client? I want to sell them a service that they don't currently use, but that will expand their reach into their current market.*

Thanks, Howard!

The fundamental issue here is a misunderstanding of what selling consists of. I never go into a meeting with a prospect with the intention of selling something to them. My intention is to determine whether or not there's a good fit between our two businesses. If there is no mutually beneficial way to engage, why would I try to force something on them?

So...

In Howard's case, the outreach could be something like:

> *Hi Bob,*
>
> *Would you like to expand your reach into {their current market}? I have a solution that helps some businesses like yours do this, but it doesn't work for everyone. Would you be open to a quick phone call to see if there's a good fit? If so, just reply with yes/thumbs-up, and I'll send across a few possible times.*
>
> *Yours,*
>
> *Howard*

(This draft is pretty weak and could be improved significantly if I knew more about Howard and Bob. But for the purpose of this message, it's good enough to get the point across.)

Your Takeaway

When doing outreach, your ask should be:

> *"Would you like to jump on a call to see if there's a good fit?"*

Given that as your opening, The Why Conversation makes perfect sense.

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 9

Reader success: “My first Why Conversation went… exactly as you said it should!”

Reader Camilla Barker wrote in with a wonderful anecdote that I think you’ll enjoy *(shared with permission)*:

> *Hey Jonathan,*
>
> *I know you’re a busy man, so I’ll keep this short. A couple of days ago, I had my first intentional Why Conversation (I’ve had them before, but didn’t ever identify them as such). I got off the phone, and I was gob-smacked. It went exactly as it ‘should’. I asked questions, but barely did any other talking. I gave no advice. I listened carefully and prompted the prospect to delve deeper into the issues without prescribing. I even borrowed your phrasing and said, “There’s a tendency among consultants to diagnose and prescribe before knowing anything about symptoms. I am keen to avoid that. So tell me about X…”. Before I knew it, I had the client singing my praises and telling me why I’m the one who needs to do the job, why they’re happy to sit back and let me advise, how they’ve got so many people to introduce me to etc etc.*
>
> *I got off the phone and felt amazing. This shit works. Thank you.*
>
> *All the best, my friend,*
>
> *Milly.*

Thanks for sharing, Milly!

I hope your story inspires others to give The Why Conversation a try :)

Yours,
—J

EMAIL 10

The Why Conversation in Architecture

Fellow list member Nick Poulsen replied to my last email to share his experiences with new clients "brain dumping" in sales meetings in the architecture space *(shared with permission):*

> *Hi Jonathan,*
>
> *I love the point that Michael makes about the realization of the potential you've proposed.*
>
> *Just an observation from my work perspective as an architect, one of the major issues I find with clients when as you rightly say, they do a brain dump, is that it's usually a mish mash of differing ideas which allows me the opportunity to go back to the basics I've learnt from you, ie Why this, Why that and piece the project together as a coherent master plan.*
>
> *Nine times out of ten, clients love the clarity of the master plan and the vision it brings to their project!*
>
> *Just sharing . . . !*
>
> *All the best*
>
> *Nick Poulsen*

Thanks so much to Nick for sharing this!

TL;DR:

9 out of 10 clients love it.

Yours,
—J

★ BONUS: HONORABLE MENTIONS ★

BONUS 1

Three categories of Why

Sometimes people tell me that they understand the “Why Conversation” in theory, but when it comes time to have one in a sales call with a prospect, they don’t know what to actually ask. They either go blank, revert to status quo (asking about requirements), or stop asking Why too soon.

There are three categories of Why. You should explore each with your prospects:

- Why this?
- Why now?
- Why me?

Here are some sample lines for each category:

Why this?

- Why do anything at all?
- Why not just leave things the way they are?
- Are things really so bad that you need to embark on a costly/risky project?

Why now?

- Why do this now?
- Why not keep an eye on it for six months and decide then?
- You’ve known about this problem for a long time. Did something change recently that increased the urgency?

Why me?

- Why not handle this internally?
- Why not outsource to India?
- Why not hire some junior contractors?
- Isn’t there an off-the-shelf solution that you could use?

Start with one category and keep going until you are satisfied or don’t know what else to ask, and then switch to another category. It’ll increase the value and your chance of closing the deal if you can get solid answers in all three categories.

However, you may find that your prospect will be so impressed with your concern for their well-being that they’ll practically beg for a quote before you can make it through all three categories.

Yours,
—J

P.S For more info about how to have a Why Conversation, check out my book ->
hourlybillingisnuts.com

BONUS 2

"Must a Why Conversation be done verbally?"

Reader Shayne Rempel asks *(shared unedited, with permission)*:

Hi Jonathan,

_I have a question about the Why Conversation that I think other readers may be interested in hearing as well. Is the Why Conversation something you can do in a questionnaire format, or do you believe it should only be done through a verbal conversation?

I have a partner agency that is looking to bring me in on a job, asking me how much my portion of the project (designing 8 web page templates) would cost. Should I value price the agency that is looking to subcontract the work (determine how valuable my service is to them) or have the partner agency use a Why conversation questionnaire I create to help me price my portion of the project?

Thanks so much for your time and valuable snippets of pure wisdom!

Shayne Rempel

Thanks for the question, Shayne!

There are two things I should comment on here:

- Must a Why Conversation be done verbally?
- Can you value price through an agency?

I'll answer the first today and the second tomorrow.

Must a Why Conversation be done verbally?
When I first read the question "Must a Why Conversation be done verbally?" my knee-jerk reaction was "Yes," but upon reflection, it's not quite that simple.

The real answer is "It depends," which raises the question "What does it depend on?"

Here are a few dependencies:

- The nature of the project
- The size of the project
- The clarity of the project
- Your history with the client
- The depth of your relationship with the client
- The seniority of your client contact

In a situation where you have worked closely with a decision maker for a long time, you can probably forgo a verbal Why Conversation for a new project. You might be able to forgo a Why Conversation completely.

For example, last week I got a request from a client I've been working closely with for a couple of years.

When it came to pricing the engagement, I opened the conversation via email by saying:

> *"I have no idea how to price something like this, but it's not a lot of work, so I'm not worried about it."*

My contact (the president of the organization) said:

> *"Just send us a bill when you're done... we're good for it ;-)"*

In other words, they trust me to name my own price. And they can, because they know that I know what's at stake and what my bit is likely worth.

The moral of the story:

Having a LOT of trust built up makes things MUCH easier for everyone.

HOWEVER

Unless you're working exclusively with existing clients, you won't have a lot of trust built up with every prospect.

In the case where you have never worked with the client before, and you aren't even sure if you're talking to the right person yet, a verbal Why Conversation is very important.

For a really big opportunity, I'd go so far as to say you should do it in person, even if that means getting on a plane (on your own dime).

Tomorrow: "Can you value price through an agency?"

Yours,
—J

WANT MORE?

Join 9,000+ independent consultants who get my free daily email on pricing, positioning, and ditching hourly billing.

Subscribe at

jonathanstark.com/daily