

Know When to Stop Talking: Practicing the Art of Active Listening – Part I

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Salespeople can be some of the worst offenders of speaking when we really should be listening. After all, most of us are hired for our ability to talk a good game. But many of us also don't recognize the importance of saying our piece, asking our questions and then really listening to our customer.

A pretty basic concept, right? But learning to listen effectively is something that we'll spend our lives practicing. Think of it as an art – one that needs your time and attention. As you become more proficient at your art, you'll also find yourself becoming even more successful as a salesperson – and guiding your clients to more profitable solutions. And isn't that what it's all about?

Listen and Learn

Remember way back in grade school when your teacher insisted everyone in class pay attention to what he or she was saying? It was for your benefit – so you could learn something instead of assuming you knew it all! The same holds true now.

If you're not listening, you'll end up making assumptions based on false information. And, in turn, that means:

- You have a tendency to over-sell or offer a premature (or inappropriate) solution SO
- You won't earn your customer's trust and lose credibility AND
- You might ultimately lose the sale OR
- You might sell one time, but you won't get repeat business.

The Benefits of Active Listening

Effective listening isn't simply about sitting back and letting your customer talk. It's about taking an active role in finding out more about your customer, her business and her goals. By practicing active listening, the best salespeople draw out the facts and determine the emotional reasons their customers buy (or don't buy).

You'll see the results in:

- Better communication
- Possibility of long-term customer relationships

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- Better control of the selling situation
- Better fit of the product or solution to the customer
- Increased satisfaction with the person
- Increased referrals
- Increased repeat business

Listening Tip: Avoid the “Uh-Huhs”

Instead of using “uh-huh” as your reaction to what your customer is saying, try using phrases that confirm you’re really listening. “That’s interesting, tell me more,” or “what would that kind of space look like?” These responses confirm your attention and put some variety in your listening. Avoid the “uh-huhs” and you’ll show the customer you’re truly interested and engaged.

This goes for physical listening, too. Zap the “uh-huhs” from your body language. Lean forward. Maintaining eye contact (without staring down your customer). Take notes during your meeting.

Tailor Your Listening to Your Customer

Understanding your customer’s personality is critical to everything you do in a sales situation – especially in active listening. Each personality type requires a special kind of listening in order to achieve a positive result, or sale, for you.

- Take note of your customer’s physical style. For example, if your customer does more physical listening or jots down notes during your meeting, try to do the same. It shows that you’re listening and taking heed of what he’s saying – and that you value what he’s saying.
- Watch your customer’s words. If she uses more analytic-oriented words (exactly, total, cost, results) she’ll pay attention when you do the same. If your customer speaks in an emotional way (feel, think, understand), reflect that in your comments.
- Learn to read body language. A person’s physical movements can speak volumes about a situation. Maintain eye contact to show your customer you’re taking in what she’s saying. Use your posture to show you’re interested – lean in rather than sitting back in your chair. And pay attention to how your customer looks when talking about a business problem or need. Noticing when he looks relaxed or uncomfortable can say a lot about how you need to proceed.

Watch for Listening/Buying Signals

Customers know when we’re listening to them and when we’re not. If you show that you’re following what your customer is saying, chances are she’ll engage you in the conversation. These listening/buying signals from your customer may include:

- Coming around the desk to show you her notes or sitting side-by-side

- with you to explain a concept or idea
- Nodding in agreement with a solution you're posing
- Sharing her thoughts about her needs ("I'm looking for a more efficient way to do that.")
- Asking more detailed questions about your product or service ("How long would it take to get that set up?" or "Do you price that by the hour or by the project?")

The same kinds of signals work for you as a salesperson, too. Active listening may mean that you engage them in the notes you're writing down to confirm what you're hearing or suggest you tour the customer's facility. It can make the situation – and the resulting close – less "sales-y," because you're doing something together.

Stay 'in the Moment'

More than anything, let it be known that you're interested in what your customer has to say. Demonstrate that you're really listening by actively responding, analyzing or addressing the information your customer has provided you. Remember, this is your prime opportunity to gather the information you need, to avoid assumptions and start working on a solution that suits your customer's needs.

Part 2 in this series will explore tips for more effective questioning which leads to a better understanding of customer needs and increased capability to meet them.



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