

Once you've polished your outbound messages, shift your focus to incoming messages. Whether you are poised on the edge of a cliff or working on a sale, being able to hear the other individuals around you and understand what they are communicating, directly and indirectly, is critical to your survival.

As noted in the last chapter, sales communication is a three-step process: listening, watching for body language, and talking and using body language. In this chapter, we will focus on listening.

Learning to listen means learning the patience to be quiet.

The average person can talk at a rate of roughly 260 to 300 words per minute. Most people can listen and absorb information at six or seven times that rate. That's why we are so prone to mental multitasking. We read the paper, watch TV, eat dinner, and think about what's coming up at the office tomorrow or what we need to do with the kids later this evening — all at the same time! Just knowing our brains work this way shows us that unless we develop skills otherwise, we are prone mentally to do too many things at once, and none of them well. To stop this process takes an intention to do so and a *lot of practice*.

The greatest gift you can give your client (*and anyone else, for that matter*) is to be present, to be absolutely focused just on them and what they are saying; not to let your brain wander off to the myriad of other things going on at the same time.

While this can be challenging, it is essential. Listening helps build rapport with the client. Giving the client time to talk and feel heard will help that client really listen to you later. You are setting the tone for the relationship from the first conversation.

Giving your mouth a rest allows your mind to work, taking what you hear as a whole and being better able to process it when the time is right.

GUIDEPOST 19:

*Listen at least 60% of the time;
talk no more than 40% of the time.*

There is a distinction, of course, between hearing and listening. Hearing is the process of your brain registering a sound that has entered in through your ears. Listening is comprehension; being tuned-in, attentive, and intentional.

Learn to listen in a way that doesn't find you continually thinking about the questions you want to ask next. Whenever you are thinking about the next question you want to ask, you are not really listening to the client.

Silence is not a bad thing. People can be uncomfortable with silence and feel the need to fill in the gaps. Practice being in silence to become more comfortable with it. The silence can be short, just a pause for a few seconds, or it can be much longer, but that pause will show that you are not in a hurry and are really there for the customer. It shows that you care about his comfort and his timetable. The client will appreciate that you are giving them the time to formulate his thoughts. If you rush in to fill the quiet space and start talking, he may never get back to the point he was trying to make, which might have been crucial information for you to know.

The questions you want to ask are those that help you gather information to move the sales process forward; questions that bring you a better understanding of the who, what, where, why, how of the opportunity. Consider preparing these questions ahead of time when you go into a sales call, both as a way to think about what you want to learn, and also as a way to free yourself to fully listen.

Ready, Set, Sshhhhhhhh...

While listening may seem to be a passive process, in reality it is anything but. Listening is an active process. Show you are actively listening by doing the following:

- * Make eye contact when customers speak.
- * Be aware of your posture, how you are sitting or standing.
- * Make encouraging gestures, like nodding, leaning forward, smiling.
- * Take notes, using whatever method you use to document your meetings.

Active listening means giving your customer visible encouragement and offering assurance that you are paying attention and are interested in his concerns, goals, and what he has to say in general.

It will be obvious to your customer whether you are not listening fully, but only listening to get ammunition for saying something yourself. It isn't easy to train yourself to actively listen, but when you are, doors will open and solutions will present themselves.

As humans, whenever we listen, we naturally sort and categorize what we hear so we can effectively remember and respond. When you listen to your customers, it's important to learn to listen for all the parts of the message and leave responding for a separate time.

When we listen by getting ready to analyze and respond, then we aren't listening to the whole message. We prejudge everything we are hearing and categorize it into where *we think* it fits in with what we've already heard. It means we only listen to about 20 percent of the message.

This is particularly a problem when the customer is talking as a means of thinking about sorting through what they want and need. We solve the problem in our heads before he finishes his explanation instead of helping him sort through the problem and then connect to the solution.

Your watching skills must be developed along with your listening skills. As you learn to listen without categorizing, also begin to listen and note what you see—especially what is in synch with what you are hearing and what is not. Watch your customer's body language. Sometimes what the body is saying is much more telling than the words. The words may be nice but if the body is stiff, the arms crossed, and the jaw set; you can sure there is more to the story.

Eye contact is important, of course, but make your gaze natural. It should be comfortable for you (and for them). Don't stare incessantly. Break eye contact occasionally by looking down at your page to write notes, or reviewing a point they just made.

Be at ease and relaxed without crossing that fine line to being too familiar. Your client is not your best friend, and while you always want to be yourself, be your best self. Even if you'd like to develop a more lasting

or personal relationship with the client, it isn't appropriate to start that way. When you are at ease with yourself, you are much more likely to be at ease with the customer. Respecting boundaries will help.

A habit of familiarity many of us get into is to finish another person's sentences. This generally frustrates clients because it just means you are taking over the conversation and not really listening. **Always** let them complete their thoughts; above all, do not interrupt.

PROOF POSITIVE

I mentored someone new to sales who was nothing if not enthusiastic. She accompanied me several times to observe and assist with sales presentations. She made a great impression on everyone we met, was respectfully silent during critical conversations, and was, in general, delightful to work with.

Then came the day for her to go out on her own. She had been "courting" a client for several weeks and was about to close the sale.

While I anxiously waited for her to return to the office with the news of her first sale, my phone rang. It was her client.

I gingerly asked how everything had gone. "Well," said the gentleman, laughing in a fatherly tone, "I tried to give her the sale, I really did, but she wouldn't let me get a word in edgewise, so perhaps you could let her know that, and send her back tomorrow with the paperwork."

Another habit of poor listeners is interrupting. They editorialize midstream. They solve problems out loud before hearing all the variables. They talk too much. They are judgmental.

When you are actively listening, you are listening for everything as well as listening for something. Listen selectively. This may sound like a bad thing, but it's not. A trained listener reads between the lines. The

client is saying one thing to you, but you hear that he or she is saying something else. If you are new in sales, this is sometimes hard to discern, but it will become second nature in time. Listening between the lines is a valuable skill. Listen to discover who this person is and what is important to him, what is challenging him, and if what you do is a good fit to help with that challenge.

We all know people buy for different reasons. Some people buy intuitively, they just feel good about something, they have an inner knowing, a belief that it will work. Some people buy based on analysis and logic. Listening to the client's words and examples of when something didn't work in the past will help you understand what the client needs to feel comfortable when making the buying decision.

GUIDEPOST 20:

Build relationships through discerning your clients' values, challenges and goals.

Effective communication allows you to develop and maintain rapport with customers that builds relationships and long-term business deals.

The Four Types of Listeners

You may think you are one of those listeners who can multitask and doesn't need to listen fully as I've suggested because you are a seasoned veteran of the sales process and you know how to do it all. Through all the sales training I've done, I've discovered that there are really only four types of listeners, and the four fit the acronym SALE:

- * Scavengers
- * Attention-Challenged
- * Literal
- * Empathetic

Scavengers are just looking for scraps of information about what the client needs. They pick up less than 20 percent of the entire message because they are listening only to decide what to say next. Scavengers typically don't listen between the lines. This tells the client he or she is just a sales number and that his or her problems are not really important to the salesperson.

The **attention-challenged** can't seem to focus on the client. They don't look the customer in the eye, or their gaze is continually distracted by something else going on in the room. They are so busy shuffling papers or showing the clients their wonderful sales materials that they completely forget to focus and listen to the client. Usually the client gives up and lets the salesperson drive the process while silently vowing never to do business with this person.

Literal salespeople listen to the client and acknowledge exactly what is said. They don't listen between the lines and don't look for clues of what the client may not be revealing. They accept whatever the client says he needs, without wondering if there is more to the story, or more information that would help them find a better solution together. They may hurry the client through the process, leaving an untold amount of dollars on the table and a dissatisfied client with a problem still not completely solved.

Empathetic salespeople are the success stories. If you want to be a truly great sales professional, really listen first, create rapport and gain the trust of the client—not as a ploy to get sales, but because you genuinely care. Leave an ample number of silent pauses to allow the client to complete thoughts. Smile and nod; maintain eye contact.

Give and Let Give

Perhaps the main benefit of empathetic, active listening is that you've modeled behavior your customer can mirror. If you lean in, nod or shake your head, your clients are more likely to do the same, giving you tremendous clues when he is excited about what you are saying.

You can help your clients communicate better with you by doing four things:

- * Speak their language.
- * Say something worth hearing.
- * Coax them out of their natural habitat; for example, meet a client at a local coffee shop instead of at his office.
- * Establish that what you are saying will be valuable to them.

PROOF POSITIVE

One of my favorite clients had her desk in the midst of the office, which was actually more of a showroom. She liked it that way because her landscape equipment repair business was based on walk-in traffic and she liked to greet the customers.

While this was an excellent way for her to build relationships with her customers, it also gave her the feeling that she always had to be at her desk, even during our meetings. As much as I liked her, I hated meeting with her. Invariably, phones, customers, vendors, and employees distracted her from the work we were trying to do. In her office, she was conditioned to be tuned-in to everything going on around her, and our “meetings” dragged on, with little being accomplished and ending with our business undone.

After a string of unproductive meetings, I suggested we meet at a local bagel shop. She arrived ten minutes late, looking harried and scattered. After decompressing with coffee and friendly conversation, we got down to business. We wrapped up everything in under thirty minutes.

As we parted, she said “I just accomplished more in a half hour than I get done in most days. Thank you for kidnapping me.”

Tune Your Receiver to the Strongest Signal

Once you've completed the first phase of the communications process, listening by just listening, you can thoughtfully respond—mirroring tempo and style and finding just the right words to connect with the customer's needs and desires.

The biggest problem for most salespeople when they finally get through the listening phase is to assume that now it's their turn to talk, so they make up for lost time by talking for 20 minutes straight. Do this, and you will completely unravel any rapport or trust you have created.

Your 40 percent (or less) of the talking should be all about answers—answering questions and seeking answers. Just be careful not to grill the client. The sales process works much better when it feels like a natural conversation.

If you feel like you are talking too much, or feel pressured to talk because the customer isn't, stop, refocus, and then ask an open-ended question to get the conversation moving again.

GUIDEPOST 21:

*Be genuinely interested, not just interested
until you make the sale.*

Listening is a skill set that must be developed. There is no substitute for challenging yourself to become a better listener and practicing the necessary skills. And the more you practice, the more this skill becomes a second skin. It's rewarding when it all comes together and you realize you are naturally getting much more value and information from the conversations you have with your clients.

Suppose your client has just started to talk about her budget for the year. Did you just hear the word budget, or did you hear that they have less budget this year than they had last year? What if you heard that they have no budget now, in June, but will have additional budget in the fourth quarter? Do you continue selling, or do you adjust your course

accordingly to continue building rapport, knowing that relationships lead to long-term profitable sales?

If you can learn to listen well, and do it consistently, you can close more business in less time. And if you can close business in less time, how much more business could you do in a year?

The unfortunate and sad truth is that many salespeople do not truly care about their clients. They care only about the order, the deal, and the commission. These salespeople tend not to last at one place very long. They move around a lot and never understand why they don't have satisfied customers and aren't making the money they'd like to. You can't fake sincerity.

So what can good listening generate for you and your bottom line?



FIELD STUDIES

Think about times when you really felt heard by others. Consider how it made you feel. Did you think or do anything differently as a result? Can you do that for your customers?



NEW TRAVELER TIPS

Try this role-playing exercise with a professional colleague or coach: You play the salesperson, and your colleague plays your customer. Have the customer talk and then stop every few minutes and you, as the salesperson, tell the customer what you heard. Your colleague will then tell you what you missed. At the end, have your colleague tell you what you didn't ask, but should have, and what it felt like to be your customer.

Your customers are nice people, and they won't tell you that you didn't listen well or that they don't feel understood. What they will tell you is no, you do not get the order.

While worthwhile, this is not an easy exercise for most salespeople, but if you do it more than once, it will get easier.



SEASONED CLIMBER CHALLENGE

Do you use these questions in your conversations with clients and then stop and listen?

- * What is the most difficult/best part of your business right now?
- * Who do you consider competitors in your industry?
- * Have you always been in this type of business?
- * How do other people usually find out about your business?
- * What would you most like to be different about your business? What can you effectively do about it?
- * Where do you currently get most of your business?
- * How can I help you with your business?
- * Who would you like to meet?
- * What is the most exciting piece of business you have ever done? How have you been able to duplicate that success?
- * How do you keep up to date in your industry?
- * What part does technology play in your business?

ASKDEB

Q: As a natural introvert, should I even think about getting into sales? Are some areas better suited than others, for instance, going into insurance sales instead of real estate sales?

A: The answer to your question is a definite YES! Sales can be an absolutely wonderful career for an introvert. Who is better at truly listening?

No matter what it is you sell, the customer or client should be the focus. Unfortunately, so many salespeople think THEY are the focus and so do not really make the sales presentations with the customer or client in mind. They make presentations, not conversation.

If you sell around understanding the customer's issue, problem, difficulty, or need, you are better able to formulate what solution you can offer with your product or service. Customers love it when someone really listens to them and understands what they are dealing with before trying to sell them something.

In answer to your second question about some areas being better suited to introverts than others, I don't really think so. What's important is that you sell something you know and love. Those will always be the easiest things for you to be successful at selling, and that applies whether you are an introvert or an extrovert!

Want more help on your journey?

See www.The-Sales-Company.com for the Inbound Communication Workbook