



Back to Basics Part 2

By Maile Foster

It takes a great man to make a good listener.

- ARTHUR HELPS (1813 - 1875)

Improving your listening skills can improve your competitive edge in sales calls. A few improvements can make the difference between winning and losing a big sale. Years ago I learned that lesson the hard way, when I lost a big order to a normally weak competitor. I later learned my customer went with the competitor because of the tape backup it offered. Well, I had tape backup, too! Unfortunately, I didn't realize that it was a hot button for my customer, so I never clearly addressed the issue. I just wasn't listening closely enough when the customer was communicating. I vowed this would never happen to me again!

Last issue we started a series on sales basics. We discussed ways to prepare for the perfect sales call, including building features-and-benefits charts and gathering information on the customer's industry. The next step is developing rapport with the customer through careful questioning and, most of all, listening. How good a listener are you?

"What?" you say. "I'm on the phone all day, following leads and creating new opportunities. If that's not listening, what is?" But how often do you take the time to really hear what your customer is telling you, not to mention your staff, your competition, or your family? Good listening skills will reap rewards. You'll spend less time correcting your own misconceptions, and be more likely to close the sale because you'll respond to what your customer is really saying, proving to him that you know his specific needs and can respond to them.

Active listening is much more than hearing sounds. With active listening, you use all your sensory skills - sight, sound, even gestures and facial expressions - to deepen the communication process. You listen with your whole body. You'll retain more of what you've heard; and, even better, you'll hear underlying feelings and ideas. Your edge on the competition increases when you respond to what the customer hasn't even verbalized.



Start improving your active listening with this simple self-scoring quiz and find out how good your listening

skills really are. Score yourself on the 25 active listening skills that follow. If you usually practice the skill in question, give yourself a "2." If you sometimes practice the skill, give yourself a "1" and if you seldom practice the skill, give yourself a "0." No one knows your score but you - so be brutally honest with yourself.

1. Before I begin a sensitive discussion, I make at least one "clearing-the-decks" gesture, such as removing the papers I'm working on from my desk.0 1 2
2. If I expect the conversation to be lengthy, I offer coffee or water to my discussion partner.0 1 2
3. I sit close to the speaker and directly face him or her. 0 1 2
4. I listen for subtle changes in inflection and tone of voice to understand the speaker's feelings.0 1 2
5. I gaze at my partner during discussion, but avoid impersonal or "cold" staring.0 1 2
6. I don't offer opinions or judgements on the issues at hand, at least until the discussion is over.0 1 2
7. I use gestures, like nods of the head, or murmurs of understanding, when my partner makes points that seem particularly important.0 1 2
8. I don't succumb to distractions, such as ringing telephones or activity in the hallway, while listening.0 1 2
9. I maintain a relaxed posture during the conversation, despite the content of the discussion.0 1 2
10. Although I might jot down an occasional word or phrase, I avoid writing extensive notes during the conversation.0 1 2
11. I restate the speaker's key thoughts in my own words from time to time.0 1 2
12. I ask questions to clarify facts and understand the feelings of the speaker.0 1 2
13. I avoid expressing irritation at any poor speech patterns or hesitancy the speaker might exhibit.0 1 2
14. I use the speaker's name occasionally.0 1 2
15. I let the speaker "get off the topic" during a sensitive discussion if he or she wishes.0 1 2
16. I listen carefully for signs of emotion in the speaker's voice.0 1 2
17. My demeanor appropriately complements the speaker's demeanor; for instance, if the speaker is upset, my posture and gestures are reassuring.0 1 2
18. I resist the temptation to finish the speaker's sentences or draw conclusions before he or she does.0 1 2
19. I speak slowly and in a relaxed manner.0 1 2
20. I avoid distracting gestures, like looking at my watch or at papers piled nearby.0 1 2
21. I acknowledge the speaker's feelings and thank him or her for sharing them.0 1 2
22. If the speaker asks me a question, I answer simply, directly, and non-judgmentally.0 1 2
23. I'm not afraid to say "I don't know," if I can't offer a firm answer to a problem or question.0 1 2
24. I periodically ask the speaker if I'm understanding his or her message.0 1 2
25. I help the speaker bring closure to the conversation by forging mutual conclusions or observations.0 1 2

Now total the numerical values of all your answers. If your total score is 40 or above, congratulations! You're a good conversation partner and practice active listening skills quite effectively. If your total score is between 30 and 39, you're probably familiar with active listening techniques, but need to practice them more often. If your total score is below 30, don't worry - active listening skills can be learned. In fact the test above may have given you ideas about just where you need to improve. Start by really concentrating on your partner and what he or she is saying. What is the underlying idea being conveyed - not just the words?

Mr. Brown, the customer:

I just don't see how we can afford the time and expense of learning a new language now, but my developers keep begging me for more flexible tools.

You respond by restating the important words and the underlying idea:

You:

What I hear you saying, Mr. Brown, is that you need a programming tool that offers lots of flexibility, but is easy to learn and use . . . and the benefits need to outweigh the costs. Is that right?

This give and take makes sure both parties are heard - and understood. Never be afraid to check out what you thought you heard. It's always better to get it right than to make an assumption incorrectly, and waste you and your customer's money and time.

Next time you're involved in a conversation, remember that active listening places the focus of conversation on the person you're speaking with - not on yourself. Whether on the phone or in person, use your words, your feelings, and your thoughts to fully communicate. You'll make better use of your listening time and, what's more, you'll notice an increase in customer satisfaction and sales.

Next issue: Questions, Questions, Questions!