

# How to Listen Effectively<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Sales is a very challenging and important aspect of business. Essential sales skills and techniques are constantly evolving thus enabling salespersons to be more effective. These developments lead to higher sales and higher customer satisfaction. This document discusses the art of effective listening and gives pointers that will make the next sales call more successful for both the customer and salesperson.

Salespeople today have a harder time trying to prove themselves to customers because most customers view salespeople as underhanded and tricky, only out to make a sale and to make themselves more prosperous. Salespeople are often seen as pushy and unconcerned with the needs of customers and are often accused of not listening. This is a problem that also plagues other professions besides sales.

## The Importance of Listening

Many salespeople have the bad habit of “doing the product dump.” This is when they tell you everything there is to know about the product, barely taking a breath; it is often caused by inexperience or nervousness. However, one of the key factors to being an effective salesperson is the use of effective listening. Research has shown time and again that the ability to listen is the most necessary skill for a successful, productive, one-on-one sales call (Brooks 2001).



Figure 1.

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The challenge in listening effectively is to know how to listen. Often, a customer only wants a salesperson to listen when frustrated or enthusiastic about a product. When there is a problem, sometimes there is little that can really be done, but effective listening can help a salesperson stand apart from the others. If more salespeople would simply learn this obvious truth, they would certainly sell better, easier, and at a greater margin (Brooks 2001).

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## Asking Questions

Many salespeople find that customers love to talk about themselves. The first time a salesperson speaks with a customer it should be solely for learning about the customer. This is a chance for a salesperson to use listening skills to develop rapport with the customer and to gain useful knowledge for future sales calls, such as the customer's history, objectives, and current and future business plans (Bonura 2001). It is all part of building a long-term sales relationship.

## Answering Questions

Questions should be answered carefully. It is important to be knowledgeable about the product's strengths and weaknesses, but you should avoid stating an answer until you hear the entire question. Do not listen with the intent of answering, but with the intent of *understanding* (Parker 2001).

Once you have heard the question, use reflective listening, or mirroring, to repeat the question. This will ensure that you and the customer understand the question in the same way (Bonura 2001). Then, take a moment to think before answering. This will show the customer that you are interested in finding an answer that addresses the question (Parker 2001). Bonura (2001) suggests that, "if you use body language, verbal signals, and reflective listening, your customers will tell you everything you want to know."

## Positive Effective Listening

Bill Brooks has identified 10 hints that improve your ability to listen effectively: listen for answers to intelligent, probing questions; listen between-the-lines; never interrupt the customer; focus on what the customer is saying; record what the customer is saying; paraphrase what you believe you heard the customer say; ask for clarification; offer feedback; listen with your eyes, heart, and ears; and summarize what you heard the customer say (Brooks 2001).

## Listen for Answers to Intelligent, Probing Questions

The salesperson needs to know how to phrase and ask questions in a manner that helps customers define how the salesperson can help them. Use structured questions to listen more effectively.

## Listen "Between-the-Lines"

The salesperson should listen both to what customers are saying and what they are not saying. Many customers are afraid to say what they really think for fear of being embarrassed or being disrespectful of the salesperson. For example, a customer may respond to the question "How was your last order?" by saying that "the quality of the product was fine." However, the customer may not have been completely satisfied with the time that the delivery arrived. Unless the salesperson reads between the lines, he or she may never discover the customer's true feelings about the delivery time. Listening between the lines can help you respond to a customer's needs and wants, thus resulting in a sale.

## Never Interrupt the Customer

The salesperson may miss vital information if he or she has a habit of interrupting the customer. Customers may lose their train of thought or be offended at being interrupted. If something the customer says needs further clarification, the salesperson should jot it down until the customer has finished speaking.

## Focus on What the Customer Is Saying

Listen intently to what the customer is actually saying, not what you think the customer may be saying (Brooks 2001). This could be vital information that will help gain a sales. All customers are different and have different needs, so predicting their next word is a waste of focus and time. Also, the salesperson should not focus on what he or she will say next (Brooks 2001). This breaks concentration and focus and is a sure sign that the salesperson is not effectively listening to the customer.

## Record What the Customer Is Saying

After gaining permission, the salesperson should record or write down the customer's responses to the salesperson's questions. A record of the customer's response may be helpful in solving the problem at the time or later, and it shows the customer how serious the salesperson is about identifying needs and solving problems. It will also help in the future if the salesperson needs to refer back to the problem when planning the next sales call or for any other reason that may arise (Brooks 2001).

## Paraphrase Questions

Paraphrasing or restating the customer's question is important. It will ensure that the salesperson truly understands the question, and it will help avoid wasting time answering the wrong question.

## Ask for Clarification

If the salesperson does not fully understand the customer's question or concerns, he or she should ask the customer to explain further. This will prevent the question from being answered incorrectly, which could make the salesperson look foolish in the long run.

## Offer Feedback

Offering feedback will let the customer know that you correctly understand his concern (Brooks 2001). For example, explain how you have addressed similar problems or concerns in the past. Be sure that the feedback is useful to the current customer.

## Listen with Your Eyes, Heart, and Ears

Listening with your eyes, heart, and ears means that you should look for both nonverbal and verbal cues. Many times customers will say more with their body language and gestures than they do with their words. For example, if customers' arms are crossed, this is a signal that they may be resisting what is being said because they may not believe the sales presentation is credible or they may be feeling defensive. Listening carefully will help the salesperson clear up doubts or questions. The salesperson also may pick up that the customer is signaling to close.

## Summarize

As a salesperson, you should briefly summarize the dialogue between you and your customer. This will avoid any confusion and prevent wasting the customer's time. Summarizing also gives you an opportunity to highlight the areas of agreement and disagreement, which is vital for moving along the sales process. While paraphrasing and summarizing both involve repeating what was heard, summarizing should lay out common areas of agreement and disagreement between the customer and the salesperson.

## Conclusions

Listening is a very important aspect of communication that is not used enough. A salesperson can boost sales and relationships with customers by learning to listen more carefully. Effective listening takes significant effort, but it pays off in the end.

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