

# Listen to them & they'll Listen to You

BY TRISH BROCK

Most people will tell you that they are good listeners. But everyone can think back to a situation where they wish they had listened more carefully – a project lost to the competition; the surprise announcement of a key employee resigning; or the loss of a major customer. All the signs were there but no one was listening. Consider the following situations:

I once heard a dealer principal lament that they seemed to have a difficult time winning projects when a certain design firm is involved. When pressed for more information, the principal explained that when he spoke with the head of that design firm, he didn't agree with her explanation regarding a recent project loss, and therefore didn't listen to the rest of what she was saying about the project. I couldn't help but wonder what valuable market perceptions were missed that could have been helpful to improve this relationship—and possibly others as well.

I also had the opportunity to observe yet another dealer struggle with employee morale and retention issues. When asked what he thought the problems were, the

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owner explained that it was a great company, but he was tired of hearing the same old complaints, insisting the problems could be solved by adding a few "good hires" — entirely missing what his current employees were trying to tell him.

And the most pervasive scenario I've run into of all – the dealer sales person who rushes out the door after a meeting then later presents the wrong solution, presents to the wrong person, or presents multiple revised proposals while the competition closes the deal. All because they didn't take the time to ask—or listen—to what the customer was communicating about their needs regarding the project.

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And when we position ourselves as being "right" during an exchange (either quietly or out loud), we shut off information and ideas and continue to operate within our own limited sphere.

Listening is hard – it requires thought

and care. It also means that we might have to hear something difficult or contrary to our current set of beliefs. But take heart – few can say they haven't had similar experiences and, as the saying goes, acknowledging shortcomings is the first step towards making improvements. The benefits of becoming a better listener far outnumber the reasons for holding tight to poor habits.

## BENEFITS OF LISTENING

- You will receive information and learn from what you hear.
- You will be demonstrating interest in what the speaker is relaying, showing you care instead of just saying you do.
- Instead of presuming, you will get a better insight and understanding of the individual or market needs, desires, wins, etc., before it's too late.
- Good listeners create trust, making the speaker feel important and valid.
- Good listeners build credibility and when it is their turn to speak, other people listen.
- Good listeners minimize misconceptions, since they gather all the information first.

### And the biggest benefits of all:

- Sales people who are good listeners win more business!
- Companies who listen to their customers/market have more business.
- Owners who listen to their employees learn how to build a stronger organization, motivate employees, and keep and recruit more like them.

There are quite a few reasons why many of us fall short in our ability to listen. The following are some behaviors that trip up even the best of us. Assess your skills – knowing where some improvements could be made might help you win your next project, keep an employee about to leave or convert a difficult prospect into a loyal customer!

## HOW WE DON'T LISTEN

### Assuming

You think you already know what the speaker is going to say, or that you have heard everything you need to hear. And without listening, asking questions and clarifying, assumptions can be expensive. As experts, we can be quick to "fix" the problem before we fully understand what the problem is. It's important to evaluate what is being said – just make sure your evaluation comes when the speaker is finished and you have all the information needed, not before.

### Interrupting

Believing that you have heard enough, you anxiously jump in to make your next point. Communicating isn't a competitive sport! And people who interrupt would never win if it was. Interrupting is not only rude, but it also makes it difficult for people to talk, so ultimately they won't. No one cares to speak to an unwilling listener.

### Not Paying Attention

You spend "listening time" thinking of what you are going to say next, or worse, letting your mind wander about things outside the conversation. Good listening doesn't happen when you are in a hurry, checking emails, mentally putting your grocery list together or thinking about the next appointment instead of the one you are currently in. This gives the impression that you don't consider what's being said to be important or that you simply aren't interested in the project.

### Selective Listening

You hear only what you want to hear. And/or you may listen or judge strictly from your own perspective. You lock onto areas where you agree with the speaker, but ignore, minimize or dismiss areas where you don't. Editing conversations distort the real message, and yields inaccurate and therefore, useless information.

### Excessive Talking

It's difficult to listen and observe when you are doing all the talking. If you insist on monopolizing the conversation, you're not going to hear (or learn) very much. Salespeople are very anxious to tell prospects about their products/services – time could be better spent letting the prospect tell you about the problems your products/services might alleviate.

### Hearing Words But Not the Message

Words mean different things to different people. We are often listening to words but not hearing or interpreting the underlying significance of them. When listening, it's important to remember that, even though well intended, people often have trouble saying what they really mean.

### Listening Only With Your Ears

If you listen only with your ears, you're missing much of the message. Good listeners keep their eyes open and also look for underlying messages. Don't underestimate body language – some of the most important communication is done without words.

Smart salespeople have learned that you can talk your way out of a sale, but you can also listen your way into one. Enlightened employers know that good ideas and successful, motivated employees are often the result of listening to their wants and needs. Innovative companies glean information from their market in order to continually offer improved and more desirable products and services. Being aware of and paying attention to the areas above will help you fine-tune your skills, and put you in a winning position. 🎧

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*Trish Brock, principal of Trish Brock & Associates, is a well-known industry consultant with over 25 years in the business. She specializes in working with dealers on branding, sales support materials, marketing plans and market assessments as well as leadership and sales development/training. For more information, contact her at 720-277-3035 or [tbrock@trishbrockassoc.com](mailto:tbrock@trishbrockassoc.com).*