

The Necessity of Listening

To listen is to learn, and to understand is to inspire.

—CHINESE PROVERB

One of the very best ways to establish and maintain rapport is to be a good listener. Most of us hear—but don't know how to listen. Listening is one of those skills that gets a lot of lip service, but we still stink at it. (That same old Wobegon Effect at work!) We think we know all about it, and therefore are already good at it. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. Studies show that poor listening skills still account for 60 percent of all misunderstandings. Even persuasion professionals—perhaps the most likely of all to trumpet themselves as listening experts—show dismal ratings on their listening skills. When corporate buyers were asked to assess the representatives of other companies, over 50 percent felt that the reps talked way too much, and that they were not in tune with the buyer. And when they did ask questions, they didn't ask the right ones. When it came down to the bottom line—were they persuasive or not—only one percent of the respondents answered affirmatively.

We know there is a positive relationship between effective listening and being able to adapt to your audience and persuade them. Great listeners are great persuaders. Listening mastery:

- Allows for better audience participation.
- Add impact to the message.
- Helps the audience feel understood.
- Helps the audience understand the message.
- Provides valuable feedback for adjusting the presentation.

Another common misconception is that great persuaders are people persons or extroverts. Wrong! The latest research shows that the introverts out-persuade the extroverts. Why? Because they listen more, they ask more questions, and they find out what their audience needs. Most extroverts, on the other hand, tend to overwhelm their

audience with an endless list of features and benefits and hope one of them will do the trick. Introverts are simply better equipped to sense the wants and needs of their audience. Extroverts come across as old-school salespeople while introverts come across as desirable consultants.

Why are we so bad at listening? A big part of the problem is just that we talk too much. We think we're being helpful by offering lengthy, in-depth explanations. This may be appropriate on some occasions, but for the most part, your audience's emotional side begins to tune out. Let's face it: we are self-centered, self-interested, and self-absorbed. So we talk too much because we like to feel important, knowledgeable, and helpful, but it is still a subconscious focus on ourselves. Meanwhile, the attention and focus of the encounter is not on the audience, and they start to drift.

Now consider the opposite: If you talk less and invest all of your energy and attention into making your audience feel good, important, and understood—if they can feel in that moment that your world truly does revolve around them—then, my friend, you will have rock-solid rapport and lifetime loyalty. Remember, they don't need information overload. They need to feel like they are your top priority. They want to feel confidence in your ability to find the solution to their challenge, the missing puzzle piece. You can't provide that elusive puzzle piece unless you know what it is, and you won't know what it is if you aren't listening. It's been said that “we never learn anything with our mouth open.”

Take a habit of dominating the listening and let the customer dominate the talking.

—Brian Tracy

So how do we sharpen our listening skills? For one, consider listening a whole-being experience—listen not just with your ears, but also with your heart, your mind, your eyes. What is this person really telling you? Take it all in. Not just their words, but the whole package—their tone and body language, their hopes and fears.

Studies conducted by the Persuasion Institute have found critical distinctions between the listening skills of great persuaders and those of average persuaders. Compare and contrast the following and see which ways you can improve.

Great Persuader

Average Persuader

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|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is patient.• Lets the audience speak for him.• Makes sure the audience understands.• Asks clarifying questions.• Lets audience finish thoughts, sentences.• Listens carefully.
will• Is cooperative, two-sided effort.
solution.• Listens to everything.• Resists distractions.• Takes notes.• Offers verbal and nonverbal support.• Senses concern, frustration.• Does not become emotional, remains calm.• Offers silence.• Nonjudgmental.• Knowledgeable in a helpful way | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is anxious to move on to next topic.• Jumps to conclusions, makes assumptions• Agrees too hastily.• Moves on without seeking clarification.• Interrupts, cuts audience off.• Anticipates—incorrectly—what audience
say next.• Offers a predetermined, one-sided• Listens selectively.• Mind wanders, easily distracted.• Shows no interest in long-term
relationship.• Makes no attempts to show support.• Not in tune with audience.• Allows personal emotions to cloud
judgment.• Talks too much .• Judgmental.• Knowledgeable in an arrogant way. |
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The inability to listen accurately and effectively cost this country billions and billions or dollars annually.

—Dan Kennedy

I have facilitated exercises, seminars, and training to monitor effective listening. I present persuaders with a win-win situation. We begin with a very easy role play with a very easy solution. To reach this win-win scenario, all my audience members have to do is listen and ask questions. Yet 95 percent of these people start to get angry, confrontational, and tense with each other. The answer is so obvious it could have bit them in the butt, but none of them saw it because they did not listen. They were so concerned with themselves and with winning that they missed the big picture. Listening is a skill we can all work on.

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