

Sell More by Talking Less

By Joe Rickard

As a sales trainer and former sales manager, I have had the opportunity to spend a great deal of time accompanying sales professionals on calls to clients. There is always one glaring error printing sellers make, and that is not listening. When a salesperson has poor listening skills, they miss numerous buying signs, applications, and objections.

Owners and sales managers can be sure that they or their salespeople are not listening when they are:

1. Doing most of the talking
2. Asking direct questions that generate limited responses from customers
3. Finishing customers sentences
4. Distracted
5. Interrupting the customer
6. Responding multiple times to customer questions, objections or concerns because they did not get it the first time
7. Finding their recommendations and proposals are not being considered
8. Constantly doing rework or experiencing returns
9. Unable to sell custom or new products or services
10. Unable to focus and stay on the main points important to the customer

Listening is very much a part of our personality, and it is often difficult for owners and sales managers to coach salespeople to listen better without creating hard feelings.

"I have observed plenty of salespeople over the years who struggle with listening" said Bob Ross, director of business development of Corporate Communications Group in West Caldwell, N.J. He went on to say that a major reason for lack of listening is that "we are thinking of what to say next while the customer is talking." He feels this is a lack of confidence based on fear of not knowing the answer to a customer's question or objection.

Poor listening skills also may be a problem for owners and managers who are the company's most important sales people. An owner of a small shop in Long Island told me he is so busy running the business, he finds it difficult to concentrate and listen

effectively. This undoubtedly affects his business more than he realizes. Printers have a great amount of knowledge, and are experts in printing, but may not have the patience to listen to customers who have a lot less technical knowledge.

Sales trainers find it is easier to encourage and teach salespeople how to adopt new sales practices, learn new technology and research their customers than to help them understand why and how to listen better.

That being said, teaching someone how to listen is extremely important because there is significant research that links effective listening to sales performance. In the Summer 2005 article in the Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, researchers examined a number of traits that affect sales performance. They found among all the traits, empathy and effective listening skills are the most important.

Why is it not a high priority for sales people to learn to listen better? In many businesses, salespeople can achieve a certain number of sales without it. This is often evident in commodity businesses. How many times have you gone to a retail store, engaged a real estate salesperson, or bought a car and experienced sales people who do not listen?

Unfortunately, with high-value print products and services that require consultative selling and personal relationships, not listening is a significant barrier to success. Those who do not listen will only achieve marginal results.

Six Ways To Improve Listening Skills

1. Prior to each call, clear your mind and commit yourself to being a good listener. Plan to listen more than 50 percent of the time.
2. Good listening requires focus and concentration. If you are not feeling well, have something on your mind, and/or are distracted by anticipated calls, noise in the room, sunlight in your face, etc., you can be distracted. If the distraction cannot be eliminated, you may want to postpone the meeting or change locations.
3. Give the person you are speaking to your undivided attention. Pay attention to non-verbal communications. Do not write while someone is talking—it can cause a salesperson to lose key points. Record notes during pauses in the conversation, or ask for time to write down your thoughts.
4. Sometimes emotional verbal triggers can lead a salesperson to lose the customer's message. For instance, a comment about a printer's past performance could easily cause them to lose concentration. Suspend judgment. Remember customer's communications skills will vary. Adjust your listening to the skill and style of the speaker.

5. Ask open-ended, probing questions that elicit a detailed response, versus a question that requires short or one word answers. Open-ended questions begin with what, how, and why.
6. When the customer makes a key point, asks a question, identifies a need, or expresses a concern, be sure to take time to listen carefully, clarify if required, then restate the point.

The best part of being an effective listener is that it will result in better customer interactions and, ultimately, more sales.

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