

Secrets to improving your listening skills: a critical customer service attribute

by Deborah Gavello

People may claim that they are good listeners, but are they really? Only a small percentage of people truly listen to what is being spoken. Some may listen about 50 percent of the time and during the remaining 50 percent, they are formulating their reply. How can you truly listen if you are preparing your next statement? You cannot do it. I have helped banks improve their staff's listening skills for many years and this article will give you some tricks to improve your listening skills.

Why are people in such a hurry to get their thoughts out of their mouths? I believe it is the fear of forgetting one's thoughts, before the other person finishes his/her sentence. How many of you have had the following thought race through your mind while listening to a very slow speaker? "Hurry, hurry. Will you finish already; I have the answer on the tip of my tongue." If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. The diffi-

culty with this thought process is that you have already stopped listening to what is being said. If your facial expression has changed and a speaker can see you have tuned him/her out, you are not only being rude but you are also not providing the kind listening skills you most likely would prefer to demonstrate.

Good listeners are hard to come by, and when we do find one, we enjoy being in their company. Don't fret; not everyone was born a great listener, but it can be learned. This being said, how much greater would the value of your bank be, if all of your employees understood all the products and services and listened to customers? We all know that customers want the attention they deserve, or they will take their business elsewhere. This is the reason why it is so important to both train your employees on how to do their jobs and how to interact with customers.

An important side note: Recent statistics estimate that if a company

spends 2 percent to 5 percent of its annual payroll on employee training, it should realize about a 10 percent increase in net profit. Furthermore, companies with superior customer service and loyal customers can charge up to 10 percent more than their competitors. In summary, if you train your employees to provide superior customer service, your net profit can increase by 20 percent. Here are some examples to get you started.

- Keith Knudsen, vice president of commercial business development at Manufacturers Bank, Los Angeles, said, "I put a Post-It-Note up in my living room. It reads, 'Listen 1/3 More!' In addition, before I enter a referral source meeting or a prospect call, I take a quiet moment and think of the process of listening."

- Michelle Wordon, senior vice president at EvergreenBank in Seattle said the following, "It is not easy to break old habits; it took a conscious effort to improve my listening skills. I do not read or write e-mails while in front of a person or over the phone. I also always maintain eye contact with the speaker. It also helps to model the behavior both personally and professionally."

Do not think of a conversation as a game of ping-pong in which the plastic ball has to go quickly back and forth. A conversation is a meandering walk, in which you should stop to smell the flowers along the way. Bite your tongue, wrap a rubber band around your wrist, hold your fingers tightly, but don't interrupt. My favorite listening skill is to pause after someone finishes a sentence and really think about how to respond. It not only shows that you care about what the speaker had to say, it shows that you were not thinking about your reply while he/she was still speaking. As always, good luck and good selling. **WB**

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