

Sharpen your listening skills to get an edge

BY PHIL SASSO

Listen up. Seriously, listen up. According to a University of Missouri study, the average American spends only about 9 percent of his time writing, 16 percent reading and 30 percent speaking—but a whopping 45 percent listening. That's a lot of listening.

Yet the average person only retains about 25 percent of what he hears. It seems listening is one of the most poorly developed skills in America. From grade school through high school we study reading, writing and even public speaking. But listen-

ing is something we assume we all do well. Unfortunately, we don't.

To prove this in my recent Active Listening workshop, I read a minute-long story. Participants were asked not to take any notes but to listen carefully. Halfway into the workshop, I asked participants half a dozen simple questions about the story. Most were surprised by how many questions they got wrong. (To hear the story and take the quiz, go to philsasso.com/listen.)

Even if you are a good listener, you need to be sure your customer



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feels he's being heard. That's a major issue in sales training today. Good salespeople need to be good listeners. Customers want to know that the salesperson is really listening to them.

So here are the traits of good listening as relevant to salesmanship. Of course these same skills relate to any relationship: friends, family, spouse.

Engage

Eye contact is important, but avoid staring. That can be uncomfortable. You don't want them to think there's spinach in their teeth or something. But you do want to be sure you don't appear to be distracted. If you're just shooting the breeze, you can stock shelves or write up his order while you listen, but if he's telling you about a tool he wants or a problem

he's had, be sure to give him your undivided attention. You may want to take notes if it's something complicated, but don't overdo that either. Excessive note taking can make you look distracted, too.

Other verbal and visual cues also tell your customer that you're listening and tracking with him. An "Uh-huh," "Hmmm," or "I see" is a natural way to respond to long customer monologues. Something as simple as nodding in agreement can make a customer feel he's connected with you.

These actions may seem obvious or natural. But over the next week or two take note of how often you or your customer don't do these simple things.

Repeat

Summarize to the customer what

you heard him say. This both helps you clarify what you've heard and makes your customer feel you're listening. Customers today more than ever want to feel you're listening. And many unnecessary mis-orders sometimes happen over something as simple as not confirming the size, package or color. Better to spend 30 seconds confirming an order than to have to return a tool ... or eat the cost of a special order.

Question

Asking your customer a variety of closed or open questions can help you get more information to help close the sale—and perhaps even future sales.

Closed questions are questions that can be answered with a simple word or phrase. Sometimes the response is a quick "yes" or

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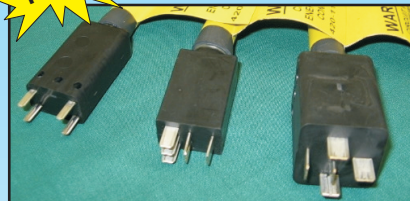
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“no” or a size, specification or color. These questions help you get specific details of an order without a lot of wasted time; something like, “What size ratchet is this for?” or “Do you want the one with a rubberized grip?”

Open questions require at least a sentence or two to answer. It gives you a chance to get more background and details. These questions tend to help you get your customer to open up more. Open questions would be, “What are some of the more common jobs you’re getting these days?” or “Why do you want this new piece of equipment?”

Be patient

Nobody wants to feel rushed. It makes us feel unimportant. You can’t spend forever listening to “Chatty Charlie” while others are waiting. But

you can be sure that you end each conversation gracefully vs. abruptly.

Disengaging is an important skill in ending a sales conversation, especially with a talkative customer. Saying things like, “We both probably should get back to work,” or “John here has been waiting patiently to talk to me, let’s catch up on that next time,” or “Just one more question before I let you go,” may help end a conversation without coming off too harsh.

Be attentive

There are a lot of distractions you face as a mobile. Some are just the typical noises of a shop. That can make it hard to hear a tech talk, and especially a soft-spoken one. Try to remove the distraction by moving to a quieter area in the shop, outside or to your truck.

Distractions can also come in the form of one customer approaching you while you’re talking to another. One way to deal with that is to turn to the interrupting customer make eye contact and let him know you’ll be with him in a minute. That let’s the first customer know he needs to wrap up, but gives him a moment to do so instead of making him feel cut off.

And to truly be attentive, it’s important to concentrate on what the customer is saying and not let other thoughts crowd out his words. That can be a lot harder to do than it sounds, especially when a customer is droning on.

But as you become more active in improving your listening skills, you’ll find you’re noticing a lot more that’s going on around you at your stops. And that won’t hurt your sales. ■

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