

# Improve Your Listening...



## Improve Your Life!

### **How To Become a Better Listener**

By Lonnie Heath

## Improve Your Listening and Improve Your Life

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One of our greatest assets that one can have is that of being an excellent listener. Back in 2001, I was asked by a few of my clients to put together a piece on how to improve listening to drive sales. However, listening applies to all avenues of our life. Being a good listener can open up tremendous opportunity for you and those around you.

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## **Improve Your Listening and Improve Your Life!**

People, in general, are horrible listeners. Even though we spend 80% of our waking hours communicating, and nearly 45% of that time listening, we remain terrible listeners. Our emphasis, from our earliest years is always focused on the other forms of communication:

- 40% is spent on learning to read
- 35% is spent on learning how to write, and
- 25% is spent on learning how to talk.

Yet we spend little or not time on learning how to be a good listener. While most people are not very good listeners, in the selling occupation, it is even worse. Salespeople, from day one we are taught to control the selling situation from start to finish. While this is admirable, doing so has its liabilities. If we are to control that situation, and not allow our customer the opportunity to communicate, then we are 1) probably not learning anything about our customer, 2) and since we are not learning about our customer, then we probably have few clues as to their needs, and 3) since we don't know their needs, then our solutions are probably not on target. A successful sale under these circumstances can probably be chalked up to just plain old luck, and not anything remarkable that we did.

The most successful sales people are those that are good listeners. Good listening skills require that we listen 70% - 80% of the time and talk only 20-30%

of the time. Unfortunately we don't follow this formula. In fact, have grown to believe the myth that 'selling is telling'. In reality, good selling is good listening.

If we look back at our formal sales training it typically does not include any formal training on improving listening skills. In fact, even in during our years in primary, secondary, and post secondary education, our formal listening training has been limited to the occasional barb, "Would you please pay attention and listen!" We need to change this if we are to become the successful salespeople we are capable of becoming.

The purpose of this article is to discuss ways to improve your listening skills to help improve your sales results. First, we are going to explore some characteristics of poor listening skills. Then, we will look at listening - What is listening? Is it simply hearing or what? - And finally, we will look at some ways to improve listening skills.

## **Characteristics of Poor Listening Skills**

How do we know if we are poor listeners? For the most part, it is a given that most of us are poor listeners. And to those lucky few who aren't, great! But for the bulk of us, read on. We just know. Poor listening is a problem. It is estimated that the normal, untrained listener retains only 50% of a conversation. That percentage drops to a dismal 25% 48 hours after the conversation. So, how do you know you have a listening problem? Consider the following:

1. Instead of listening do you think about what you are going to say next while the other person is still talking? Do you rehearse your presentation? Do you do something else like thinking about your next call, or how much money your company is going to make if you make the sale?
2. Are you easily distracted by the customer's mannerism or by what is going on around you? Do you allow background noise or the environment to distract you?
3. Do you frequently interrupt your customer or anyone for that matter, before they have finished speaking?
4. Do you drift off into daydreams because you are sure you know what the speaker is going to say, or you are just bored out your mind?
5. Do you feel a strong urge to answer or decide there and then, at that moment, on what is being said?
6. Do you make judgements or evaluate what is being said?
7. Are you sometimes in a rush, or have some other important impending business and only half listen to the content of what your customer is telling you?
8. Do you believe that you have something so important to say, that you must take time away from your customer to make your point?
9. Do you find yourself disagreeing with your customer's point-of-view either overtly or covertly?
10. Do you often see the person as different from you – different skills, different professionalism, different values, different beliefs, and therefore they are

unable to understand your infinite wisdom? Or do you simply dislike the person who is speaking and have decided in your mind that it doesn't matter what they say, it's all simply hogwash?

11. Do you look away too often and lose that important eye contact?
12. On the other hand, do you stare fixedly at your customer, to the point that they are sometimes ready to crawl under the table rather than continue the dialogue?
13. Do you often have something a lot more interesting in your head, and therefore tend not to listen?
14. While listening to your customer, do you dread silence? Do you have to say something just to break the silence? Do you wait for a pause just to hear yourself talk? Is it difficult for you to stay silent? Do you speak before thinking first?
15. Do you often fake your listening with your customer just so you can get your comments in or get the customer to believe that you are really interested in what they have to say?
16. Do you practice selective listening? Do you hear only what you want to hear?
17. Do you listen through filters? Do you listen based on past experiences or beliefs?
18. Are you aware of the message the person is sending other than the words, through body language such as facial expressions, eye contact, and vocal intonation?

19. Do you sometimes consider the topic that your customer is speaking about unimportant?
20. Do you listen to only a little of what the customer says?
21. Do you work aggressively to get in what you feel is your fair share of the conversation?
22. While listening, do you try to finish the point before your customer? Do you try to put words in your customer's mouth?
23. During the conversation, do you convey a self-centered, arrogant attitude?
24. Do you often misunderstand what is being said, or what has been said?
25. Do you do little to encourage your customer to open up and speak?
26. Do you just not hear anything that has been said?

These are just some of the symptoms of poor listening habits. This list is not all-inclusive. In fact, in your every day business, you will probably come up with more. Additionally, one doesn't have to suffer from all symptoms on this list. If you are plagued by one or two of them, you may be as poor of a listener as someone who is plagued by all of them.

To really see where you fall in terms of listening, why don't you take a moment for a self-evaluation? First answer the questions yourself, using the key provided, and then, have someone else, like a coworker, a friend, a manager, or spouse, evaluate you. Take the results and compare them. Read the following statements and then rate yourself using the following criteria:

1) Never; 2) Seldom; 3) Half of the; 4) Most of the time; 5) Always

After you have rated yourself, ask someone, a friend or manager, to rate you also and compare the answers.

1. Do you give people a chance to talk?
2. Do you interrupt often?
3. Do you look at the person who is talking?
4. Do you doodle or read when someone speaks?
5. Do you pace or fidget when someone speaks?
6. Do you ask "why" a lot?
7. Try to finish the point before the speaker does?
8. Ask questions about something that was just talked about?
9. Argue with everything others say?
10. Take what the person is saying and talk about your own experience?
11. Often offend people with your jokes?
12. Look at your watch or clock when listening?
13. Start your answers by saying "I".

After you have finished, score yourself and then compare that to the score that you received from your friend or manager. Notice the gap? Are you a good listener?

## What is a Good Listener?

What is a good listener? Does such a person exist? First, let's explore listening. Listening is not simply hearing. Listening is an active process that demands our full attention. In fact, hearing is passive while listening is active. We may hear what someone is saying, but not process what they are saying in our minds. For instance, I might tell someone to get out of the road because a car is coming. They hear me, yet they fail to get out the road. Why? There are a number of reasons, but in actuality, they are not listening because listening is a process, that involves more than just hearing. Broken down into its most basic components, listening is:

1. **Hearing.** The first step in listening is actually hearing what the speaker or your customer is saying. In this step you are simply paying attention to make sure that you have heard the message. Hearing is more of a passive behavior, but it does require a great deal of our resources. During this hearing stage, it can be very difficult for us to maintain concentration. It is simply easier to wander and really not hear what the speaker is saying. If you do wander, and fail to get the message, the rest of the listening process will be faulty because it will be based on inaccurate information. During this stage of listening, be sure to maintain eye contact, concentrate on the speaker, take notes, and do what is necessary to eliminate background noise.

2. **Interpretation**. The second step is interpreting the information. Failure to interpret the speaker words correctly will frequently lead to misunderstanding of the entire message. In fact, we've heard people say before, "I think you've missed the entire point". Well, that's typically because we failed to interpret the message correctly. Interpretation is an active stage of listening. People sometimes interpret words differently because of varying experiences, knowledge, vocabulary, culture, background and attitudes. Most speakers will use tone of voice, facial expressions, and mannerisms to help make the message clear to the listener.
3. **Evaluation**. The third step of the listening process is evaluation. Evaluation is when you decide what to do with the information. For example, as your customer listens to your sales pitch, they can either choose to believe or not believe what you have told them. The judgements that you and your customer makes in the evaluation step are a crucial part of the listening process.
4. **Respond**. Finally, the fourth step of the listening process is responding. By this, you are simply responding to what you have heard. This is a verbal or visual response that lets the speaker know whether you have gotten the message and what your reaction is. When a customer tells you that they want to place an order, they have gotten the message and chosen to believe what you have told them.

Our goal, then, is to become active listeners. Being an active listener means participating fully in the communication process. This means listening to everything the other person has to say. It also means listening to yourself. You must be sensitive to the signals of your own body. You must realize the impact of your body language in the communication process. Active listening involves paying attention to the non-verbal as well as verbal messages you send to the other person. So, how do we become active listeners? Practice some of the following suggestions:

1. Learn to manage your distractions or block them out altogether. Don't let yourself be distracted by the environment or by the speaker's appearance, accent, mannerisms, or word use. It's important that during the listening process, to keep a focused mind. Keeping focused means managing the distractions. I use to have a buyer that use to say, "ideal", instead of, "idea". I had just gotten out of college and was new on the job. The memory of professors constantly correcting me was fresh in my mind. Whenever my buyer misused "ideal" for "idea", I would lose my concentration and miss importance of the conversation. It was something I had to work to get over. I realized that the buyer truly meant "idea" when he said, "ideal". I stopped letting it bother me, and actually learned some pretty good things about the account.

2. Use body language to show interest and energy. When your customer is talking, the way you stand, the way you look, the way you hold your arms, or your posture in general can all effect the what your customer tells you. Your customer must perceive that you are genuinely interested in what they are saying. If you put your hands on your hips, showing indifference, then its doubtful if your customer will ever open up to you. Show interest. If you are sitting, sit squarely and face the speaker. Don't slouch in your chair. Lean forward when the customer is talking so that he/she can see that attention is being centered completely on them. And keep an open stance. Don't cross your arms in front of your chest, but rather fold your hands in front to you. This is done to look attentive and not bored or uncaring.
  
3. Maintain good eye contact. Good eye contact shows the speaker that you are interested in what they are saying. But, on the other hand, don't make it a stare down contest. Nothing is more uncomfortable than having a person stare continuously at you without periodically looking away.
  
4. Ask questions that relate to what the customer is saying. This helps to stimulate your listening, and shows to the customer that you are indeed listening. Many times, you can ask clarifying questions, to assure that you are really getting the message that is being communicated. However, don't become a nuisance, and continually interrupt by asking pointless questions.

Don't talk just to hear yourself talk.

5. Paraphrase what the customer has said to ensure understanding. Get confirmation that you heard and understood correctly.
6. Take notes. None of us are perfect. Take notes during the conversation that you can later review or go over with your customer. Again, as with questioning, don't let note taking become a nuisance to the speaker, and equally, don't get so absorbed in note taking that you try to write everything the person is saying down, and end up missing the message entirely.
7. Don't interrupt your customer when they are talking. Give them time to complete their thoughts so that you can consider all what is being said. A dialogue is not a competition to determine who gets to speak the most. Let your customer do most of the talking, and you can then do most of the learning. And also importantly, don't clip the ends of your customer's thoughts. If they are saying something, let them finish. Don't cut them off because you assume you know what is going to be said.
8. Acknowledge what the customer has said before changing the direction of the conversation. If the customer has just finished talking to you about razor thin margins, acknowledge this, and make sure they are finished, by simply saying, "I see that you are concerned about the low margins in the category."

Is there anything else?"

9. Encourage your customer to talk. Encourage their expressions through conversations. Sometimes when we interrupt, when we are know-it-alls, it turns our customer off and they let us do all the talking. Make it clear to the customer that you are there to learn, and that the best way to learn is to listen to them as they speak.
  
10. Focus on feelings and ideas as much as facts. Give expression to the emotional components and unexpressed core meanings of the message. If a customer says to you, "I've got to find a way to jump start my business", that's just a fact. But give attention to the meaning behind it. Listen to the way the customer is talking, and how they are talking. They may be saying, "Everything I own is in this business. If it doesn't succeed, I am going to lose everything." So listen closely, and be able to respond to the feels and ideas just as you would the facts.
  
11. Make empathetic remarks that acknowledge the speakers feelings. True empathy is a skill, not a memory. Negotiators who have developed the ability to empathize can display it even when encountering customers with whom they have little in common. Practice listening with empathy. Attend to the feelings of others, but be careful to remain detached. Being an empathetic listener doesn't mean a sympathetic listener. When you become

sympathetic, you are no longer detached from the situation and may have difficulty offering solutions. Finally, pay attention not only to the logical content of what someone is saying but also to how they say it, that is, how they feel about the subject under discussion.

12. Listen to tone changes that may reveal more than the person to whom you are speaking is revealing in words.

13. Keep an open mind. Be willing to accept new ideas and opinions that differ from yours. Reserve judgement. Remember the point of listening is to gain new information.

14. Monitor your own reactions. Sometimes the way you react isn't consistent with what the other person is saying. If your customer is looking for higher margins, and you are frowning, then your customer is receiving an answer to his request even before you speak. Equally important is to monitor your customer's non-verbal signals. Be alert to the non-verbal cues.

15. Have patience. The more the customer says the more you learn about how to sell to them.

16. Use the pregnant pause. Silence sometimes speaks louder than words.

When your customer is talking, and pauses, don't take that as a cue to begin

talking. Nod to the customer to encourage them to continue speaking.

17. Don't jump to conclusions. Don't tune out a speaker just because you think you have the gist of the conversation or you know what the speaker is going to say next.

18. Listen "between the lines". Concentrate on what is being said as well as what is not being said.

19. React to the message, not to the person. Don't get angry or take it personally. Just because a customer doesn't like your product or company, doesn't mean he or she does not like you.

20. Respond in such a way that you prove you're taking the other person seriously. Demonstrate respect for their point of view.

21. Give the speaker credit. Thank your customer for taking time to share information with you.

22. Become a solution oriented listener. Spend more time on listening for a solution than you would on the problem.

23. Listen with a positive mind. Nothing clouds your judgement more than being negative going into the dialogue.

24. Resist the temptation to rebut. As human beings we have a natural tendency to resist any new information that conflicts with what we believe.

25. Know yourself. Understand where your hot and cold buttons are and adjust your listening process to circumvent any sudden shutdown because of an emotion laden word or phrase. Again, don't take it personally.

Active listening takes a great deal of practice. It's not something you are going to get in a day or two. You will have to work at becoming a better listener. And remember, just because you become a good listener doesn't mean that the speaker is going to become a better speaker. That person may still be a poor speaker. Your customer may still talk in a low, boring monotone voice. But by becoming a better listener, you will be able to really hear what your customer is saying and no longer be distracted by the delivery.