

Listening, the Key to Your Success on the Phone

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A tough economy puts a lot of pressure on everyone. Clients are more and more demanding, especially when doing business over the phone. Good listening skills are essential. Yet, most people do not excel at listening. Researchers tell us that people listen effectively only about 25% of the time. When customers feel heard, they are more likely to be loyal and trusting. When they don't feel heard, they do not feel valued. Since relationships with customers are affected by how well we listen to them, it is important to improve our listening skills. Consider the following suggestions.

- 1. Be fully present.** Many people pick up the phone to place or take a call while inputting data or completing an order related to the previous call. It is impossible to actively listen while multi-tasking. If the previous call has been difficult, take time to de-compress. Stand up, walk around. Take a bathroom break, but do not go back on the phone until you can focus and be fully present.
- 2. Do not interrupt.** People want to be heard. They need to get their ideas out. Interrupting customers prematurely to get an account number or purchase order will annoy them. Instead, let them finish and take notes so that you get their issues correctly.
- 3. Listen for the message not being expressed.** Some clients are not good at expressing themselves, or they send conflicting messages. Don't assume that what they say is the whole story. Often, there is a hidden message. Make sure to acknowledge any emotions and ask questions to clarify confusing issues. Pay attention to the speaker's tone of voice and the emphasis placed on certain words. It will help you to gain a better perspective.
- 4. Avoid judging.** Clients often say things that are untrue. "The sales person said training

was included." "My contract includes technical support." "I paid for same-day shipping." Resist the role of being a judge. It thwarts listening and puts both parties in a defensive stance. Try to see things from the customer's perspective, rather than your own.

- 5. Summarize often.** It is important to let the customer know you are listening throughout your conversation. Phrases such as, "Um hum," "Yes, I see," or "I'm sorry," demonstrate to the customer that you are paying keen attention. In addition, it is important to summarize or paraphrase the key concerns before proposing any solution. If the stated issues are incorrect or if information is missing, the client will tell you. If the solution addresses the customer's identified issues, it is more likely to be accepted.
- 6. Speak slowly.** Customers don't want to make a mistake. When a phone representative speaks quickly, it doesn't allow the person on the other end of the line to keep up, take notes or pose their questions. It makes the person feel you are only interested in moving on to the next call or that you are hoping they won't challenge you. Pause for one or two seconds between each main point. It will emphasize critical points.

Being a good listener is not easy. It takes discipline and focus. However, as you demonstrate real listening, relationships improve. In today's difficult economy strong relationships with our customers are key.

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