

Listening...The Best Gift for a Customer

By Cheryl Crumb

Knock, knock. Who's there? (Silence) Who's there, I said? Knock, knock. Who is there? (Silence). This is driving me crazy. Knock, Knock. Who in the \$*%&^# is there?

That is likely not the way you remember the kindergarten game being played. But that's what's happening out there today in the world of retail. No one is listening to anybody. Do the "man on the street" test. Ask, "what's the best gift?". Once we get deeper than the predictable "million dollar" answers, it's usually, "someone who listens to me, who really, really listens." One survey determined that 90% of the sales force talked three times as much as the top salespeople. A Forum Corporation study states that the number one distinguisher of excellent salespeople is that they understand the customer's situation. This can only be accomplished through questioning and profound listening.

When I work with experienced university graduates, I often ask the question: Who has taken listening training? Most people look at me like I'm crazy. I can hear their brains processing the internal question, "Why does she think we need training in something we do every day? I'm bright, I'm educated, I don't need to learn to listen.". Wrong! Studies repeatedly show that most of us listen at the Ear-Q rate of 20-25%. That means that we miss 75% of what was said, and the most insidious part of that math is we don't even know we missed it.

Most people think that listening is hearing what people said. That's only partially correct. True generous listening is hosting the content, meaning and feelings of the message. It's listening with more than the ears. It's hearing what is said and unsaid.

Here's a quick example: Someone says, "Do I have to do that?". What's the message? A superficial listener would say, "Duh....He's asking if he has to do that." A keen, generous listener would say, "He's conveying that he doesn't want to do something, and he's asking if he really has to do it. It's unlikely that he will." Where did all of that come from?

Let's use the metaphor of the whole body to understand generous listening: head, heart and hands level.

- At the "head" or logic level, we are listening to facts, concepts, and opinions. This is the most common level of listening.
- At the "heart" or emotional level, we are listening to feelings, moods, and values.

- At the "hands" or commitment level, we are listening to the will, motivation and intention.

These three levels of listening are further compounded by the actual process of listening.



The first stage is hearing the message which requires concentration, discipline and attention. External barriers like noise, accents, disruptions get in the way. Internal barriers including daydreaming, allowing distractions, rehearsing what you want to say, selective hearing, and feeling defensive are even more powerful inhibitors. Any emotional response to the message, speaker or world is cotton balls in the ears. We miss content and nuance, and we don't even know we're missing it. Pseudo-listening or deliberately pretending to listen makes it even worse. Excellent salespeople develop a genuine interest in the customer that keeps them attentive.

Stage two begins when we interpret what we heard or thought we heard. We're "meaning-making machines". We're likely listening through a different filter or frame of reference than the speaker, which is formed by our education, experiences, and cultural background. Certain words can be incendiary to one person and clinical to another.

Most people stop listening after the second stage because they think they've understood the speaker. This is what leads to the 25% Ear-Q ratings. We've missed or misinterpreted the message, superimposed our own feelings and ignored the will.

Generous listeners consciously engage the third stage of listening, which is evaluation. They're aware of the flaws and gaps in the first phases, so they test their assumptions by asking questions to prevent jumping to conclusions. They clarify, seek examples, and probe for deeper understanding.

Then, when they think they've understood, they enact the final stage of listening, which is restatement. They play back all three levels (head, heart, hands) to the speaker. They offer a restatement of facts and opinions and examples. They wrap it in the moods and emotions that may or may not have been articulated but were present to the discerning senses, and they share their interpretation of the customer's commitment

or lack of intentionality.

Why is all this hard work worth it in a sales scenario?

Let's listen in to a Top Salesperson as s/he summarizes a lengthy conversation with a customer: "Mr. X, let me make sure I've understood you clearly. You're looking for a home theatre system, not just to enjoy the great movies but to bring your family together. You have two teenagers who are frequently out somewhere and this causes you anxiety. You think that if you have a state-of-the-art system, not only will you and your wife get to have your romantic date nights at home rather than trudging to a crowded theatre, but your kids' friends will want to use your place as the hangout. Knowing where they are and who they're with presents you with a tremendous peace of mind. You don't think you're technologically savvy enough to list specific features, but you know the outcome you want. You'd like our ideas on what might be compelling to the teen crowd. Have I got it?"

What does the average salesperson say? "So, you want a home theatre system, eh?"

Which salesperson do you want to work with?