

Understanding our Customers

By Cheryl Crumb



Think of a time when you entered a retail establishment and really looked at a product from all angles ... Did the salesperson rush up to you and begin the "pitch"? Something like: "My you have a fine eye. One of the best products in stock. Let me tell you more about it. It is dual-control, indoor-outdoor, all-weather resistant, comes in a rainbow of 83 colours, features optional mosquito-netting, hand-cured vinyl, and is available this week only if you order tonight..." What most annoys you about the preceding scene? Is it the salesperson's total disregard for you? Is it the arrogance in assuming that was the product for you? Is it the fact that you were "being sold"? Is it that you weren't even consulted? Is it the assumption s/he made about your interest? All of the above responses usually add up to "no sale".

Service superstars know that they earn the right to "sell" to you only when both of you have a clear idea of what, why and how you want to buy. Successful service and sales demand a meeting of the minds. From an integrity view, the retailer must understand what is driving the customer's request. In the Customer Relationship Diamond, our model for service excellence, this state of understanding is represented by second base. Understanding means "I have entered your mind...I see what you see". It does not mean, "I assume I know what you want because people like you usually want this particular model". It also does not mean, "I'll give you exactly what you asked for because the most important thing to me is

that I get your money". Understanding can only be accomplished through the proficient flow of three skills: listening, asking questions and summarizing what you think you listened. Hard tasks indeed!

Understanding is not a competency that we should presume we're good at. We've been hearing since we were born, and we've been asking questions since we were two. For most of us, we peaked in both skills at the age of 5. Research shows there's a lot of work to be done in beefing up our "understanding muscle". Let's talk about listening here and we'll address questioning in the next issue.

What is listening? It's more than hearing. It's hard. It's multi-faceted. It starts with making a conscious decision to pay attention. It's keeping at bay the external distractions of cold, heat, noise, and the even more dangerous internal distractions of wanting to interrupt, thinking of something else, judging people, or wanting to impress. Why dangerous? We don't know what we didn't hear. Most of us will swear on a holy book "the customer didn't tell me that." It's only through an observer being present that we learn, "whoops, the customer did say that and I missed it entirely."



The second phase of listening is "interpreting". We make everything that we hear or see mean something. As humans, we're meaning-making machines. We're influenced by our life experiences and we listen through filters,

and we're blind to the existence of those filters. Just as a fish doesn't realize he's swimming in water, we don't realize we're immersed in our filters. Could Einstein comprehend that some people can't mentally figure out percentages if their life depended on it? In a service situation, a retailer might listen through a filter of technological mastery and assume the customer knew things she didn't.

These first two stages of listening (hearing and interpreting) are passive and invisible. Because of the flaws inherent in both and because listening usually stops here, it's no wonder most people listen at only 25% effectiveness. Another way to say that is we miss or misunderstand 75% of what a person is telling us.

The service provider must undertake two active and visible phases: asking questions and summarizing. Questioning stops us from jumping to those conclusions (which we don't see as assumptions, but we see as "truth"), and summarizing ensures that we've absorbed the content, meaning and feelings of the customer.

PRACTICE

Try out some listening exercises on your customers over the next month.

1. Pick a customer whom your inner voice whispers to you, "I know what he wants". Instead, challenge this inner voice. Look directly at the customer, locking eye contact, and make yourself hear everything s/he is saying. Every time you want to interrupt, gently pinch your finger with your thumbnail.
2. Before you offer information or views on anything, paraphrase what the customer has just said. Use words like "If I've understood you correctly, you said..." or "You're looking for a basic model because...". Nine times out of ten, the customer will add even more. By hearing you summarize their words, they're usually reminded of something they forgot to say the first time.

These two exercises sound childishly simple, but they're agonizingly difficult. Each day, increase your reps...just like at the gym. Target one more customer than the previous day. If you're really daring, try it at home. Listen for the surprise in your partner's voice as she says, "You're listening to me!?"

Listening, the unwrapped gift. Give it to a customer.