



COMMUNISPOND™

communicate | respond

Socratic Listening

The Key to Sales Success

Socratic Listening

The Key to Sales Success

The Best Salespeople Are Listeners

Our perception is that great communicators are primarily great speakers. Not so.

The most critical communication skill for anyone in the business world—managers, salespeople, and customer service specialists—is effective listening. The tale of two salesmen below illuminates this invaluable lesson that, for most businesspeople, still remains a hidden secret.

Example: Wrong Way

An acquaintance of mine planned to buy a new SUV. He noticed an ad in a newspaper advertising a special discount on the very model in which he had been most interested. So he and his wife made a special trip to the dealership, ready to make a commitment to buy.

When a sales representative met them, the couple let him know immediately about the vehicle they wanted to see. The salesperson appeared to be listening; then he led them to an entirely different model. In fact, the vehicle wasn't even from the same manufacturer as the SUV they had mentioned.

When the couple demurred, the salesman plowed ahead. Although they said that they were slightly pressed for time since they had been invited to a dinner party that evening, the sales rep practically insisted on showing them the other vehicle. They were unimpressed.

Finally, the salesman showed the couple the SUV they had asked about. He accompanied them on a brief test drive. They liked the vehicle but said they wanted to think it over. Besides, they added, the party was starting soon. They suggested they could return the next day.

The salesman, sensing that he risked losing a sale, subtly pressured the couple to agree to a deal. He excused himself to talk to his manager. When he returned several minutes later with his bottom-line offer, the couple was in no mood to continue the discussion. They resented what they perceived as a bait-and-switch; it was apparent to them that the salesperson had

some particular incentive to push the other vehicle on them instead of the SUV they wanted. They left feeling that the salesman had not listened to them. On top of everything, they were late to the dinner party.

They never returned to that dealership.

Example: Right Way

Several weeks later, they visited another dealer to look at the same SUV model. Here, they got an entirely different reception. The sales rep inquired about what had prompted their interest in an SUV. The couple began to explain that, with the recent arrival of a second child, they had outgrown their subcompact. They were looking for more room. They said they also were concerned about safety, reliability, and, especially, good value.

The salesman listened attentively, then showed them the SUV that had interested them. He pointed out how its features addressed their need for room, safety, and value. When he finished, he asked the couple if they had ever considered a minivan.

“Not really,” said the husband, who had always regarded minivans as uncool, soccer-mom cars.

“We have a brand-new model, and I think you might find that it meets the needs you mentioned even better than the SUV,” the salesman said. “Would you be interested in seeing it?”

“Sure,” replied the couple.

They examined the minivan and began to consider the possibilities. As the salesman gave them a tour of the vehicle, they realized he was right. The minivan seated seven people; the SUV held only five. The minivan had as much room for luggage and other cargo as the SUV, perhaps even more. Its engine had a reliable track record. It was well engineered for safety. And it cost \$7,000 less than the SUV.

The couple bought the van. And when they replaced their other subcompact car several years later, they purchased another minivan of the same make.

respond

communicate

What Went Wrong-and Right?

How could the couple have been dissuaded from purchasing a vehicle they had every intention of buying and instead be sold on a completely different vehicle from a completely different dealer? The answer should be obvious to anyone who's listening.

The first seller never listened to his customers. He insisted on showing them a vehicle they did not want. He failed to listen to their need to cut short their meeting. And he failed to make a sale. The second seller listened to the customers' needs, responded to them—and succeeded.

Many people undervalue listening because they mistakenly view it as passive; they regard talking as active communication. In reality, listening—*effective* listening—is extremely active. Active listening engages our minds and our senses more fully than simply rattling off information.

It is no easy skill to master. But the rewards of effective listening are well worth the investment of time and energy.

Listening Builds Lasting Relationships. Listening is the password to the customer's world. The customer (or your boss) admits you into his world because you've shown you understand it.

Once you're part of the customer's world, the relationship builds momentum. You've shown you understand the other person's needs and way of thinking. It becomes easier to build upon the relationship. The customer doesn't have to start over with someone else who does not yet know his world and whose listening skills are unproven.

Listening Gives You a Competitive Edge. Because it builds such strong relationships, active listening gives you an even stronger competitive edge—and

edge that may be even more valuable than a superior product or service.

He failed to listen to their need to cut short their meeting. And he failed to make a sale.

The advantage becomes stronger still because so few others will recognize it. Since most people value talking over listening, it's unlikely that a competitor will out-listen you.

Listening Produces Results. It's no coincidence that the best listeners are the best sellers or the best at cultivating business relationships. The value of active listening is borne out time after time in anecdotes like that of the two SUV salesmen.



Why Don't People Listen?

If listening provides a competitive edge, then why in the world don't more businesspeople practice this skill? In some ways, listening seems a counterintuitive strategy. We want others to know we know our stuff. We want to feel in command of the situation, and we feel most in command when we're talking.

Unfortunately, that's the mind-set that produced the first car salesman and countless other failed attempts at communication. Talking too much and not listening enough actually reflect a *lack* of command over the situation—and a failure to comprehend the turf on which our communication takes place.

The Customer's Turf

Most external business communication is about the buyer or client, not about the seller. As a seller, you are entering the buyer's turf. As an executive, you're entering the turf of colleagues or your boss. The buyer holds all the power. And the only way you can access that power is through listening.

In a sales meeting, the most important talk that occurs is the buyer's talk. Think about it. While you're talking, no buying decisions are made. They're made when the buyer is talking.

The first decision involves the buyer's need—which only the buyer can express. By listening, you can understand that need and tailor your recommendations accordingly.

The second decision occurs when the buyer compares your recommendation to his need. Your recommendation is important. But the buyer's own talk is decisive.



To be understood, the person with whom you are communicating must believe that you understand *him*. We buy from people who understand us. That's human nature, too. And it's practical. We understand that someone who understands us will respond to our needs. We have communicated successfully.

As sellers (either of ourselves or a product), this sometimes requires us to alter our point of view. From our point of view, our product is superior. But the customer perceives the world as generic and commodity driven. He believes he can obtain our product from any number of places. So he'll buy from a vendor who understands his needs and offers a solution that fits this understanding.

The Seller's Turf

In theory, anyhow, salespeople and service reps know all about their products' features, benefits, price, competition, and delivery time. That's their turf. It's the focus of their training. Therefore, that's where they are most comfortable. We like to talk about what we know best. And that's just what most people do instead of listening.

Get Off Your Turf

Unfortunately, most businesspeople don't develop their listening skills because they fail to appreciate the purpose of meetings with prospects and clients (and bosses). Standing squarely on their own turf, they think the meeting takes place because they have something the prospect needs to know about. They don't recognize that the meeting is all about the buyer. Without the buyer, no reason for the meeting exists.

Your own comfort zone aside, you cannot be effective with the boss or with clients unless you meet them on their turf. Listening—and demonstrating that you have listened—is the key that lets you access that turf.

So How Do You Listen?

At Communispond, we teach businesspeople to use a "Socratic dialogue." A dialogue means that two people talk and that one spends ample time listening. And since the meeting is all about gaining admittance inside the buyer's world, wise businesspeople listen first and talk second.

A Socratic opener facilitates effective listening from the outset. Just as Socrates asked questions that guided his students toward drawing correct conclusions, so the Socratic opener relies on a question that lets the prospect know you are interested in her needs and perspective; that lets her know that you recognize you are on her turf; and, most of all, that invites her to speak so you can listen and respond.

Open Socratically

Your meeting has begun. You've made small talk. Both you and the prospect sense that it is time to settle down to business. Since you asked for the meeting, the prospect waits for you to begin. How can you deftly get him to talk—and access his world—while guiding the dialogue?

At Communispond, we recommend a Socratic opener. A Socratic opener might begin like this:

"We talked on the phone, and I have the presentation I told you about. But I could sense when we spoke that you have a point of view on this subject, and I'd like you to share that with me so we can make our time together most productive."

The Socratic opener is the most effective device for a business dialogue that we have yet discovered. One reason is that it plays directly to the

prospect's desire to establish turf. The buyer wants to establish parameters for the conversation: "Here's where I am." Even if he says nothing you don't already know, it's important to let him establish these boundaries.

Only after you've listened is it appropriate for you to speak, because only then have you demonstrated that you understand the parameters. Besides, if you begin making a presentation without letting the prospect talk first, you risk being just enough off-target to fail.

We like to talk about what we know best. And that's just what most people do, instead of listening.

Take Notes

Effective listening demands awareness so you can take in the information you're receiving and give full value to your customer. Taking notes is a great way to remain aware.

Even if you're meeting with a long-time client, and even if you're discussing a subject you've discussed before, taking notes lets that person know he has your attention.

Don't worry about eye contact. If you're taking adequate notes, you should be looking more at your notepad than at your client. And it's what the client expects to see.

Listening Does No Good If the Client Doesn't Know You've Listened

When I was a young pilot in the Navy, I flew a jet one day from Pensacola, Florida, to Virginia. The Navy required pilots to transmit to control towers along the flight path, even if the pilot couldn't pick up the tower's signal. As I approached Atlanta, I dutifully transmitted, "Navy jet One Zero Five reporting in over Atlanta. Do you read?"

No response. So I transmitted again. And again—five times in all—stating my position, altitude, time over Atlanta, and ETA at Raleigh-Durham, my next reporting point. Still silence. In the lexicon of pilots, I was "transmitting in the blind." It was frustrating not to know whether I had been heard.

That's what happens if your clients can't be sure whether you have truly listened to them. They're transmitting in the blind. It's your job, as an effective listener, to demonstrate that you've heard.

Playing Back

Many people think they have demonstrated that they're listening if they simply nod their heads or say "Uh-huh." But those responses are nothing more than reactions. They only demonstrate that you're alive.

To win the boss's or customer's confidence, you must do more. You have to "play back." There is no substitute for letting the client hear you summarize the message.

Summarizing is key. Playing back doesn't mean that you should repeat exactly what you have heard or recorded in your notes. It's better that you don't. Grasp the important, relevant facts and restate them in your own words. That's the best way to demonstrate that you understand.

Frequently, the other person will send a cue asking for playback:

"Got it?"

"Make sense?"

If you're a parent, you've probably sent similar cues to make sure your children were paying attention to you:

"What did I just say?"

"Did you hear me?"

In all likelihood, you didn't let the conversation end until your child played back the message.

Sometimes, businesspeople are reluctant to play back because they fear the client will rebuke them for parroting their words. Or they worry they'll misunderstand and restate facts inaccurately. But you can't go wrong playing back. If you were mistaken, the client will happily correct the error. If you're tracking correctly, the client is encouraged to keep talking. Either way, you advance the dialogue. The other person knows he is not transmitting in the blind. And you gain additional information.

You can use any of a number of simple devices to cue the speaker that you're about to play back:

"Let me just see if I got this straight. . . ."

"So I hear you saying that . . ."

"So in other words you'd like . . ."

After you play back, cue the customer to verify that your understanding was correct:

"Do I have it right?"

"How does that sound?"

"Is that it?"

Let's return for a moment to the couple at the car dealership and envision how effective listening and playback might have worked in their conversation.

The couple inform the salesperson that they're interested in an SUV featured in a newspaper ad.

Salesman: "I'm curious. What particularly interests you about this vehicle?"

Here, even though the couple has come to his turf, he turns it back to them and invites them to talk. They mention that they're looking for more room than their subcompact provides and were attracted by the advertised special price.

Salesman: "So you'd like a little more comfort and room to stretch out?"

Not so much that, they say; they need more room because they have a second small child, and the subcompact simply isn't large enough, particularly when they go on trips together. A small car also doesn't provide as much protection. With this one simple playback device, the salesman has accomplished the following:

- demonstrated that he listened;
- clarified his understanding;
- encouraged the couple to continue the dialogue; and
- gained new information

As he shows them the vehicle they came to see, the salesman adds something like:

Missing such cues in a business conversation can spell the difference between a successful dialogue and failure...

"And you said that you were particularly interested because of the special end-of-model-year price."

"Yes," the woman replies. "We've always said we wouldn't buy a new car on impulse. We'd be patient for a good deal." (Without asking a question, the salesman

played back, prompting the couple to provide additional insight into their needs and motivation.)

After they tour the vehicle, the salesman plays back again:

"I just want to make sure I've heard you. You're looking for more room for your growing family. And now, especially, you're concerned about having a vehicle that will keep them safe. And it sounds like you're saying that you're less concerned with sportiness and style than with good value for your money. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Because if that's the case, there's also another model here I'd like to show you that you might find even more appealing."

"OK."

By demonstrating that he has listened and understands the couple's needs, he gains permission to show them the minivan, which they ultimately buy.

Two other things are notable about the salesperson's playback.

First, notice how he played back throughout the conversation, not just at the end. Playing back early enabled him to clarify the customer's need and source of motivation.

Second, he played back the customers, not just facts. He heard what was important to them: their concerns for the well-being of their children and their desire to buy sensibly. When you play back the customer, you're listening at a higher level. You demonstrate that you really know that customer—which allows you to be admitted into his world.

An unexpected dynamic occurs when you listen and play back the person. That person believes he knows you, even if he has done most of the talking. And people tend to trust (and buy from) those whom they feel they know. When you play back, the other person gains confidence that has nothing to do with your credentials. It stems from your ability to demonstrate that you understand.

The same dynamic takes place when you talk with your boss or colleagues. The boss, remember, is less interested in what you have to say than in hearing what you understand *he* has said. When you play back, his level of attention goes up. You're responding to his needs, and he gains confidence that you are reliable.

So When Do You Get to Tell What You Know?

Especially if we're selling, we're itching to tell the customer what we know. We know our company, our products or service, and our own expertise. We're convinced that our story will impress the customer.

What's more, most of us are well trained to do our homework before we meet a prospect. We learn everything we can about a prospect beforehand, or we prepare ourselves before an internal meeting. We want to demonstrate our knowledge.

That step is important, but the beginning of a meeting is not an advantageous time to download what we know. Once the other person responds to your Socratic opening, then it's appropriate to insert something you know about the company, such as:

"I was studying your Web page, and one thing that impressed me was . . ."

At this point in the dialogue, such a statement may be all you need to show that you've done your homework; meanwhile, you've invited the other person to speak further and given yourself another opportunity to listen.

Later in the conversation, there will be other opportunities to demonstrate your knowledge. But never let those demonstrations get in the way of the other person's own story. And never cut someone off to say that you already know or have read what he's telling you. The boss or the prospect will perceive you as arrogant rather than knowledgeable. Remember: The meeting is not about you.

Every Question Is a Cue

Our own knowledge creates one other serious impediment to Socratic listening. In our eagerness to respond to a question, we may miss its underlying purpose—and provide an incorrect, sales-killing answer.

Once, I was meeting with a prospective client who asked whether Communispond provided communications training for senior executives. I responded with a long spiel about how many company presidents we had trained and about the coaching we offered. Then the prospect floored me: "Actually, I was interested in training for middle managers. I'm tired of hearing companies beat their chests about how they train senior management."

At that point, the sale was over. There was no way to get the horse back into the barn.

How could I possibly have known he was interested in middle-manager training when he asked about senior executives? What did I do wrong?

The short answer is . . . a short answer—and a question.

Most people never pick up on a simple truth: Many questions are not asked in order to obtain an answer. They're asked to introduce a topic that the questioner wants to discuss.

If I ask you "Have you ever had a sore knee?," I'm probably not interested in actually hearing about your knee. I'm signaling that I want to tell you about *my* knee.

Missing such cues in a business conversation can spell the difference between a successful dialogue and failure—as my experience with the training prospect showed. If we miss the cue, the dialogue bypasses the real topic the customer wanted to discuss.

Mr. Daley is the founder and chairman of Communispond, a communication skills training firm based in New York. Communispond is the resource of choice for any population that must hold their own in high stakes communications situations. Communispond has personally served 62 board chairmen, 362 company presidents and 3,100 sales executives.

You can avoid that problem by sticking to a short answer and a question that returns the ball to the other person's court:

"Yes, we do provide a whole range of training for senior executives. But I'm curious: Why do you ask?"

That way, you give the prospect a chance to talk further and lay out the real issue—while you keep listening and probing for more information. You're not evading the issue but trying to identify it so you can meet the person's needs. Over the years, these four little words—Why do you ask?—have paid unimaginably rich dividends for businesspeople who recognize that almost every question is a cue.

Dividends Are the Bottom Line with Listening

If you're meeting with colleagues or one on one with an equal, applying Socratic listening skills simply reflects good manners. It establishes you as a team player who's easy to work with, and, ultimately, it furthers your career.

When you seek to enter a client's or the boss's turf, in addition, effective listening builds long-lasting business relationships.

The bottom-line results are quantifiable. Fleet Bank, one of our clients at Communispond, had 14 salespeople complete our Socratic training. They were part of a larger unit of 106 representatives. Afterward, Fleet measured the productivity of those 14 graduates of the Socratic method against the rest of the sales unit. They found that those who had been trained in listening skills achieved sales increases of 73% over the following two months—compared to only a 28% increase for those who had not received Socratic training.

Then again, you don't necessarily need statistics to demonstrate the value of listening. The successful minivan salesman could have told you all about that.



communicate | respond



COMMUNISPOND™

website: www.communispond.com

email address: info@communispond.com Phone: 1-800 843 5168