

# SOUND CHECK

TUNE IN TO YOUR CUSTOMERS FOR BETTER SALES

EDITORIAL | DAVE KAHLE



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## DAVE KAHLE

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I just came across some research that confirmed what many of us in the profession of educating salespeople have known for years: **Purchasers would be “much more likely” to buy from a salesperson if that salesperson would just “listen” to the customer.** The survey found that some of the worst offenders were actually *experienced* salespeople.

Listening is one of the four fundamental competencies of a professional salesperson, and yet, the profession is, in general, so poor at it that most customers remark on our inability to do it well. Gee, if there is anyone I wouldn't want thinking I was a poor listener, my customers would be towards the top of the list. Why is listening such a powerful sales competency? In my book, *Question Your Way to Sales Success*, I describe a number of reasons. Here are a few:

### LISTENING IS A PRIMARY TOOL

First, it is our primary way of digging beneath the surface of a customer's needs and uncovering deeper and more powerful needs and motivations. That makes it a primary tool – the skillful use of which separates the master salespeople from the mediocre. For example, it doesn't take any skill whatsoever to pick up an RFQ, a set of blueprints, or to write down a list of what the customer says he needs. You don't have to be a master listener to do that. But to dig deeper and uncover deeper issues, that takes the ability to listen.

Here's an example. In a routine sales call with a regular customer, the customer says, “We're thinking of going to X product. What's your price?”

Lots of salespeople would look up the price and provide it. There. Job done.

The master would hear the words, “Thinking of going...” and dig a little deeper. “What makes you interested in that?” he says.

The customer replies, “Well, we're looking for a solution for a problem with our widget production line, and one of the key operators mentioned it as a possibility.”

“I see. What sort of problem are you having in that production line?”

“An abnormally high reject rate.”

“I may have some other solutions. May I talk to your production manager?”

I don't have to take this scenario much further to make the point. A visit with the production supervisor could very well result in a deeper understanding of the problem and the development of an alternative solution with a whole lot more gross margin to it. The master salesperson, exercising excellent listening skills, hears opportunities where many salespeople don't. Listening is the primary tool for digging deeper and uncovering deeper and more significant issues in our customers.

But that's not all. When we listen, we send a powerful message that we care about the other person. Conversely, when we don't listen, we send the message that our agenda is far more important than the customer's trivial ideas and issues. That makes effective listening one of the all time great relationship-building devices.

### PUTTING IT TO USE

Listening requires us to take in information, ideas and opinions that are outside our comfort zones. It is, therefore, one of the primary tools we use to grow intellectually, to broaden our views, and ultimately, to become wiser and more knowledgeable. If we never listen to someone with a different perspective, we never consider the possibility that we might be wrong.

From a salesperson's perspective, the more we listen, the more different positions, motivations, opinions and nuances we are able to understand and accommodate. The wiser and more capable we become. Since we are able to understand an ever-growing panoply of positions and opinions, we are able to feel a rapport with more and more customers, and move closer to a consensus position with them.

Listening positions us as a consultant, not a peddler, in the eyes of the customer. Ultimately, listening provides us our competitive edge.

So, how do we do it better?

## LISTENING IS ONE OF THE FOUR FUNDAMENTAL COMPETENCIES OF A PROFESSIONAL SALESPERSON.

## LISTENING REQUIRES US TO TAKE IN INFORMATION, IDEAS AND OPINIONS THAT ARE OUTSIDE OUR COMFORT ZONES.

### IMPROVING YOUR EFFECTIVENESS

Here are two specific techniques to help you improve your listening effectiveness:

#### 1. Listen constructively.

My wife is a crisis counselor. She talks about “listening empathetically.” That means she listens in order to understand what a person is feeling. That is very appropriate for that type of work. However, we are salespeople. It is more important that we listen “constructively.” Think of “constructively – construction – building.” We need to listen for things upon which to build. Listen for opportunities, problems, opinions, etc. on which we can build our solutions.

One way to do this is to plant a couple of questions into our mind before every sales call. These are questions for which we want to gain the answer. You could, for example, say to yourself before a sales call: “What is the one thing that is this customer’s most pressing challenge today?” And, you could ask yourself, “On what basis will this customer make the decision to buy or not?”

By planting those questions into your mind, you sharpen your sensitivity to what the customer says, enabling you to listen more constructively to the customer’s conversation.

#### 2. Discipline yourself to build the habit of responding to your customer’s comments.

Here’s how we think the sales interview should go.

- a. We ask a question.
- b. The customer answers.
- c. We ask another question.

When you exercise the habit of responding, you change the format. Now, it goes like this:

- a. We ask a question.
- b. The customer answers.
- c. We respond to the answer.
- d. We now ask another question.

Notice that we have intervened in the process with something we call a “response.” A response is a verbal or non-verbal signal that we send to the customer that we are listening, and accepting what the customer says. It flatters the

customer, makes him/her feel good about answering, and encourages him/her to answer in more depth and detail.

Here are two powerful responses:

#### A. Select one or two words out of the customer’s conversation, and repeat them back to the customer, nodding your head.

Here’s an example. You ask the question, “Which of these challenges are most pressing for you?”

The customer responds by talking for a few moments about his challenges. When he pauses, you say, “back orders” and nod your head. “Back orders” was one of the issues he talked about. You just repeated it, and nodded your head.

That’s a powerful response because it shows the customer that you have listened to the point that you have captured and repeated one of his main thoughts. That feels good to the customer and conditions him to answer the next question with even more depth and detail. Just as importantly, since you were focused on finding a key word or two to repeat, you had to listen to the customer’s conversation! This technique forced you to listen more effectively and made the customer feel good in the process.

#### B. Summarize and rephrase what the customer has said, and repeat it back to him.

This is similar to the one- or two-word techniques discussed above, only more intense. When the customer has finished answering your question, you say something like this: “Let me see if I understand you correctly. In other words, what you are saying is....” Paraphrase and give him back your understanding of what he just said.

Like the prior technique, this is a powerful tool because it forces you to listen, it engages the customer, and it seeks agreement. Using this a couple of times in the sales interview will make the customer feel good about you, ensure that you understand him, and create an atmosphere of agreement.

Ultimately, your ability to listen more effectively evolves out of your discipline to apply some of these techniques regularly and methodically. If you are going to listen more effectively, you must first make the commitment to expend the effort to do so. 🎧

**WE NEED TO LISTEN FOR THINGS UPON WHICH TO BUILD.  
LISTEN FOR OPPORTUNITIES, PROBLEMS, OPINIONS, ETC. ON WHICH WE CAN BUILD OUR SOLUTIONS.**