

The Art of Listening

How to Gain a Competitive Advantage by Listening to Your Customers

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Do you really want to know how to differentiate yourself from your competition? Pull up a chair and listen....

One of the most valuable, but grossly under-utilized, skills that any business professional should have in his or her bag-o-tricks is listening. This is exponentially true for entrepreneurs. While we all like to think we are good listeners, in reality most of us do a very poor job at listening to others, especially our customers. The majority of the time, when engaged in conversation, we are already thinking about what we want to say next rather than giving our full attention to the speaker. Similar to medical experts claiming that we only utilize 10% of our brains, I surmise that we only use a tiny fraction of our listening capabilities.

Be aware that listening opportunities are not only presented when we are engaged in a face-to-face conversation. It could just as well be an overheard conversation or comments on a blog. Customers are willingly sharing immensely indispensable information about what we as entrepreneurs are doing right and what we are doing wrong. The point is we are missing out on a lot of valuable information from our customers. And as we all know – the key to happy, loyal customers is giving them what they want and need. So pay attention, listen, and learn.

While there are plenty of ways to gather information about customers (distributing surveys, holding focus groups, etc.), I don't think anything can replace going into the field and talking to your customers. Procter & Gamble utilizes this type of research and data collection all the time. They conduct countless ethnographic studies whereby they immerse themselves into the lives of their customers to listen and learn. Understanding what is of true value to customers, knowing what their problems are, and then identifying a solution to address those problems is really what business comes down to, doesn't it?

Why is listening particularly important for entrepreneurs? Because the strategy of "if you build it, they will come" no longer works. It never really did. Whether you blatantly ask people if or how your product/service can better fulfill their needs or you simply spend more time in the field interacting with people, you will be amazed at how much information you can cull from your existing as well as potential customers. The key is to spend more time listening than talking.

"I find when I am truly listened to, I am able to really hear myself, sometimes for the first time. Listening is one of the most powerful tools human beings have and one of the most under-utilized."

- Kim Ann Curtin, Life Coach, The Coach Shoppe

Fundamentally, listening is not very difficult, but being an attentive, deliberate listener is what everyone finds so challenging. Quite honestly, it requires a conscious effort and plenty of practice. So, you ask, how does one become a better listener? Here are a few suggestions:

- Meditate. Practice teaching your mind to eliminate clutter and to focus on one thing and one thing only. Use this same approach just before engaging in an important conversation. Remove the clutter. Remove preconceived notions. Set aside all the things you want to say, so you can first and foremost focus on what is being said.
- Ask open-ended questions. This is a technique qualitative researchers often utilize. Begin your questions with "how" or "why," then zip it. Giving your customers the opportunity and freedom to offer more than yes/no responses in turn gives you more opportunities to listen and learn.
- Give your full attention. This is the hard part. Concentrate on what others say, but also pay attention to what they don't say. Oftentimes, it's silence that poses an "a-ha" moment. Also, send positive nonverbal messages (such as eye contact) to reinforce you are paying attention to the speaker. When you show you are interested in what your clients have to say, you begin establishing trust-worthy relationships. Eventually, they will feel more comfortable sharing more information with you.
- Don't interrupt. As much as you are tempted to jump in mid-sentence or finish the other person's thought, wait your turn. Be patient. Soak up everything that is being said first before responding or reacting. Make sure you understand someone's point before jumping to conclusions or passing judgment. Even if you think you know what is best for your client or you think you have the answer, hear them out.
- Paraphrase. Restate what you just heard to confirm your understanding. Not only does this improve your listening skills, it fine tunes your problem solving skills and it advances the conversation in a productive way.

If you want to gain a competitive advantage...listen. It's a surefire way to build a solid clientele, increase your sales, and believe it or not – differentiate yourself in the marketplace. Research shows that business professionals that are truly good listeners are rare to find, so if you can master some of the techniques above, you and your business will stand out in the crowd. And don't overlook the fact that the real value of listening goes beyond information gathering. Being a good listener will enable you to build loyal business relationships with not only your customers, but also your vendors, suppliers, and partners.

Yes, listening is a skill, but it is also an art. It must be practiced and perfected to reap the full benefits. In any given situation, you will learn exponentially more by listening than by talking. Perhaps this is why we were created with two ears but only one mouth.

Never underestimate the value of listening. ■