

QuickTips

Everyone is aware that ‘2 ears and 1 mouth – use them in that proportion’ is one of the basic truisms of successful selling. Listening skills are essential, but rarely taught at schools, and apart from some of our Foundation Selling Skills programs, not often examined. In particular we are concerned with Active Listening, during which we are attempting to simultaneously do three things:

- Understand exactly what is being said (and not said).
- Put the new information into a context, and plan our next questions, to steer the conversation in the direction that we want.
- Build rapport by communicating back to the customer with our words, questions, encouraging sounds and body language.

Here is a quick reminder of some of the basics:

Reflecting back

By repeating the last phrase or few words, you invite the speaker to amplify and expand:

Customer: “.... so, I’m concerned about flexibility.”

Salesperson: “.... about flexibility?”

Clarifying Questions

Using questions to clarify (and possibly expand) your understanding:

Salesperson: “have I got this correct, are you saying that...?”

Expanding questions

Customer: “.... and that puts enormous pressure on the organization.”

Salesperson: “I see, in what way?”

Summarizing

Particularly towards the end, but also at key points throughout the conversation, you can summarize to check understanding and correct any misunderstandings:

Salesperson: “So, my understanding is that the key issues that you face are.....”

Prioritizing

Often used after a summary, asking the customer to prioritize, in order for you to check importance:

Salesperson: “That is very interesting, and of all the issues that we have discussed, which would you say are the most pressing.....”

Use of silence

Silence is a key weapon in any discussion, giving the customer the option to expand, and if accompanied by a thoughtful expression, signaling that you are really interested in them and their ideas:

Customer: “.... So, that is a summary of our position.”

Salesperson: “hmmm.....”

Mirroring

Active listening involves communication back to the customer and building rapport. Mirroring is a technique for doing this, and can be applied in terms of body language, where you adopt a similar posture to your customer, and also verbally by using any key words or phrases that they use, back to them.

Barriers to effective listening

Listening is difficult, and we often make it more challenging by not removing the obvious barriers, which can be environmental (too much other noise in the vicinity), physiological (not being relaxed), linguistic (awareness of jargon etc.) and personal (being pre-occupied with something else).

Note taking

Note taking can be very valuable in Active Listening. Clearly notes will help you remember exactly what was said, but done judiciously they are a signal back to the customer what is important to you. Writing brief notes can also give you valuable breathing space to gather your own thoughts; however beware of the discussion appearing to be an interrogation!

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