

Listening Skills

The cornerstone of any communication is the ability to listen and to accomplish this in an active manner. Often communication fails because people have not actually heard to the message or have only listened to part of it. As a result, they may have assumed or misinterpreted what was actually said. In the professional arena, good listening skills are necessary in order to communicate that you want to help.

We may listen for comprehension, for ideas, facts, or detail. Sometimes we practice evaluative listening when we need to make a judgement, as in political debates. At other times we listen empathically, when someone is trying to be understood and heard while many times, we are just practicing appreciative listening, for pleasure.

There is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is purely physical whereas listening involves not only hearing sounds but also responding. Selective listening requires concentration and attention. It also involves the ability to take in the whole message, accepting what is said without judging, understanding not only the words spoken but also the feelings that underlie the words.

Listening is a process that involves several steps.

Preparation would include arranging yourself to listen, freeing your mind of distractions.

Paying attention to the speaker to demonstrate you are actively listening

Active listening involves focused attention, and we communicate this both verbally and non-verbally.

When preparing to listen, the first step is to avoid distractions. These can be external or in our heads. Things that can get in the way of active listening:

Distractions – noise/other things going on around us

Thinking about how we are going to respond rather than concentrating on what is being said

Becoming impatient, especially when time is tight

Guessing and assuming what people are going to say next

Forming judgements/opinions about what people are saying

Thinking about our own problems

Getting ready to give our opinion and advice

Attending focuses on non-verbal behaviours to demonstrate you are actively listening to the speaker

Facing speaker squarely,

Open posture,

Maintaining eye contact.

Nodding of the head

Smiling

The three types of inference-observation confusion in listening

While we often jump to conclusions with good intentions, there are three main cognitive distortions that account for most inference-observation confusions.

Mind reading. When we infer a person's probable thoughts from their behaviour and nonverbal communication. For instance, a salesperson asks a customer a probing question about their current system. The customer looks away or appears to be uncomfortable, and the salesperson infers that they must lack knowledge or insight, even though there are other potential explanations, such as the customer not knowing the context of the question, or the question is positioned too early in the conversation.

How to overcome mind reading. We achieve this through a process of Reflection, Advocacy, and Inquiry. Reflection: thinking about what we are inferring; Advocacy: making our reasoning visible to the customer we are communicating with; and Inquiry: asking the customer we are communicating with questions for clarity. Clarity of focus leads to accuracy of response every time.

Fortune telling. When we predict an outcome before we have enough evidence. For example, when we tell ourselves there is no point in calling that customer because they wouldn't be interested, or when we don't even attempt to participate in a sales objection conversation because we are certain there is no way we will win. These inflexible expectations for how things will turn out before they happen often prevent us from taking action.

How to overcome fortune telling. What is the evidence for and against your predicted outcome? It is important to examine the actual evidence, and even more importantly, the quality of that evidence. Consider your track record for making similar predictions. In similar situations, what kinds of predictions have you made, and how do the situations actually turn out? Find three positive outcomes and write out how these outcomes might actually occur in your sales conversation.

Labelling. When we use overgeneralizations by labelling all the members of the buying group with the characteristics seen in maybe one of them, or when we assign a label to someone or something based on the inferred character of that person or thing. For instance, a customer who forgot my name becomes a disinterested buyer. Plus, we also often label ourselves, which makes us jump to conclusions when it comes to our own abilities.

How to overcome labelling. Whenever you notice yourself labelling a customer, try to think about how you would feel if they did the same to you. Next, consider why someone might act the way they do. Focusing on what you wish to achieve can remove the number of labels you apply. Always challenge your preconceived labels to discover the real character of a customer or group of buyers.

Active Listening

Active listening shows you have understood the other person and acknowledged their thoughts, objections, or concerns. You want to be able to show that you are following what the speaker is saying and you want to reflect thereby checking your understanding of the message and allowing the speaker to clarify his/her own thoughts.

Here are some strategies to enhance effective listening:

Not interrupting the speaker – give them space and time to say what they have to say. Stop talking, you can't listen if you are talking!

Focusing – actively attend to the other person’s words, ideas, and feelings. Ask for more detail or ask them to expand on certain things.

Use paraphrasing - means providing a concise response to the listeners’ words to reflect that you have understood their message using their own words (rewording). For example, *‘So what you’re saying is ...’*

Use summarising – formulate a brief statement containing key words and/or feelings that person has said. For example, *‘I think you’re trying to tell me ...’*

Use inquiry – to aid active listening by asking appropriate questions and using open-ended questions. An open question is one which leads the speaker into exploration and elaboration. A focused question calls for a “Yes”, or “no” or other specific response. It facilitates clarification. Most people tend to rely on closed or focused questions. Both are essential to good communication.

Listen to how something is said – too often we concentrate on the content or what is being said whereas the emotions and reactions behind the content may be more important.

In summary, listening is a matter of concentration - the more attention paid the better the listening. Listening skills involve being receptive to others and being able to understand another person’s perspective.

HURIER Model of Listening

The acronym HURIER is a good method to summarize a model for effective listening skills.

H – Hearing

‘Hearing’ is used here in a very broad sense. Not only does it refer to the physical act of hearing, but also for you to pick up on non-verbal and other signals, tone of voice, body language and facial expressions.

U – Understanding

Once the message has been ‘heard’, the next step is to understand. This means pulling together all the elements of ‘hearing’ to create a coherent understanding of what was communicated.

R – Remembering

Remembering requires focus. An effective listener needs to be able to remember the message they are receiving in its entirety.

I – Interpreting

Interpretation of the message builds on, and enhances, understanding. Interpretation means considering factors such as the context in which the message was given. Importantly, here the listener also needs to be aware of, and avoid, any preconceptions or biases that they may hold that may affect how the message is interpreted.

E – Evaluating

Evaluating requires that the listener keeps an open mind on the messages they are receiving and doesn't jump to conclusions about what is being said. Evaluate all the information and only then start to formulate a response.

R – Responding

Finally, your response should be well-measured and demonstrate that you have understood what was communicated. It may be necessary to get clarification and use reflection as part of the response.

The Four Customer Communication Styles

Different customers and prospects have unique ways that they like to communicate based on their own communication style. They typically fall into one of four communication styles based on two factors. Those two factors are the level of sociability and the level of dominance.

The four communication styles are: Supportive, Open, Closed, and Organized.

Understanding the different communication styles and how to handle each individually can drastically improve your relationship and ability to connect with other people.

Supportive Communication Style

Supportive communicators have a high sociability level and low dominance. What exactly does that mean? High sociability means they're very friendly, outgoing, helpful, and thoughtful; They're quick to form relationships and business friendships.

Supportive communicators like a lot of information. They like to take their time to make decisions and absorb information. These are the people that often request detailed summaries or more often, the whole report. So, it should come as no surprise that they typically won't send you a short email; it's going to be a long detailed email.

1. The customer gives the appearance of being quiet and reserved. People with the Supportive communication style can easily display their feelings, but not in an assertive manner.
2. Listens attentively to other people. In a sales meeting, listening comes naturally to the supportive communication customer.
3. They tend to avoid the use of power. The supportive communicator is more likely to rely on friendly persuasion and interactions to get the outcome they desire.
4. They make decisions in a thoughtful and deliberate manner plus usually takes longer to make a decision.

Communicating with the Supportive Communication Style

Because of their naturally friendly nature, they love to engage in conversation; If you're meeting with them, it's wise to ask them about their weekend, friends, or family. Have they seen the latest films? What are they reading at the moment?

You want to reciprocate their language by being very sociable and friendly with them because that's how they are. Remember, it's critical you always give them lots of information.

They love informative, colourful presentations. Do not rush them into deciding because they need time to absorb, digest, and ruminate.

Open Communication Style

The Open communication style has both a high level of sociability and a high level of dominance. Open communicators tend to be expressive and excitable, often seeming restless. They're open (*obviously*), honest, and friendly; You know where you stand with them. Like Supportive communicators, they're very friendly and sociable, and they like to form relationships quickly, like a business friendship, so they're speedy to build relationships with you.

What's the difference between the Supportive and Open communication styles?

Supportive communicators take their time-making decisions, they often don't want to tell you "no" because they don't want to hurt your feelings and want lots of background information. On the other hand, Open communicators tend to make decisions quickly, and they don't need or want a lot of information. They are likely to say, "You know what, I think we can do something. Let's get started."

1. They appear quite active. This customer type gives the appearance of being busy. As they combine higher dominance and higher sociability, they often display spontaneous, uninhibited behaviour. The Open communicator is likely to express feelings with vigorous movements of the hands and a rapid speech pattern.
2. They tend to be extroverts. When meeting them for the first time, the Open customer is more apt to initiate and maintain the conversation as well as to initiate the handshake. Open communicators rate higher in both directness and openness.
3. Likes to encourage informality. The Open customer moves to a first-name basis as soon as possible. Even the way this person sits in a chair communicates a preference for a relaxed, informal business setting.

Communicating with the Open Communication Style

They're content with simply the bullet points because they tend to make decisions based on gut instincts. Therefore, it's fair to say they're fairly spontaneous in their decision-making.

Ask them how they feel or what they think, in a direct yet nonaggressive manner. They like to buy concepts (future pacing).

Get Yes commitments from them while you can. Once you have gone, they will be moving on to their next project and will have forgotten about you.

Listen carefully to their needs and wants, they are usually able to articulate them well. Build your solutions specifically around these needs.

Be honest and open but use tact. Help them to look at all sides of a problem.

Don't be pushy or manipulative. Treat them as equals, don't talk down or defer to them.

Canned flip chart presentations may be tolerated but are normally not impressive. They are less impressed by flashiness and more impressed by facts—brief demonstrations can work well.

Closed Communication Style

The Closed communication style has a high level of dominance and a low level of sociability. Meaning that Closed communicators tend to be demanding, aggressive, determined, and often frank.

They like to get down to business quickly, so they're not seeking to be your friend. They don't care about your weekend. They don't care about any personal aspects of your life. A stark comparison compared to the other communication styles such as the Open which is high sociability and the Closed is low sociability.

What are the similarities between these communication styles?

In terms of dominance, both the Open and the Closed tend to make decisions quickly. However, the Open makes decisions based on how they feel about you, whilst the Closed make decisions based on the facts. They want succinct written summaries as well but prefer to review the facts alone to determine whether or not they will do business with you.

1. Appears to be quite busy. The closed communicator generally does not like to waste time and wants to get right to the point.
2. May give the impression of not listening. In most cases they feel more comfortable talking than listening.
3. Displays a serious attitude. This communication style usually communicates a lack of warmth and is apt to be quite business like and impersonal.
4. Likes to maintain control. Because of the higher level on the dominance continuum, they like to maintain control. During meetings, the closed communicator often seeks to control the agenda.

Communicating with the Closed Communication Style

One of the keys to dealing with the Closed communicator is: **don't waste their time**. They're very conscious of time because they're busy, always seeming to be in a hurry. Therefore, you must get to the meeting on time or, better yet early. Always endeavour to be respectful of their time and end the meeting on time or early.

- Give a polished, well supported sales Presentation.
- Avoid reading a canned flip chart presentation.
- A team approach, if professional, will probably impress them.
- Be prepared for suggestions on how to improve your selling technique.
- They like to feel in control. Be ready to confidently answer any of their questions on the spot.

- Communicate bluntly and decisively. Let them feel that they negotiated an exceptional deal (they probably did).
- Never be late or keep them waiting.

Organized Communication Style

The Organized communication style has a low level of sociability and a low level of dominance, so naturally, they tend to be reserved and cautious.

The Closed communication style and the Organized communication style are both in low sociability. What does that mean? They don't like chit chat, they don't want to get too personal, and definitely don't want to find out about your personal relationships. They're not interested in forming any friendship per se; they'd rather get down to business and keep things at a professional level.

The organized person doesn't want bullet points, so they don't make decisions quickly – just like the Supportive. The Supportive also wants lots of information and takes their time to make decisions. However, the Supportive also has high sociability. In contrast, the Organized has low sociability. So, you want to be acutely mindful of this difference.

1. Controls emotional expression. Organized communicators tend to curb emotional expression and are less likely to display warmth openly.
2. Displays a preference for orderliness. They enjoy a highly structured environment and generally feels frustration when confronted with unexpected events.
3. Tends to express measured opinions. They usually do not express dramatic opinions. This communication style is characterized by disciplined, business like actions.
4. Seems difficult to get to know. The organized communicator tends to be somewhat formal in social relationships and therefore can be viewed as aloof.

Communicating with the Organized Communication Style

When dealing with an Organized communication style, you want to appear very organized, professional, structured, thorough, detailed, and on time.

You cannot rush them into making a decision. They don't respond well to that type of pressure.

Instead, use techniques that work well, like *“I'm happy to send you all the information you need. Please take your time and review it carefully. This is a significant decision, and you shouldn't rush into it. Let me know if you have any other questions. I'm happy to provide you with more supporting documents if needed.”*

Don't expect them to openly express what they really want—you must search for it.

Avoid technical jargon—they may be overwhelmed by it. Pay attention to the way things are phrased, or what they're emphasizing.

Help them make good choices and make buying easy.

ACS: The Key To Connecting With All Communication Styles

Regardless of the customer's communication style, your job as a sales professional is to help your customer or prospect feel as comfortable as possible and make buying easier. This means communicating with them in a manner unique to their personality and needs. This is what we call ACS - Adaptive Communication Selling.

This selling technique requires the salesperson to be able to adapt to the customer's needs and problems in order to improve communication with the customer. The main strategy for this approach to be efficient is for the salesperson to adapt or customize their selling techniques based on the customer's style.

What is your communication style?

These are your patterns of behaviour that others observe. Your voice patterns, eye movement, facial expression, and posture are some of the components of your communication style.

Your communication style is the "you" that is on display every day, the outer pattern of behaviour that others see. If your style is very different from your customers, it may be difficult for the two of you to develop rapport.

It's a universal truth that when it comes to human interaction, people like people like them. They're comfortable with people who are like themselves. However, please make no mistake; this isn't simply a case of mirroring their gestures, parroting, or paraphrasing. Rather you want to adopt characteristics unique to their communication style.

ACS entails listening to the customer, identifying their needs and solve their problem by giving them customized service or product.

You are an expert on your product knowledge for what you are selling. Skilled on being able to use your selling techniques based on the customer's needs and buying expectations.

You can adapt to the customer's social and communication style as to create a good relationship and build rapport.

The first step in ACS is reaching out not with your sales pitch or overt attempts to gain a competitive edge, but to offer genuine insights. While employing ACS is necessary for success, the extent of that success will depend on your authentic and genuine delivery.

ACS addresses the three types of relational benefits a customer expects to receive during a sales interaction: 1. Confidence, 2. Social, and 3. Special treatment.

Confidence benefits are the psychological benefits associated with trust building and salesperson integrity.

Social benefits are represented by the perceived creation of social relationships with the salesperson and others in the company.

Special treatment benefits refers to a wide range of preferential or personalized experiences delivered to the customer. ACS positively relates to such benefits, and those benefits are themselves positively related to the customer's perception of value created in the communication exchange.

Engage – check your customers circumstance, confirm if a pain point exists, diagnose their concerns accurately, display empathy, provide tangible information, motivate the customer to take action.

Evidence – provide concrete proof, what is the benefit to the customer, decipher between financial gain, strategic gain, or personal gain, do not create an artificial urgency.

Empower – provide choice, clarity on comparisons, educate the customer, support the buying (not the selling) process.

If you want to sell successfully to all of the communication styles – Supportive, Open, Closed, and Organized – you need to use ACS. Adapt your style to suit that of your customer. That will help you to build rapport and trust, establish credibility, and communicate effectively.

7 Actions for Effective ACS Communication

Be confident

When someone walks into a room with confidence, he or she gets the attention of others easily.

Tips

- Show confidence in the way you sit, stand, or walk
- Keep your shoulders straight and your chin up
- Practise maintaining eye contact
- Control signs of physical nervousness, such as tapping a pen

Speak slowly and clearly

Talking too fast will not give people the time to listen and understand you.

Tips

- Use a clear, even paced, calm voice
- Be loud enough to be heard but don't shout
- If people aren't noticing you, say 'Excuse me'
- Don't be apologetic when you haven't done anything wrong
- Make short, BRIEF, correct speeches

Dress correctly

People make judgments based on how we look. Dress neatly, smartly, and correctly according to the place and occasion.

Tips

- Looking confident and attractive can change others' minds
- People may not listen to you seriously if you are not dressed properly
- People respect you when you are dressed properly

Be honest

Being honest builds trust and results in open communication.

Tips

- Express your thoughts or views clearly and honestly
- Ask yourself what you actually want or what will work best for you before agreeing to something that is not convenient

Don't be aggressive

Getting angry, shouting, using bad language, and pushing is not assertive communication.

Tips

- Don't confuse assertiveness with aggression
- When faced with a challenging situation, stay calm and try to understand the real problem
- Insist on your right to respond by using logic and politeness

Speak up

Express your thoughts, ideas, and opinions without worrying about other people's reactions.

Tips

- Don't be silent if you have something to say
- Share your feelings constructively with logic
- Practise expressing your opinion and values

Learn to say 'NO'

If you do not feel right doing something or it is not within your power to do so, then do not do it. It is okay to refuse.

Tips

- Respect yourself, your time and expertise
- Don't let others take advantage of you or pressure you
- Agreeing with things you know are not correct may harm relationships and outcomes