

The Art of Listening

One of the most useful tools in customer service and business in general, is often overlooked, the art of listening. Study after study has concluded that good listeners are more effective with customers than poor listeners. Here are some tips on being a better listener.

1. Think like a customer. Your role is to solve the customer's problem. Concentrate on the customer's needs by getting inside their head.
2. Ask questions. The best way to find out what the customer is thinking is to get them talking. Use open ended questions that can't be answered with "yes" or "no". This will keep the communication going. If you don't understand something, clear it up as soon as possible or it may come back to haunt you later.
3. Keep quiet. Don't jump into the conversation at every pause. Pausing is a natural part of conversation and does not mean your customer is finished. Be patient and make sure that your customer has completed the thought and is finished.
4. Concentrate. 100% of your energy should be focused on your customer. Minimize distractions and keep your thoughts on the current situation and not on what you're going to say next.
5. Try taking notes. Writing things down will help you remember what your customer wants and forces concentration. Your notes should be key words that trigger ideas. Don't try to write everything.
6. Ideas - not words. Your goal is to get the big picture, the overall idea of what your customer is saying. If you get too caught up in the words, the bits and pieces, you may miss the general idea.
7. Watch the non-verbals. Most of what people communicate is in the body language and voice inflection and not the words they use. You can gain a great deal of information by the way a customer reacts to what you say.
8. Active listening. The use of a nod, "I see", "I understand", shows the customer that you are still with them and helps you concentrate.
9. Watch your thinking. You always communicate, when contact is made communication occurs. It's almost impossible not to communicate what you're thinking. Your face and body language tell the customer your thoughts, so keep your thoughts positive.
10. Do your homework. The more preparation you do prior to a customer arriving the better you are able to concentrate on their needs. If you make notes on the file jacket, you can personalize your interaction.
11. Don't argue mentally. When dealing with an upset customer, many people will think of clever comebacks even though they would never voice them to the customer. Avoid this type of thinking, it won't help the situation and can make it worst.

Listening is not easy, but it is the most effective way of communicating how we value customers. Practice listening daily.