

Can You Hear Me Now?

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When I'm on the consumer side of a business transaction, I frequently wonder if anyone is listening to me. It seems that most sellers are more interested in telling me what I can buy than how their product or service can solve a problem or provide a benefit. When I describe my needs and am then offered a product that doesn't match what I've just described, I get frustrated and usually find another seller.

What do your customers say about your ability to hear their needs and preferences? Are you falling into any of these three traps of selling your product as opposed to solving your customer's problem?

1. *Focusing exclusively on this transaction.* It's a shortsighted business or salesperson that forgets that customers talk about (and blog, post comments, and rate online) their business transactions. Every customer represents a relationship with a potential for referrals. The lifetime value of the customer will increase if you handle the sale as an exchange within a long-term relationship, as opposed to a single transaction.

From the relationship perspective, you might be motivated to ask more questions and learn more about the person behind the problem.

2. *Assuming that price is your customer's only (or most important) purchase criteria.* Consumers may value other benefits, such as convenience or after-sale service, enough to justify a higher price. A bare-bones option may appeal to some buyers but others will see that as a stripped-down substitute, inadequate for their needs.

Listen for the consumer's priorities and be prepared with options other than price adjustments. If the customer's most important criteria is convenience, a price reduction for an inconvenient offering won't work.

3. *Failing to value the customer's time.* Notice how time spent waiting seems longer than time spent doing what you planned. The next time you're on a delayed flight, observe the frustration and impatience in the gate area.

If your customer (client, patient) is kept waiting, their experience is less valuable to them, even if everything else remains the same. Recognize the value of your customer's time and reduce their wait time to increase their satisfaction.

Your customer's time is also de-valued when you take longer than the customer expected. I met with a consultant for what I expected to be a one-hour meeting that he planned for three hours. I felt cheated when after 90 minutes, we were not concluding our discussion or making decisions. I chose to buy from another consultant, one who allowed me to lead the pace of our conversation and who understood that this purchase was only one of the important issues demanding my time and attention.

Time is a scarce resource for most consumers; don't abuse it if you want to build a relationship with your client.

To stay out of these traps requires strong listening skills. I don't mean that you stop talking just long enough for the customer to say something that you can jump on as another reason to buy your product. Listening requires that you hear both content and context—what is the customer asking for and what problem are they trying to solve. Where, when and how does the problem impact them? Why are they looking for a solution at this particular time?

Respond to the customer's expressed need and ask additional questions to determine if there's more at stake. Let your customer know that you can hear them now.

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