

# Shut up and Listen!

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The number one complaint customers express about any call center representative is reps don't listen. When asked what reps should do differently, responders say "Shut up and listen!"

Listening is a critical skill for anyone in the service industry. Yet, most people are not very good listeners. People ignore, misinterpret or forget 75% of the things others tell them. People are even worse at looking for the deeper meaning in what others say.

## What are some of the problems poor listening creates?

When reps don't listen, customers feel unappreciated. They often consider taking their business elsewhere. In addition, underlying issues that are actually more important to the customer than the original problem remain hidden and may resurface at a later time, causing more serious issues. Minor problems, thus, turn into major snafus. Moreover, because reps are not listening, customers repeat and time call volume escalates. The bottom line is that not listening creates major headaches for an organization and can be financially devastating.

## Why are some customer service reps poor listeners?

There are many reasons why people aren't good listeners. Customer service reps are ingrained with the idea that they must fix a problem quickly. To accomplish that directive, they often cut customers off without acknowledging their pain and determine a solution before hearing the entire problem. Customers need to vent. If they don't get the opportunity to finish their explanations, the interaction will stall and instead of a quick resolution, the caller may want to escalate the call.

Customer service reps, like other listeners, process information quickly. People speak at about 125 words per minute. They digest information at about 600 words per minute. In the down time, many reps think about what to say next and how to end the

call, instead of listening all the way to the end of a sentence or thought. In fact, some researchers say people listen only to the first three or four words in any given sentence, and, then, they begin crafting their response.

People are easily distracted and get bored easily. After all, reps handle the same issues day in and day out. Exterior distractions, like the conversation and laughter of one's peers can be much more interesting than the customer's scenario. In addition, being hungry, having to go to the bathroom or having a headache also affects concentration, as does indifference. When reps are not really interested in what the customer says, they begin to ask the same questions. They may also not notice subtle changes in the customer's voice and meaning.

## So how do you improve listening skills?

Being a good listener takes real discipline and practice. It is not possible to listen on a part-time basis. By the time a rep realizes he may have missed something significant, it might already be too late to win back the customer.

A good way to improve listening skills is to practice listening each and every day all the way to the end of the speaker's sentence without interruption, not only on the job but off – at home or in social situations. When the rep's attention starts to wane, it is a good idea to ask questions or take notes. Another practice exercise is to listen for ideas, concepts and emotions and to acknowledge them when they are uncovered. Good listeners pay attention to more than just the facts. They hunt for hidden meanings and verify that what they have heard is correct. They summarize frequently and demonstrate to the listener that they are trying to get it right. Off the job, one might try listening to television programs or talk shows whose subject areas would normally be avoided and summarize the information learned each break.

## What do reps gain by being good listeners?

There are many reasons why reps should improve their listening skills. For starters, people who are good listeners are perceived as more knowledgeable and competent, even if they aren't. The rep is also

*Continued on page 2*

seen as warmer, more sincere and more likeable. Callers are much more willing to solve problems with someone that they like, rather than someone who seems like they don't care. Consequently, being a good listener makes the reps' job easier. On a personal note, listening helps reps understand their own world and make better decisions. Just because a rep has two ears, it does not make the person a good listener. It takes attention and interpretation. But the payoff is worth the effort.

**Question:** *We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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