

ARTICLE REPRINT

Listening In A Forest

It's likely that anyone who has been involved in sales for any period of time has attended some sort of sales training seminar. If not, they have at least read a book or two about selling. How many salespeople have you met who have ever attended a "listening" class, or read a book about listening?

I've known for some time that salespeople, generally, are among the world's poorest listeners. This, however, isn't merely my opinion.

A group of sales consultants some time ago actually used a stopwatch to measure the conversational pauses in sales conversations of experienced, professional salespeople. The results were startling.

The average time that elapses from the moment a salesperson asks a question, and then rephrases the question, asks another question, or answers his or her own question is less than one second. You cannot listen to an answer you won't wait to hear! A number of customer surveys cite poor listening skills as a major complaint customers have about salespeople.

Why aren't salespeople good listeners? It may be that they are so busy "selling" that they allow little or no time for listening. Sales training seminars and books have done a disservice to salespeople by counseling that the most important task of the salesperson is to ask good questions.

Good questions play an important role in most sales interactions, but if salespeople ask questions, and then immediately move onto another question or another topic before a customer answers, it's no wonder they are pegged as poor listeners by many buyers.

Listening isn't difficult, and it has come naturally to all of us for thousands of years. Just think about how you would listen if you suddenly found yourself alone, frightened and smack in the center of a dark, thick forest in the middle of the night.

Under these conditions you wouldn't need any particular listening skills or a disciplined approach to listening you might have learned from a book or in some classroom – you would *listen* with every cell in your body!

Standing alone in the forest, with adrenalin pumping through your veins, you would be acutely aware of every sound in the forest. You would hear the sounds of wild animals in

the distance, the scurrying of smaller animals around you, the wind sweeping through the trees, and the rapid pounding of your heartbeat accented by your accelerated breathing. Nothing would escape your attention.

If our ancestors didn't have all the tools they needed to listen effectively, and didn't use good listening skills to avoid the dangers of the forest, we wouldn't be here today writing or reading this article!

So, how can salespeople, and the rest of us, become good listeners? It may surprise you to learn that the last thing I would suggest to anyone interested in improving their ability to listen would be to attend a class or read a book that advertises specific techniques or a disciplined approach to listening. Discipline is the *last* thing required for effective listening.

Next month we will explore a back-to-basics approach to listening that works. What you read will probably strike you as counterintuitive, and may even shock you. It will most likely shake the foundation of everything you've been taught about listening.

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