

Listen Before You Talk:

Communicating With Customers and Colleagues

Editor's Note: This is part one of a two-part series.

Everyone is always talking about the need to enhance and improve communication. I have yet to work with clients who have not cited some form of communication deficits in their company. Whether it is complaints about misuse of e-mail or issues with language differences or simply the inability to articulate intelligently, clients continually add communication problems to the short-list of organizational ills. While my specialties are customer satisfaction and team building, I have certainly learned a lot about communication along the way. I am going to share some of those lessons in this two-part article.

The Three Basic Skills

First, there are basic communication skills that help build better relationships with customers and colleagues. Let's review three of those basics.

1) Shut up! You can't talk and listen at the same time, so, put a zipper on it (your mouth, that is). The more time we



spend listening, the easier it is to resolve conflicts with colleagues and customers. Listening requires that we tune in to the message. It also requires that we become aware of the internal distractions — those noisy little conversations in our heads. That internal chatter gets in the way of receiving the message.

2) Enough really is enough! Make your point clearly and concisely. Words are not like money — more is not necessarily better. You can achieve brevity and conciseness by thinking your message through before you deliver it.

Consider the main points. What is the “must-share” information? Brevity also shows respect for the listeners' time. It creates more

time for them to be active in the communication exchange.

3) Your face is telling the real story! The nonverbal cues that we send speak volumes. Do you typically look distracted or disinterested? Does your annoyance glare like a neon sign?

Pay attention to your posture, too. Those crossed arms can easily be interpreted as defensive. More is communicated through your nonverbal cues than through the spoken word, so be keenly aware of that body talk.

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Communicating With Customers

Now that we've reviewed the basics, let's talk about customer communication. How do you and your team consistently send messages that will be well received? Begin with print messages. Letters, advertisements, proposals and all other forms of written communication need to be error free. Nothing is more unprofessional than letters with grammar and spelling errors. Spend time and energy carefully editing everything that goes out so that it is all proofed and corrected before it leaves your office.

Consider the customers' time when composing written material. Get to the point! They'll appreciate a targeted, concise message.

Last, don't overdo it with written communication. The personal touch of a phone call conveys more warmth. It also gives you another opportunity to connect with the customer. So, if it's an issue that could easily be covered with a quick chat, by all means, call!

Just as important is communication between colleagues. It is essential that you treat your colleagues with the same con-

cern as your customers. When communicating with them, whether on the phone, via e-mail or in person, listen and reply in a way that will build bridges, not walls. When you have an opportunity to bridge the electronic divide, do so. It is so silly for people sitting three yards apart to use e-mail to discuss matters that could easily be resolved face to face.

Another point to remember when communicating with colleagues is that they, too, have a perspective — and that perspective may be very different from yours. So, just as you work to educate, inform and sell customers, you will need to do the same with some people within your own organization. Don't assume that they know what you're working on or that they know your pressures and deadlines. Use your talk time as an opportunity to educate colleagues. 

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