



Communication Skills for Relationship Selling

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Learn how to apply communication techniques to build your network.
- ✓ Identify the key elements in strong working relationships, and how you might put more of these elements in your working relationships.
- ✓ Recognize the key interpersonal skills and practice using them.

Communication Skills for Relationship Selling

Listening Exercise

The two most basic elements of good communication are listening to others and asking questions. The physical process of **hearing**, where sound enters your eardrum and is registered in your brain, is not the same as listening. **Listening** is more of an attitude, a desire to understand what is being communicated. It is an essential communication skill.

Many of us don't listen very well, and we fake it a lot of the time. We pretend we are listening when we really aren't, and that can create a whole lot of trouble with other people.

Active Listening

Active listening means that we try to understand things from the speaker's point of view. It includes letting the speaker know that we are listening and that we have understood what was said. This is not the same as **hearing**, which is a physical process, where sound enters the eardrum and messages are passed to the brain. Active listening can be described as an attitude that leads to listening for shared understanding.

When we make a decision to listen for total meaning, we listen for the content of what is being said as well as the attitude behind what is being said (is the speaker happy, angry, excited, sad, etc.).

Responding to Feelings

The content (the words spoken) is one thing, but the way that people feel really gives full value to the message. Responding to the speaker's feelings adds an extra dimension of listening. Are they disgusted and angry or in love and excited? Perhaps they are ambivalent! These are all feelings that you can reply to in your part of the conversation.

Reading Cues

Really listening means that we are also very conscious of the non-verbal aspects of the conversation.

- What are the speaker's facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture telling us?
- Is their voice loud or shaky?
- Are they stressing certain points?
- Are they mumbling or having difficulty finding the words they want to say?

Demonstration Cues

When you are listening to someone, these techniques will show a speaker that you are paying attention, providing you are not acting them out.

Physical indicators include making eye contact, nodding your head from time to time, and leaning into the conversation.

You can also give **verbal cues** or use phrases such as “Uh-huh,” “Go on,” “Really!” and “Then what?”

You can use **questions** for clarification or **summarizing statements**. Examples:

- “Do you mean they were charging \$4.00 for just a cup of coffee?”
- “So after you got a cab, got to the store, and found the right sales clerk, what happened then?”

Tips for Becoming a Better Listener

- **Make a decision to listen.** Close your mind to clutter and noise and look at the person speaking with you. Give them your undivided attention.
- **Don’t interrupt** people. Make it a habit to let them finish what they are saying. Respect that they have thoughts they are processing and speaking about, and wait to ask questions or make comments when they have finished.
- Keep your **eyes** focused on the speaker and your **ears** tuned to their voice. Don’t let your eyes wander around the room, just in case your attention does too.
- Carry a **notebook** or start a conversation file on your computer. Write down all the discussions that you have in a day. Capture the subject, who spoke more (were you listening or doing a lot of the talking?), what you learned in the discussion, as well as the who, what, when, where, why, and how aspects of it. Once you have conducted this exercise 8-10 times, you will be able to see what level your listening skills are currently at.
- Ask a few **questions** throughout the conversation. When you ask, people will know that you are listening to them, and that you are interested in what they have to say. Your ability to summarize and paraphrase will also demonstrate that you heard them.
- When you demonstrate good listening skills, they tend to be **infectious**. If you want people to communicate well at work, you have to set a high example.

Asking Questions

We spend a lot of our lives asking and answering questions, but we aren’t always aware of how we ask questions. Open questions in particular often give us difficulty, which is unfortunate since they are the most important ones for us to become skilled at using.

Closed questions can be answered with a single word or two or a simple yes or no. They can begin the closing process in a conversation, or provide confirmation of a detail, but they don’t usually lead to gathering more information. Where most people need more practice is asking the **open question**, those where the listener is given a chance to explain, to tell how they feel about an issue, or offer suggestions.

Open questions give us more information because:

- They encourage other people to talk
- We get opinions and ideas from others
- They can help us determine if people have interpreted what we say correctly
- They can help us arrive at consensus much more readily

Good open questions include:

- “What is your opinion?”
- “How do you think we should solve the problem?”
- “What would you do in my shoes?”
- “Tell me more about...”

Note: Be very careful about “**why**” questions. All too often these questions sound like accusations, and the listener immediately becomes defensive.

It is **easier to build relationships** with potential customers if we become skilled at asking questions that give us more information about that person and their wants and needs. The questions help us find common ground with someone, show the person we are interested in them, and we put the emphasis on them rather than us.

Good **customer-focused questions** can include:

- What do you think we can do about this?
- What would you like me to stop doing?
- Would it be helpful if I...?
- Supposing we were to...?
- Help me understand where you’re coming from?
- Let’s set a time when we can talk about the changes we’re prepared to make.
- I’m prepared to... Would that ease the situation?

Write down the names of three people that you consider good listeners.

Non-Verbal Messages

Non-verbal messages can be far more important than the words we say. The way we stand, what we do with our hands, the sound of our voice, the way we walk, and the expressions on our face can support, enhance, and even contradict what we say.

In our fast-paced world, we don't have time to get more than a quick snapshot of how a person looks before we make up our mind about them. They are making up their mind about us at the same time, so it is essential that our non-verbal messages are consistent with what we say verbally.

When we meet, what should we be watching for?

- Rejection of our comments (for example, the person physically moves further from us by sitting back in their chair or slouching in their seat)
- Anger on the face and in their posture
- Lack of understanding or comprehension (such as furrowed brows, pursed lips)

What are some other non-verbal signals we must be careful not to communicate?

- Boredom
- Anger (our own flushed face, or the way we put things on our desk will all convey our own mood)
- Arrogance

The face and the eyes are the most expressive means of non-verbal communication. Additional positive or negative messages are sent by your gestures, posture, and the space between you and the other person.

Positive body language is important to encourage conversation and support your positive intent in meeting with the other person. When we don't pay attention to our non-verbal signals, we often send mixed or confusing messages to people. Get control of your image by working on your non-verbal language.

Managing Your Messages

What are some things that we need to consider about the following aspects of our body language?

Facial Expression

Smiling

Eye Contact

Body Language

Voice

Your attitude is projected through your voice as well as your body language. Make sure your body language and voice always says, "I'm here to help as best I can."

When your voice is annoyed, impatient, or condescending, the other person may become angered or angrier. Speak with a calm, firm, caring, soothing tone. Your communications will be more relaxed, more pleasant, and better understood.

The speed and rhythm of your speech is important as well. Clear communication includes appropriate pauses and inflections to support the words.

Qualities of a Good Voice

- Awake and interested
- A smile in your voice
- Straightforward language, without jargon
- Glad the person called or visited
- Easy to understand with moderate volume and rate
- Well-modulated, varied tone

Managing the Mingling

The underlying principle of networking is that people prefer to do business with, to hire, or to buy from, people they know.

Networking can not only help you get what you want; it can also add immeasurably to your polish and sophistication. Attending meetings of business organizations or community groups and getting to know new people gives you greater self-confidence, builds your people skills, and offers you opportunities to interact with successful business people. Networking exposes you to new ideas and helps you keep current on what is going on around you.

It's important to flex your networking muscles as much as possible. Many people network only when they are looking for a job or when they first get into sales. The trick is to network constantly and to keep your contacts current, so they will be there for you whenever you need them.

Two things to get right include:

- Remembering names
- Your handshake

The Handshake

The Professional Handshake

During the important first few minutes of a new relationship, a handshake is usually the only body contact between two people. It can communicate warmth, a genuine concern for the other person, and an image of either strength or gentleness. It can also communicate indifference and weakness. Developing a professional handshake is perhaps one of the most valuable business skills you can ever cultivate.

The message you communicate with your handshake is determined by five factors.

Degree of Firmness

Your grip should be firm, rather than weak. However, you don't want your handshake to be painful to the other person. Consideration is appreciated. Be especially considerate if you are shaking hands with someone in a receiving line who has many more hands to shake, someone who is wearing a lot of rings, or someone who is obviously elderly and perhaps fragile.

Dryness of Hand

We all prefer to shake a hand that is dry. While you typically don't want to obviously dry your hands before greeting someone, this is perfectly acceptable if you have been holding a cold glass. Similarly, if

you are at the buffet table and have been eating, it is expected that you would wipe your hand on your napkin before extending it to be shaken.

Depth of Grip

A handshake is palm to palm. Generally you will place your hand so that the web between your thumb and forefinger meets the web of the other person's hand, briefly. Your hand remains perpendicular. If your palm is facing up, this may be construed as a sign of submissiveness. Similarly, if your palm is on top, it can be seen as a sign of aggressiveness.

Duration of Grip

The perfect handshake is about 3 seconds. You can gently pump once or twice but this is not necessary. Then pull back your hand, even if you are still talking.

Eye Contact

While this will vary from culture to culture, in North America we expect the person shaking our hand to make eye contact with us.

Tips for Success

Have something to say as you shake hands, if possible. It doesn't require anything witty. It may even be the old stand-by, "Pleased to meet you." However, these few words set the stage for some small talk that can be the beginning of a new business relationship.

Grasping the top of the other person's hand with your other hand, so that their hand is enveloped in yours, may very well signal warmth and affection. However, this may be seen as patronizing and too familiar for an introductory handshake. Save this handshake for a meeting with an old friend.

Business Card Etiquette

Don't leave home without your cards. However, **don't hand out your business card to everyone you know**, as if you are spreading the wonder of who you are. First, see if people need or want your card. Handing out your cards like chewing gum makes you seem like a pushy salesperson – not the image you want to project.

Make sure your business cards are clean and in **good condition**. They are a part of your business image. A business card that is dirty or curled at the edges leaves a poor first impression. Use a business card case to keep your cards clean and fresh.

When your cards are **damaged or out of date**, print new ones. If you start crossing out information on a card and write new information on top of it, it makes it difficult to read and looks messy. Business cards are part of your image. Make sure yours are well designed and up to date.

When you receive a card, take a moment to look at it. Make a positive comment about some aspect of the card: the logo, the company name, or business location. This shows respect for the other person, and demonstrates your interest in them. As well, this is an excellent way for you to find out more about them, such as their job title. It also helps you remember their name, or reminds you of their name in case you forgot – a very common occurrence.

If someone hands you a card that you don't want, **don't refuse** to take it. Accept it, look at it, and put it in a pocket. Throw it out later.

After you've looked at the card, place it carefully in a card case, or in a front pocket – not a back pocket. Treat the card with **respect**. This includes being careful about writing on people's cards. Although this may seem contrary to current thoughts on networking, in many cultures (specifically Asia), a business card is part of the overall persona, and should be treated with respect. People spend time and money designing a professional card and may not appreciate you writing across it. If you need to record information, write on the back, not the front. Ask first, "Do you mind if I write on your card?"

Handy Hands

Stand up and move about the room, shaking hands with several of your colleagues. Candidly evaluate the other's handshake by using a 1 through 5 rating scale, based on the five factors listed above. (1 indicates a very ineffective handshake, while 5 is a very effective handshake.)

Tell the other people your reason for giving them the scores you did, and listen as they explain the score they gave your handshake. After each evaluation, before shaking hands with the next person, attempt to correct any deficiencies the others have pointed out to you. Keep practicing until a comfortable, confident handshake has become second nature to you.

Small Talk

Small talk has a bad reputation. Sometimes we think of it as the poor cousin to a "real" conversation, and in certain cultures it is not valued at all. However, without small talk, many of us will never get to those "real" conversations. Small talk helps us put others at ease and make them comfortable. Small talk breaks the ice and goes a long way toward furthering a relationship.

The ability to make small talk can help us build business, develop our networking skills, get friends, maintain relationships, and even find us jobs.

When you are out with a gathering of friends, do you find it easy to just chat away without thinking of what to say next?

How about when you get thrown in with a group of people you don't know?

Where do you find topics of conversation that you can bring up at the next party or office get-together?

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Where can you get some good conversational openers?

[illegible]

What are some ways you have successfully started conversations with people you didn't know?

What Works?

- As important as what you say is how you say it. Wear a smile. It is always becoming to your voice.
- If you find yourself alone, look for others who look similarly disengaged or join a group with an odd number of people. You could also pass the cheese tray or sample the buffet table.
- One tip that often works is to imagine you are host or hostess. Now you will be less worried about yourself and more concerned about other people.

What Doesn't Work?

- Don't attempt to make a derogatory remark under the guise of humor (that's sarcasm).
- Don't try to shock. Some people are hard to shock anyway, and others may be shocked in a very negative way, so it just isn't worth the risk.
- Lengthy emotional debates will not contribute to the gathering. Death, politics, religion, illness, and children usually head the list of subjects to be avoided. There are, of course, exceptions to every rule, such as when you must express your condolences to someone when someone has been ill or have somebody they care for who is ill.

Exit Lines

No matter how seriously you try, not all conversations can be made into engaging discussions. Eventually even good conversations may come to an end. Tell the other person how much you have enjoyed speaking with them and go on to meet other people.

What are some exit lines that let you bring a conversation to a close?

Networking

Organizing Your Network

Once you start meeting people, you should organize your network.

- List the people you want to contact over the next three months.
- Consider how much time and money you have available to devote to networking.
- If you don't have business cards, get some!
- If you collect a card, note the date you met, where, and at what event. Enter them into your database if you have one.
- Do you need to do any follow-up? If so, put the details into your calendar.
- Create a networking notebook. This can be a handwritten file or a computer document. Keep track of those contacts you want to cultivate.

Networking Tips

Sometimes when we enter a room full of strangers, we look around and everybody is already talking. What do we do besides stand there and look foolish? How do you get the conversation going?

- Set a reasonable **goal** for the number of new people to talk with each day...and do it!
- At gatherings, **limit the time** you spend with friends and people you already know. They will probably want to network too.
- Prepare and rehearse a brief **description** of who you are and what you do, something that takes only three seconds to say. What is your message?

- Exchange **business cards** with everyone who is appropriate and interested. If you don't have business cards and your role is to be out networking, then you need to get some cards so potential customers can reach you. If you go to networking events where people don't have cards (which would be rare, but possible), have a notebook or PDA handy to collect their details, and at least get the name of their company, and if possible, their telephone number.
- **Use your time effectively** if you are in transit or lining up for meals at a business or social event. It is smart to network at training or organizational sessions, and some of our most interesting networking is done at meals or in hallways.
- If you have a **name tag**, wear it on the upper left side of your chest. This makes it easier to read when you are shaking hands, and that part of your clothing doesn't wrinkle when you reach across to grasp someone's hand.

Keep Wayne Dyer's words in mind: networking is about developing relationships, and out of those relationships can come the things you want in life. Networking means sending what we have and what we know out into the system and having it reciprocated continually through the network.

Business authority Marilyn Moats advises that, "Networking is just another way of organizing your luck. Who you meet today may very well determine where you are tomorrow."

Case Study

John Rose owns a small printing plant in town. He believes that the big tourism attraction on the outskirts of town must have some printing needs he could meet. One day, on the way back from delivering an order to a client, he stopped in at the administration office and asked who made the decisions about print advertising. When they told him it was Jane Collins, he asked where her office was located and immediately marched back to talk with her.

He knocked at the door, but he could see she was busy and didn't look up so he went on in and introduced himself. She looked up like she was a little annoyed at being interrupted, and looked at her watch. He decided he'd better hurry and tell her as much information as he could, without delay. He told her about what he could do to help her—brochures, newsletters, site maps, place mats for the dining room—and how quickly they could get them printed, as well as the quantities he thought she would need and what that would cost her. He especially emphasized what a great deal he was giving her.

He handed her his card and told her to call him if she ever changed her mind. He left the building feeling he had been snubbed and mentally wrote her off his list of possible clients.

Discussion Questions

What do you think John might have done differently?

If you were giving John some friendly advice, what might you suggest he do now?

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Dyer, Wayne. Everyday Wisdom. Hay House, 2005.*
- ✓ *Gitomer, Jeffery. Little Black Book of Connections: 6.5 Assets for Networking Your Way to Rich Relationships . Bard Press, 2006.*
- ✓ *—. The Sales Bible. Wiley, 2003.*
- ✓ *Godin, Seth. Linchpin. Portfolio Hardcover, 2010.*