

10
QUESTIONS



How to communicate with customers

Quickly improve your customer communications to improve sales.

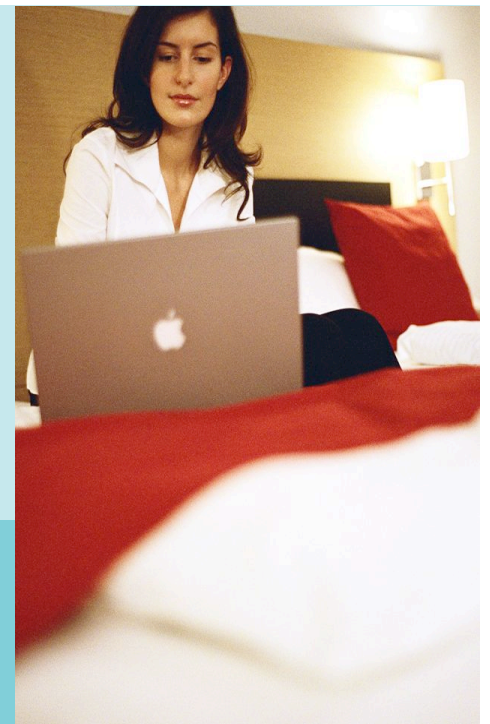
Communication is at the heart of many service provisions. Some, like consultancy do not exist in the absence of conversation, so the way we communicate with our customers or potential customers is everything.

Customer communications matter, people's expectations and demands of customer service is continually increasing so the companies that are successful focus on customer service and ensure a satisfying customer experience. We know it from our own personal experience, being very ready to return to the company that exceeded our expectations the next time we have a requirement for that product or service.

Check out your customer communication skills using the self assessment overleaf and then reflect on the why each question has been included, and what you could do to improve.



"The amateur salesperson sells products; the professional sells solutions to needs and problems. It's a totally different approach."
(from 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' Stephen R. Covey)



Think about how you communicate. Score each statement: 1: Not like me 2: Sometimes like me 3: Always like me.

		Score
1	❖ I like to listen as much as talk.	
2	❖ In conversation, I am interested in what people feel about things.	
3	❖ I give people time and space in conversation to make their point.	
4	❖ I often ask questions to get to the bottom of an issue.	
5	❖ I find it easy to 'step into another persons shoes' and see their point of view on an issue.	
6	❖ I am easily understood – I speak clearly at a steady pace.	
7	❖ I use my body language to influence people.	
8	❖ I use my voice tone to influence people.	
9	❖ I can build a rapport with people easily.	
10	❖ I often take the lead with a customer to achieve a mutually satisfactory outcome.	

Interpreting the result

Add up your total score here

- 10 -17: Your customer communication skills need work. Start by thinking about your attitude to people, your communications skills and how you conduct yourself in business conversation.
- 18 -25: You have strengths and weaknesses in your customer communication skills. Start by reviewing your lower scores and find new behaviours and ways of communicating that you can practice and gradually improve your habits.
- 26 -30: You have high level customer communication skills. To give your assessment more strength, ask some key people to complete the questionnaire on you and to give you some useful feedback.

1

The listening process

Most people assume communication is about speaking. However to be a good communicator you need to firstly be a good listener.

The listening process has three parts:

Hearing – this is the physical sensory part, where sound waves travel from the speaker into our ear to our ear drums.

Listening – this is the perception part, our body and spirit being attentive and engaged with the speaker to maximise intake of information. Giving people time and space to speak is foremost. Secondly, through our body language we need to be an active listener – this is discussed later.

Interpreting – this is the cognitive part, where our brain receives the information and starts to make sense of it. If we jump to conclusions we stop listening and interrupt the speaker. If we quickly find the speaker boring we switch our listening off and the conversation dries up. How you interpret information therefore plays a big part in determining the power of your listening skills...and therefore your powers to understand people.



2

Why it is important to listen first then speak

You walk into a Doctor's surgery and begin to tell him your problem. He interrupts you within seconds saying 'yes, yes' and writes you a prescription telling you what is wrong with you and what you need to do.

Would you accept the services of this Doctor? Would you trust his diagnosis and treatment?

Fortunately for many people in the world, our need for basic survival has been taken care of. We have progressed towards wanting to meet our psychological needs and the most fundamental is the need for security, acceptance and understanding. This starts with genuine listening and yet most people only listen with an intent to respond, not an intent to understand. If we do listen, we either pretend or we selectively listen, that is, we listen to bits and make assumptions.

Like the Doctor, we have a ready made solution before we have truly heard the problem. We prescribe before we diagnose. 'I know how you feel', 'Why not try this?', 'Yes, I had the same experience', 'I wouldn't do that if I were you'. This is not the basis to building trust, confidence or to create a position of credibility and influence.

If we want to create trust, confidence, credibility and influence with our customers we must work hard to listen genuinely in order to fully understand them. The customer must also perceive that we are doing so – it must be visible in our conduct and manner. We need to diagnose first...then prescribe.

Only once we have understood the needs, concerns, issues and feelings of our customers can we begin to serve them, meet their needs and resolve their problems. We will also be in a position of trust and credibility in order to influence and lead them.

3

How to powerfully listen and understand

For most customer situations, actively listening will suffice. This means fully concentrating and putting effort into the listening process.

- If you have the opportunity, prepare well with a structure based around important open questions.
- Build rapport and create a suitable environment for communication.
- Take the initiative and make communication two-way and involving.
- Summarise regularly to establish clear understanding.
- You may need to make notes. Let the person know you are doing so.
- Focus on the customer and resist external distractions.
- Keep an open mind and your emotions positive - don't be defensive or rush to making excuses.
- Use the right voice tone to build trust and interest in the customer.
- Analyse what is being said through how people say things and body language.
- Look comfortable, use encouraging body language, maintain eye contact.
- Allow silence and give people personal space.

For more tricky customer situations, such as a problem or complaint, practice empathetic listening. This involves putting yourself into the customer's shoes, in fact, putting yourself into the customer's mind. We need to see things from their perspective – not our own. We need to relate to their feelings on matters. We need to appreciate there is a human dynamic to any customer communication as well as the technical aspects of our product or service.

- To help do this, you can:
- Repeat back key phrases that they say in a supportive tone.
- Rephrase / summarise the content of their communication to check understanding.
- Reflect / summarise the feelings in their communication to check understanding.



Keep coming back to this document and gradually work on building increasingly proficient communications skills. Always have these principles in mind when speaking with your customers to provide a service that they keep coming back to. It will take practice, but the more customer conversation you enter into, the more sales will flow into your business.