



Listening: a skill, an art, or what? Part I

Lou Holtz once said, “Success comes from listening. I have never learned anything from talking.”

In other words, listening is the key to success in everything we do. It is a fundamental building block in creating trust and attraction with everyone, from family and friends, to prospects and clients. If this is true, why do we find it so difficult to listen first, and then talk? The challenge is that listening is two-way communication. It is the process of taking in information from a prospect or client (without judging), clarifying your understanding of what you heard and responding in a way that invites the communication to continue. It takes time and patience.

“Active” listening can ensure the two-way communication process is achieved. The concept of active listening is simple, but not easy to do. However, the benefits of mastering the technique are far-reaching. Beyond making a connection with prospects and clients, active listening can:

- **Reduce stress.** We typically feel less stressed when someone listens carefully to us. Also, we feel less stressed if we are good listeners because we don't have to be “on” with something clever or insightful to say.
- **Reduce meeting time.** We can get to the heart of an issue with a prospect or client much faster if we listen rather than talk and miss what is important to them.





• **Touch the principle of reciprocity.**

That is, give first so that you may receive later. Listening is a form of giving. Dr. Stephen Covey has suggested that we should “make deposits into someone’s emotional bank account before we make withdrawals.” Active listening is an emotional deposit.

William James, the father of American psychology, stated that “the deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be understood and appreciated.”

In this fast paced, increasingly impersonal world, everyone has a deep desire to be understood, yet few people are willing to take the time to truly understand another human being. Your ability to actively listen can differentiate you in the competitive financial services industry. This is critical because consumers tend to recognize differences, not similarities.

If the benefits of active listening are so clear and universal, then why is it so difficult to do? Here are two potential barriers to successful listening:

1. Studies show people can speak at an average rate of 125 to 150 words per minute. People can listen at a rate of 500 to 600 words per minute. Because our listening speed is much faster than our speaking speed, there is a lot of “dead time” in the conversation. Quite often, we fill that void by daydreaming or forming rebuttals. To become a better listener, we should use that time to process what the speaker has just said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding.

2. We have a psychological need to be understood and appreciated. In an attempt to build rapport and fulfill this need, we focus on expressing our own thoughts and feelings rather than focusing on the prospect’s or client’s feelings and concerns. The key to getting to the “inner person” is to be interested, rather than interesting.

The first step to becoming a more

| | Almost Always | Often | Sometimes | Seldom | Almost Never |
|--|---------------|-------|-----------|--------|--------------|
| 1. I maintain eye contact with the person talking to me. | | | | | |
| 2. I allow others to finish expressing their thoughts without interrupting them. | | | | | |
| 3. I paraphrase what the other person has said to ensure my understanding of his message. | | | | | |
| 4. I refrain from thinking of other things or daydreaming while the other person is talking. | | | | | |
| 5. I use non-verbal cues such as head-nodding to encourage the other person to continue. | | | | | |
| 6. I listen for vocal tone and feeling as well as words. | | | | | |
| 7. I refrain from forming rebuttals in my head while the other person is talking. | | | | | |
| 8. I “tune out” sounds and other external distractions when listening to someone speak. | | | | | |
| 9. I pay attention to the other person’s non-verbal cues that may contradict his message. | | | | | |
| 10. I refrain from engaging in activities while someone is talking to me. | | | | | |
| RESPONSE TOTAL | | | | | |
| | x5 | x4 | x3 | x2 | x1 |
| SUB-SCORE | | | | | |
| TOTAL SCORE | | | | | |

SCORING ASSESSMENT

42-50 = Effective Listener
 34-41 = Developing Listener
 26-33 = Inconsistent Listener

18-25 = Surviving Listener
 0-18 = Struggling Listener

effective listener is to assess your skills and habits. Above is a brief quiz to help determine your listening effectiveness. Reflect on your professional and personal interactions. For each item, indicate how frequently you exhibit a particular behavior by placing an “X” in the box. Add each column to get each “Response Total.” Multiply each response total as noted and add your sub-scores to get your total score.

No matter the outcome of your assessment, remember that listening is a learned skill that can be greatly improved with consistent effort and practice. The first step toward behavior change is awareness.

In the second segment of this two-part series, we will explain how active listening can help you connect at a deeper level with prospects and clients.

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