



Mastering Technical Sales

2037 Trowbridge Drive

Newtown, PA 18940

Phone +1-215-431-1552

John@masteringtechnicalsales.com

www.masteringtechnicalsales.com

John Care, Managing Director

Shut Up And Listen!

Let's Hear It For The Ears

I am often asked what the #1 skill of any Sales Engineer should be - and my standard answer "knows when to shut up and listen"! Maybe it is because, as SE's, we tend to hang around salespeople too much, but we all have this tendency to confuse talking with selling.

Some of the most effective selling I have ever seen occurred when the sales team spoke for about 5 minutes of a 60-minute call. In effect, with just a few subtle nudges and prompts, the customer "sold" themselves. Communication is a two-way street, so when the customer is speaking, you should be listening and not thinking about "what am I going to say/sell/show next?"

Why And How You Should Shut Up And Listen

1. **Because you ask questions.** Extensive scientific studies have proved that the best way to gain information from another person is to ask questions (!) As we only remember about 30-50% of what we hear, you need to start working harder when your customer is speaking.
2. **Practice Active Listening.** This is a phrase much beloved by HR personnel and is very relevant. Active listening is going beyond hearing the words and trying to understand the meaning. That means focusing on the individual talking and eliminating distractions, both internal and external.
3. **Eliminate Passive Thinking.** The instant your mind starts to prepare a rebuttal, an argument, or a counter to an objection while the customer is still speaking - you are not paying attention. We have all been in that situation when speaking to someone and knowing they are not 100% "there". Don't do that to the customer!

4. **Use The Non-Verbal Signals.** Look at your customer, make frequent eye contact, nod occasionally and smile. Provide encouragement to the speaker to keep going with a few well-placed comments such as "yes, ok and uh-huh". Pay attention to your body language to ensure you are open and inviting.
5. **Do Not Interrupt.** Except in severe cases of time constraints or total off-topic conversations - let the customer finish their train of thought. This applies whether the customer is answering your question or asking you one. If in doubt, pause for a second (and make sure your rep does not fill the silence).



I have a terrible habit of interrupting people just at the end of their questions, which is highly irritating. I now place my hands on each other or clasp them together and am training myself NOT to speak when my hands are touching. I must consciously separate my hands before I speak.

6. **Use Verbal Feedback.** Although nods, smiles and "uh-huh's" are nice, you need to speak up sometimes and either ask a question or provide a comment. Using a variation of "What I just heard / So there are no assumptions / Just to confirm that.." is very effective. Don't be afraid to ask "what exactly do you mean by?" when the customer uses an ambiguous or common term - like **cloud**.
7. **Resist The Temptations.** When the customer says "tell me about your product" or "tell me about your company" resist the urge to give them the 10-15 minute story. Until you have asked some questions, performed some active listening and showed that you care about them - they really will not care about what you say. Remember that prescription before diagnosis is malpractice - both in sales and medicine.
8. **Remove The Emotion.** This may not apply to a customer situation, but can to an internal conversation with your manager, a peer or a salesperson. At times, you may find yourself responding emotionally to someone else's statement, maybe because of criticism or lack of trust. Instead of immediately launching into a defense, practice being a great presales engineer and get information and clarification.



Say, "I may not have correctly understood that because I'm taking it personally. I felt you said <paraphrase>, is that really what you meant?"

9. **Don't Fix The Problem Too Soon.** Charles Green of TrustedAdvisor.com notes that if you type "men do not listen" into Google you will get over 600,000 hits. "Women do not listen" generates over 300,000 and many of those are "women do not listen to their inner feeling". In school, we learn that getting the correct answer first gets the prize - but that is not always the case in selling. First listen, and then make sure you understand, and then seek permission to fix the problem.



For an SE, this happens all the time during Discovery. A customer tells you about a business issue and you dive deep into it. Wrong! Next question is "what other issues should we also talk about today?". Then, because we have been an SE for 5+ years we know how to fix the customers problem.

So we tell him, before he has finished telling us about it. That doesn't make you look smart and credible, it makes you look arrogant and a "know-it-all". Just a few seconds of patience can fix that.

The Call To Action

Make the effort to really listen to the customer and understand the meaning of what she is saying (try it with your friends and family too). Practice active listening - Google it for even more information and look at some of the online HR classes your company may offer. It may seem strange that you need training to help you to listen better, yet it will undoubtedly make you a better SE. Next sales call - mentally record how much time you spend speaking and presenting versus listening.

So get out there, shut up and listen! Good things will happen.

"It is the province of knowledge to speak. And it is the privilege of wisdom to listen"

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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