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Listen and Earn

A veteran entrepreneur explains why it's important to relearn the lost art of listening to customers.

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Street Smarts

Listening to customers is becoming a lost art. That's good news for people who still know how to do it

Let me tell you about an absolutely foolproof way to increase your sales: start listening to your customers. It happens so rarely these days that you can actually gain a competitive advantage just by doing it.

I'll give you an example. I have a company, CitiStorage, that's in the archive-retrieval business. We store boxes for a variety of customers, including law firms. One day I was showing two people from a large New York law firm through our facility, hoping they would give us their business. We hadn't gone too far before one of them, the office manager, said, "By the way, we want to keep all of our boxes in numerical order. If you take one out, we want it put back in exactly the same spot."

Now, normally, we don't file boxes in a particular order. Like most of our competitors, we have a bar-coding system, which allows us to find boxes instantaneously, no matter where they've been stored. But I always try to give customers what they want, and this potential customer had just told me what she wanted. I said, "Fine, no problem."

She looked at the other person, then back at me. "Aren't you going to tell me I'm crazy?" she asked.

"You didn't ask my opinion," I said. "You told me what you wanted, and I'm sure you have your reasons."

She started to laugh. "Well, everywhere else we've gone, they've tried to talk us out of it. You're the first person who just said yes."

We got the account.

In telling this story, I don't mean to suggest that listening to customers is easy. On the contrary, it's the most difficult part of the selling process. Why? Because all kinds of extraneous issues get in the way.

For one thing, you often believe you know what's best for the customer, and sometimes you may even be right. I can readily understand, for example, why my competitors tried to discourage the law firm from keeping the boxes in order. From a storage company's point of view, it's an inefficient practice. You get nothing but hassles, with no apparent benefit, and the customer winds up paying more for the service. The other companies may well have thought they were offering the law firm a better alternative. There was just one problem: it wasn't what the

customer wanted.

And when you're selling, your entire focus should be on figuring out what your customers want and then, if possible, giving it to them. You don't really know what's best for them, after all. How could you? In any situation, there are numerous factors of which you are completely unaware. I'm not arguing against helping customers find better ways to deal with their needs. I do it all the time-- *after* we've built a relationship. In the beginning, however, it's too easy to confuse your needs with their needs, particularly when you're trying to make a sale.

Pride also gets in the way of listening to customers. As a salesperson, you naturally want to emphasize the best things about your company, and why shouldn't you? You're proud of them, and justifiably so. You want people to know about the special services you offer or the hot new product line or the state-of-the-art computer system in which you've just made a six-figure investment.

So what happens? You oversell. You don't hear the customers when they say the computer system isn't important to them. You think it *should* be important to them. You know that if they knew more, it *would* be important to them. So you keep on touting its benefits, and you don't notice that their eyes have glazed over. You've lost them.

Then, of course, there's ego. Recently, I was giving a tour to a prospective customer who looked around at all the boxes and said, "Gee, are you afraid of having a fire in this place?" Now, in fact, I'm not afraid of a fire, and I might well have responded, "No, we're protected. It's not a concern." But that would have been my ego talking. When a customer asks such a question, it's because *she* is worried about a fire. Why she's worried is none of my business. The point is that I need to respect her fear, not minimize it. So my answer was, "Yes, certainly, I've thought about the danger of fire, and let me show you what we've done about it."

Some people might say I was being disingenuous. I prefer to think I was being unselfish. I was putting my ego aside and responding to the concerns of the customer.

And that's my goal as a salesperson. I don't worry about closing sales. I worry about making customers feel as though they've been heard, understood, and responded to. I want them to leave with a warm and fuzzy feeling. If they do, the sales will follow.

You can't make customers feel warm and fuzzy if you don't listen, if you don't shut out all your preconceptions and prejudices, your agendas and opinions, and hear what they're really saying. Doing that doesn't come naturally. It requires discipline and practice. You have to develop routines to block out the distractions.

I myself sit quietly for a couple of minutes before taking customers on a tour of our facility, and I try to make my mind a blank slate. I repeat over and over, "No preconceptions. No preconceptions." I wipe out any thoughts I might have that would keep me from hearing or observing the customers. Yes, I'm going to talk about our product, emphasizing what I consider to be the important features and benefits, but I'm not going to push anything on people. I'm going to find out what they want. I'm going to look for the clues, verbal and nonverbal. I'm going to listen to what they say and what they don't say, and I'm going to respond accordingly.

And it works. I watch, I listen, I hear, and I find out amazing things. What's important to customers is often inconceivable to me. Sometimes a comment will be made about an issue on which I have a strong opinion, and I'll have to remind myself, "Don't take sides. Don't take sides." So it does take some effort to avoid being distracted.

The selling part, on the other hand, is easy. I just tell people what they want to hear. It's all true information, mind you, and not misleading, but I emphasize the parts they're most interested in. I don't have to create a sales pitch. My customers tell me what to say.

There is, unfortunately, one drawback to this approach to selling. Although I firmly believe anyone can learn it, I still haven't figured out how to teach it. Perhaps I don't explain myself clearly enough.

Then again, maybe people just don't listen.

[Norm Brodsky](#) is a veteran entrepreneur whose six businesses include a former *Inc.* 100 company and a three-time *Inc.* 500 company. Readers are encouraged to send him questions he can address in future columns. This column was coauthored by Bo Burlingham.

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