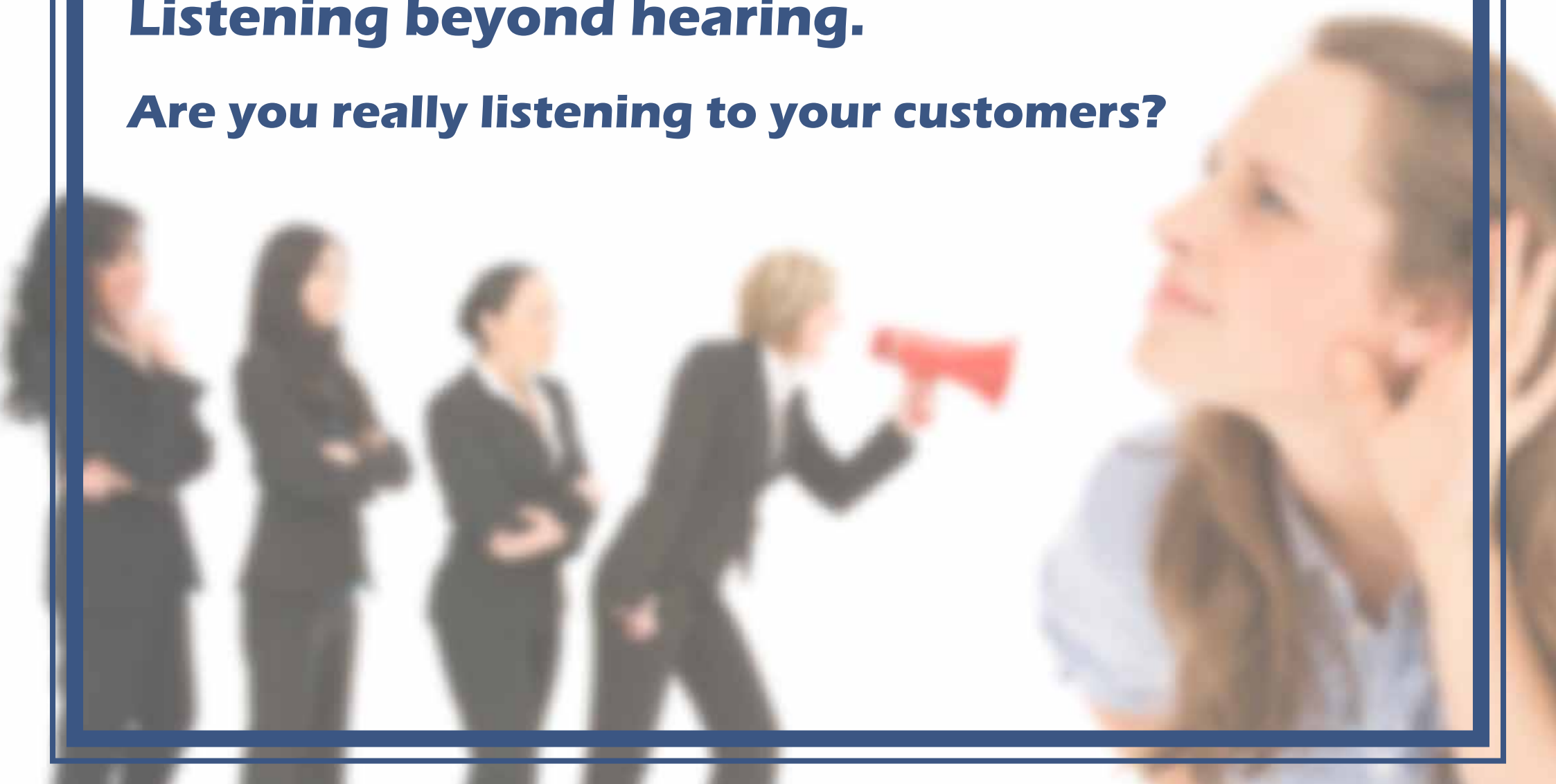


**Listening beyond hearing.**

**Are you really listening to your customers?**



## What does it mean to really listen?

Listening skills are required in everyday life. You spend a significant amount of time listening, but like any skill effective listening takes practice. There are substantial differences between just hearing and really listening.

**Hearing** is an involuntary physical response to your environment. Think about how well you screen out background noise when you are working.

**Listening**, on the other hand, is a sophisticated communication skill which can be mastered only with considerable practice.

People often hear but do not actually listen. If you ask people what they heard 30 minutes earlier, most people will have retained just a few words.

People remember approximately 20% of what they hear. They forget 50% within 30 minutes and forget 80% within two weeks. If we actually listen to someone, then our recall of what is being said rises substantially.

## So why is it important to listen carefully?

**A professional attitude and behaviour** underpins all organisations' approach to business and so by listening carefully and showing that you have understood what has been said demonstrates the importance of your customer and the level of respect you have for them, creating a positive environment to continue the conversation. How often have you felt like walking away from a shop counter because you felt you were being ignored?

Effective listening allows you to **understand and prioritise the information** you receive. A customer may tell you what is going on in their business, details about their performance and their customers, maybe even details about your

competition. Some of this information will be really useful, even crucial whilst some will be less valuable.

Careful listening of the customers' words, intonation and energy enables you to **assess the relative importance of the information and prioritise the order** in which you address each of these facts. This makes you much more effective.

By listening carefully you will **improve your recall**, enhancing your ability to relate to your customer and your working relationship with them.

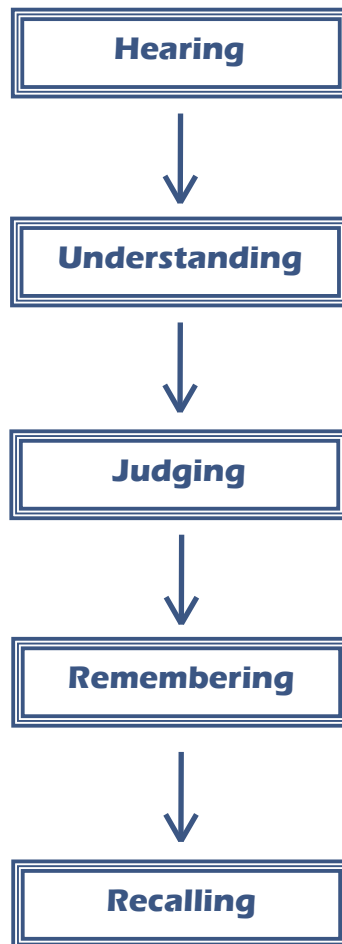
You could be **perceived as unprofessional** when asking a customer to repeat simple information because you have not listened, it may demonstrate the lack of importance given to the customer and create the wrong environment for business to be secured.

Listening demonstrates that you have **received and understood the message**. You need to find ways of ensuring that the customer is confident that you have comprehended what they have said. This can be achieved through repeating back key statements and asking for clarification of what has been heard.

You can also show you have taken on board and understood the information through the use of your body language.



## The listening process



## The listening process

### Hearing

To listen to someone, you first have to be able to hear the person clearly and concentrate, listening to what is being said not what you think is being said. Conversations should take place in a quiet location free from distractions. Stay focused and do not let your mind wander.

**Understanding** - The next part of listening happens when you interpret the meaning of what was said. You can check your understanding and reassure your customer by asking questions emphasising that you have listened and understood.

**Judging** - When you have clarified your understanding, think about whether it makes sense. Do you believe what you have heard? You do this by taking a step back. For example you may ask yourself, *“Why is my customer telling me about the problems he is having winning this type of case? It could be a gentle hint or a request for help. Maybe it is because we haven’t given them the training that they’ve asked for.”* Or *“Is there anything we are doing that creates this issue. Is there something else we can do to help for example, a business intelligence toolkit?”*

**Remembering** - Finally, effective listening involves remembering what has been said. The most accurate way to remember something is to write down information. Notes from a discussion will last as long as you keep them; unlike your memory which unfortunately fades with time.

**Recalling** - Recalling is the process of retrieving memories and so you may need prompts to help you to do so. An example of this would be if you are asked the name of a client’s PA and you can’t quite grasp it. You might say, *“It’s on the tip of my tongue.”* You know you know the client’s PA’s name, but you can’t quite remember it right now! However, if someone reminds you of the name, your memory will unlock the vault and the name of the PA (and thoughts about them) will come flooding back.



## Active Listening

People speak at 100 to 175 words per minute, but they can listen effectively at 600 to 800 words per minute. Since only a part of our mind is used for listening, it is easy to let your mind drift while listening to someone. The cure for this is 'active listening', listening with a purpose. It happens naturally when we are very interested in what someone is saying; both our verbal responses and our body language leave the speaker in no doubt that we are listening.

You can train yourself to actively listen to any speaker in order to maximise the quality of your listening, both in terms of the effect it has on you and those we are engaging with. The benefit is that actively listening makes us listen better and therefore makes the speaker feel valued and understood.

Actively listening takes the same amount or even more energy than speaking as it requires you to focus on the words and feelings of the sender to gain a full understanding. It should be used when you need to gather important information such as obtaining directions, understanding your customer's requirements needs or feelings, solving problems, or showing support.

It requires the receiver to hear the various messages, understand the meaning, clarify that they have understood and then demonstrate to the speaker that they have understood. Just repeating what is being said is not sufficient to let your customer know that they are in good hands. You must also demonstrate that you understand what is being said.

In the workplace, you need to develop your skills of active listening. Active listening means thinking and acting in ways that connect you with the speaker and show the speaker that you are listening and understand. It encourages further and deeper communication.

## What makes an active listener?

- Spending more time listening than talking and allowing the other speaker to freely talk and not dominating the conversation.
- Not finishing the sentences of others
- Never daydreaming or becoming preoccupied with their own thoughts when others talk
- Starting to formulate a response to a question but is able to stay focussed on the discussion in hand
- Providing feedback but without interrupting
- Asking open-ended questions and then walking through the analysis by summarising in order to cover all the relevant factors of the conversation
- Keeping the conversation focussed on what the speaker is saying ... NOT on what interests them
- Taking brief notes which forces them to concentrate on what is being said

## How to make yourself an active listener

There are many skills involved in active listening all of which must be employed to maximise effectiveness.

### Before you start the conversation:

**Minimise external distractions** - You need to stay focussed if you want to get the most out of a conversation and as far as possible try to eliminate noise and distractions by recognising and guarding against the things that prevent you from listening properly. There may be distractions in the environment such as background noise, pictures that capture your attention, people walking past.

In the short term make sure your equipment works properly or move away from your colleagues if they are talking too loudly or perhaps use another room. In the longer term you need to find a more permanent solution, maybe demonstrating to whoever is responsible for the disruption the effect it is having on your performance.



**Focus your mind** - If your mind easily wanders make sure can consciously re-focus your attention on the speaker as you need to give them your undivided attention. Establish what may cause your attention to waiver; it could be due to physiological factors such as being overly hot, cold, hungry, or thirsty, or for psychological reasons such as your emotions. If you feel your mind wandering, change the position of your body and concentrate on the speaker's words.

#### **During the conversation:**

**Take notes of the key points that you hear** - Taking notes acts as a reminder, showing you are listening, slows down the pace of the conversation and allows the other person more time to talk. Taking notes is also a very effective way of controlling the conversation.

Have a prepared format for your note taking with you, which lists the questions you might ask and is used to capture notes. This provides the added advantage of having preparation at hand to refer to, to aid your memory of the things to discuss. Write notes next to the questions and mark the page to remind you to return to a specific point later if relevant.

**Listen more than you speak** - A common misconception is that to be a great sales person, you need the 'gift of the gab' - although eloquence is important, a great sales person excels at listening.

Many sales scenarios are dominated by the salesperson doing most of the talking. However, in reality the salesperson should be doing the majority of the LISTENING in order to understand the customer's needs and create the right solutions. You should analyse the proportion of time you spend talking versus listening, and if necessary redress the balance.

**Remain neutral** - If you have previously met your customer, you could have developed some existing positive or negative attitudes about them which will

impact the way you hear, giving it a positive or a negative slant. Ignore this and remain neutral, not harbour any preconceptions and begin the conversation with all customers with an open mind.

Let the speaker finish before you begin to talk as interrupting indicates you are not listening even if you are! Speakers appreciate having the chance to say everything they would like to say without being interrupted, and they won't be ready to listen to you until they have said everything they want to say.

**Listen for main ideas** - The main ideas are the most important points the speaker wants to get across. They may be mentioned at the start or end of a conversation, and repeated a number of times. Pay special attention to statements that begin with phrases such as, "*My point is...*" or "*The thing to remember is...*".

#### **Show the speaker you are listening**

**Respond appropriately** - Demonstrate understanding by making sounds like "*uh-huh*" and "*hmmm*" and encouraging words such as "*Really,*" "*Interesting*". Use more direct prompts: "*What did you do then?*" and "*What did she say?*" If you are face-to-face, your body language is very important such as maintaining eye contact and nodding occasionally to show that you understand. At appropriate points you may also smile, frown, laugh, or be silent. This shows the speaker that you are really listening. Remember, you listen with your face as well as your ears!

**Keep an open mind** - You might think you know what the person is going to say next, but you might be wrong! Wait until the speaker is finished before deciding exactly what has been said. Try not to make assumptions about what the speaker is thinking or what they are going to say.

**Clarify by asking questions** - Check your understanding when the speaker has finished by asking clarifying questions and repeating in your own words what the speaker said. Start with, "*So you're saying...*".



Clarifying questions are also used to gain a clearer understanding of the speaker's situation and to move the conversation from broad general topics to specific facts. For instance, *"How many days have you been waiting?"*, *"What date was the invoice raised?"*

**Repeat main points** - To show you are listening every so often recap what you think the person said by paraphrasing in your own words. For example, *"Let's see if I'm clear about this. . ."* The purpose of repeating is to highlight key words or phrases that indicate you have identified the most critical parts of the message.

**Summarise conversations** - By summarising at the end of the conversation it pulls together the important points and reviews the progress made. It also assures both the listener and speaker that a complex message was received and understood. Restate the key points using expressions such, *"These seem to be the key ideas you have expressed ..."*; *"If I understand you, you think the key thing about the situation is..."*.

## Summary

Active listening is far more than just hearing, there are many benefits to be gained all of which will ensure that your customers feel they are important as a participant in the conversation, and will enable you to glean far more from the discussions.

Think of a time when you felt that someone was not really listening to you. What let you know that the other person was not listening? How did that make you feel? Reflecting on your own experiences may help you understand the importance of active listening. Trying to communicate with someone who is not listening attentively can be frustrating and unproductive and can lead to misunderstanding, conflict and potentially impaired job performance.



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