



# Trained to listen

## Updating your listening skills

By Rick Hill

We all have met him, the loud, aggressive, overbearing salesperson twisting our arm into buying now and buying often. Sadly, many people are still being trained to force or trick people into parting with their hard-earned cash. The old idea that you can change a person's mind by overcoming their objections with canned responses is still practiced in many forms of retail sales. The car industry is notorious for browbeating the consumer into purchasing. It is this exact image that scares many of the small entrepreneurs in our wood industry from promoting their products. They do not want to be seen as a "salesman."

In industrial sales, the overbearing, loud mouth salesperson doesn't last long. Professional purchasing and business people won't work with someone who tries to bully and trick them into buying. Industrial salespeople are focused on building long-term relationships of trust and honesty with their customers. The best salespeople act as outside consultants in the customers business, bringing them new ideas, products and methods without resorting to false claims and lies.

Consultative selling works best on long-term sales where relationship building is the key to future business. Establishing your reputation as an ally to your customer makes every sale, even the commodities, easier. There are several ways to increase your consultative selling skills; the first is through better listening.

The best way to improve your listening skills is to shut up. Woodworkers are often so enthusiastic about their own products that they tell their story before even hearing what the customer wants to buy. This is also my worst habit. I get so enthused when the customer is telling me their ideas that I will interrupt with my own ideas on how to solve their problem. I have to constantly tell myself the old sales adage: "If you're talking, then you aren't listening." Remember, the goal is to hear what they are saying, not to tell them what you are thinking.

Dr. Stephen Covey in his book, *The 7 Habits Of Highly Successful People*, said, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." If you want to train yourself or your staff in better sales skills, get them to "Seek first to understand." Listen to the customers' needs and wants, understand why they are placing importance on these concerns, and help them achieve their goals, not yours.

The technique of restating the customer's

comments in your own words allows you to qualify that concern and clarify your thinking. It also proves to the customer that you are seeking to truly understand his/her needs.

As an example, the homeowner has come into your shop and is looking at cabinets. As they talk to you about their home, they state they hate brass hardware. "It seems to tarnish easily and look cheap." Your job as a good listener is to restate that comment and then add a qualifying question.

"I take it that you have had cheap brass hardware before and it changed color?"

The customer will usually nod or acknowledge that you understand their concern. This then gives you the chance to clarify the situation with questions that lead to a better understanding of their lifestyle. Do they like chrome? Are they looking to upgrade to better hardware or redo the whole kitchen?

The ultimate goal of a consultative salesperson is to get at the root of what will really make your customers happy. Better listening helps you get to their true desire. It also builds an immediate relationship with the customers. They begin to let go of their preconceived barriers to sales and understand you are truly trying to help them achieve their desires. The customers see you as an ally in their concerns. After they understand your goal is to help them, they will then make time to help you achieve your goals.

Listening to each answer and delving into the next set of questions takes time. It also shows the customers you care and are concerned for their benefit, not yours.

When we built our house, the architect drew up the whole house along with the kitchen. Now being in the kitchen industry, I had a few ideas of what we wanted. The architect had been very helpful and asked a lot of questions, but when it came to the kitchen, he drew up a very plain U-shape "Cabinet Alley." He let us know that this was the best design for the space utilization and that nothing would work better.

I took the designs to Kym Davis, an NKBA member and experienced designer in town. Kym took the time to ask questions. How much



did we cook? What was the normal breakfast routine? Did Lynn bake a lot? Were we entertaining often? He even asked about our hobbies.

Kym designed the perfect kitchen for our use. Later when the architect came to visit the completed house, he noticed Kym had added a corner sink with windows in the kitchen.

He commented what a poor use of space the sink was and all the cabinets we lost. I took him over to the big corner window over the sink and showed him one of our favorite views. As the architect looked out the "wasted window" facing the north line of brush and pine trees, he saw a riot of color and activity in the dead of a white Wisconsin winter. The window looked out at a bird feeder with cardinals, goldfinches and blue jays feeding just 15 ft. from the corner sink.

Kym took the time to find out that we loved feeding the birds in winter; that we hated closed-in dark corners and that cabinet space was less important than a big window at the sink. The experienced architect assumed everyone wanted more cabinet space. Kym did not put his personal beliefs on us, but asked what we wanted, and then gave it to us. He was a true consultant who searched for our perfect design.

### QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS.

One of the simplest ways to increase your listening skills is to have questions prepared ahead of the call — questions that are open ended, "Why" based questions; questions that lead you to understanding before you make your conclusions.

For example, instead of asking "What color stain do you want?" you could ask, "Why does

that color appeal to you?" The answer to the first question is "Cherry." But if you ask the question in an open-ended way, you may learn that the rest of the house trim is in clear maple and they are sick of that look, so they thought the red cherry look might be a good contrast. This can then lead you both into a discussion of the floor colors, how

to contrast and blend the cabinets into the house and where the transitions would be.

The first question leads you to a possible decision that may make the customer ultimately dissatisfied. The second question leads you to an understanding. The first question is the kind of question the untrained clerk in a retail store

might ask. The second shows you are a seasoned professional searching for the best solution, not just the sale.

We often feel like a 3-year-old child as we ask "Why" repeatedly and in many different ways. But, the goal of our questioning is very different than in older sales styles. We are not trying to ask questions so we can beat down their objections to our product with our canned sales answers. Instead, we are striving to truly understand why they do what they do. Only when we really know why can we use our knowledge to help them achieve it.

#### **SELLING YOURSELF FIRST.**

To get in-depth knowledge of the why, you often have to change focus from selling your products to yourself. This is a whole new set of WHY questions. Why should they work with you? Why should they open up to you? What do you have to offer that sets you apart from other salespeople?


Experienced industry veterans can answer sales objections easily, but asking "why" can be much harder. Veterans think they know all the whys already and jump to conclusions before truly hearing the customer speak. Veterans know their experience gives them a background that is extremely useful to the prospects, and they prejudge the customer based on that history. If you're a veteran salesperson, one of the best ways to change your sales attitude from countering objections to asking why is to pretend you are brand new at the job. I have found this technique works very well for new customers. Simply tell the truth, by saying, "I have been selling these cabinets for 20 years, but I am really trying to change my attitude to one of understanding instead of selling. Do you mind if I ask a bunch of simple questions that will help me understand your specific needs better?" You will be amazed at how they open up to your new attitude.

For veterans, their success stories, referrals and knowledge all help to establish their credentials with the customer, but what about the new salesperson?

New salespeople are unique in that they have no preset prejudices. They come in to the account with the need to prove themselves.

INQUIRY CARD

It is very common for a new salesperson to take over an “old dog’s” territory and make it increase in the first few months. Why? Well, they have no bad history to hold them back. They are willing to go into accounts that the old dog has avoided for years. When challenged they are willing to work harder to prove themselves. Often accounts are willing to give them the chance just because they are new. New sales people are given a little leeway at the start and do not have to be as knowledgeable as veterans. As new faces in the field, they only have to focus on the two essentials.

professionalism. Both following through and following up stem from one basic sales skill, listening. Train yourself to listen first, and the rest will come naturally. 

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### THE NEXT TWO ESSENTIALS IN CONSULTATIVE SELLING

Listening is easier for the new salesperson; they have no industry stories or successes to use as impressive tales for the customer. They know they are there to learn. So, as they listen, they only have two essentials to focus on: following through and following up.

Read most sales training manuals and they will spend page after page talking about your presentation, your clothes, your company product knowledge, and your controlling objections. Those all help, but the two essentials are more important than any of these ideas combined.

When I first started selling to the office furniture industry, I knew I needed help. So I brought in an expert. According to the sales manuals, he did everything wrong. The expert had worked his way up from the plant floor and knew everything about the manufacturing of ball bearing slides. We went to a high-end prestigious office furniture account. He arrived in an old rumpled suit, thick black dirt under his fingernails, and sticking to his face were seven bloody pieces of toilet paper on his cuts from shaving. I was sure his appearance would ruin the sale. My feeling was we should just turn around and go back to the hotel.

As usual, the customer’s team was impeccably dressed and professional. They were a bit taken aback by his appearance. During the call he ate donuts and talked with his mouth full. He often told the customer’s team “Bad Idea” or “No, that won’t work.” But based on his technical knowledge and his promise of making their unique slides, they gave him a chance. For the next two weeks, every promise he made, every sample he suggested and every test he said the slides would pass worked. As he progressed in his testing, he would always let everyone know of the failures and success at each stage. For the next two years we did business; every promise he made, he kept

His follow-through and follow-up were the reasons we won and kept the business

Following through is the first test that every customer gives a new salesperson. Proper follow-through means listening to the customer’s requests, summing up your understanding of what is required by both parties involved, and then delivering what you promised. If changes happen, it means communicating those to the customers before they are committed to the products and keeping them up to date with the summations you agreed to.

Following-up comes after the first products arrive at the customers’ dock. Follow up with updates on expected deliveries, late or back ordered shipments, product changes in design or packaging and how well the product is flowing through the plant.

Follow up is the difference in building long-term relationships with customers instead of one-time sales. It shows commitment, understanding, compassion and