



The sales power of listening



Dr. Heather Johnson of the Klassen Performance Group offers her perspective on how you can identify and use listening skills in your business. Dr. Johnson provides coaching to the Blue Cross sales staff to make them better listeners.

Really knowing how to listen is a powerful sales skill—a power that, if refined, can increase your sales and build client relationships.

“Most sales people have a ton of training on selling skills,” says Dr. Heather Johnson. “These cover things like prospecting, probing for need, closing and so on. But very few have training on listening.”

What does she mean by that? “One of the best lessons in listening skills I’ve learned came from our real estate agent,” she continues. “All the other agents we had interviewed had experience and glowing recommendations, but she got our business because of her listening skills. She recognized that I was more focused on the big picture, while my husband needed more details. Her responses fit our individual needs.”

Five listening styles

Research has identified five listening styles, according to Johnson. She says we all tend to use at least one of these approaches (and sometimes up to all five in varying degrees). Here is a brief description of each style and how it can help an agent sell:

Appreciative. Someone with the Appreciative style listens for enjoyment. They focus on the speaker’s positive energy and emotions rather than on details. They put others at ease, which helps them build rapport. However, if they don’t move beyond fun and small talk, they may neglect the business at hand and risk not being taken seriously.

Importance to an agent: *It’s a great way to break the ice and develop rapport.*

Empathic. Empathic listeners want to understand the speaker’s experience, especially their feelings, so they tune into emotional and physical messages that give meaning to spoken words. They excel at building trust, but if they focus too much on empathizing they may neglect to share their own ideas.

Importance to an agent: *Empathizing can help you connect with the importance of emotion in decision-making.*

Comprehensive. The Comprehensive listener wants to understand a speaker's thoughts so they focus on identifying the speaker's main ideas and reasoning. They often summarize and elaborate on what they hear. However, they may jump to conclusions or overlook important details.

Importance to an agent: *It can help you identify the big picture with clients before digging into details.*

Discerning Style. A Discerning listener wants to get the facts right, so they focus on gathering correct and thorough information. They pay very close attention, take notes, ask pointed questions and verify details. However, if they don't get the big picture first, they may waste time in pursuit of irrelevant details.

Importance to an agent: *Paying attention to the right details can save everyone time and trouble in the end.*

Evaluative Style. An Evaluative listener analyzes what they hear in order to make a decision. They critique reasoning and motivation. They make decisions based on sound reasoning and facts. However, their focus on the objective can lead them away from the emotional factors that can be of equal or greater importance.

Importance to an agent: *Being able to evaluate a client's needs can help you decide how best to meet those needs.*

Listening skills: What's in it for the agent?

When you become a better listener, Johnson says three good things can happen:

- ❶ You'll develop faster rapport with customers and they will feel as though they are connecting with you. Prospects may be expecting that you'll just be "selling," so good listening can be what makes you different.
- ❷ You'll get a better understanding of what your customer needs. Nearly all information that is heard is distorted by listening style. If you are aware of how your customer typically listens, you'll have a better chance of meeting their needs.
- ❸ You'll communicate better and more effectively. If you present in the style of your customer, they will better understand the solution you are offering.

How do you become a better listener?

According to Johnson, "first, understand YOUR style of listening. Identify your strengths and weaknesses and consciously focus on those listening approaches that don't come naturally to you. Second, focus on the prospect's style. Learn how to identify your client or prospect's style. This will give you a sense of what that person is most interested in hearing and what isn't as important. And third, learn to adapt your presentation to their listening style."

Of course, good listening can be taught and practiced. If you'd like to become a better listener, Johnson offers three options. The first is to take a listening assessment to determine what style of listener you are. It's quick, easy and inexpensive. The second option is to take a listening assessment and receive some coaching over one or two sessions to help you get a better understanding of how you interact with your prospects. The third option would be to attend a half-day seminar where you can get hands-on practice.

Dr. Johnson's contact information is in the box below.

Special offer: Find out YOUR listening style
Research has identified five listening styles, according to Dr. Heather Johnson. For a limited time, she has agreed to offer her listening assessment at a discounted rate for Blue Cross agents. You can call Dr. Johnson at (651) 322-7821 or e-mail her at heather@klassenperformancegroup.com.

Next month: Powerful first impressions
Next month, Dr. Johnson will provide tips on making a powerful first impression with your prospects. Look for it in the December issue of TrueBlue.