

Listening...The Forgotten Business Communications Skill by Kevin Ryan

Recently, I visited a retail luggage store in a large suburban shopping centre to replace, yet again, my accident-prone luggage. As a professional speaker, I tend to travel a lot, which means my most commonly used suitcases rarely see their second birthday. I was approached by Valerie (not her real name) whose badge told me she was the store manager. Her friendliness and professional presentation could not be faulted.

"I travel over 100,000 kilometres a year, so suitcases don't last me very long..." I started.

"Well," she said, "you'll need something very heavy duty."

What followed was the most detailed dissertation on heavy-duty luggage in the history of retailing. The breaking strength of the rigid cases, the comparisons between 600 denier and 1200 denier, the relative merits of 10mm zips versus 15 mm zips, and a whole lot of other stuff that didn't even register. I had obviously found the most knowledgeable person on heavy-duty suitcases on the planet. If you were a contestant on 'Who wants to be a millionaire?' and you got a question on luggage – she's the friend you'd want to call!

Did she enquire about my past experience – as someone who had used a lot of luggage. Did I have any brand loyalties? Preferred styles? Pet hates? No she didn't. Did she ask if the information she was giving me was making any sense or had any relevance to my particular usage? No, she didn't. Did she sell me a suitcase? You know the answer.

The sad thing for her was that she thought she was doing the right thing – showing me that she was more knowledgeable than the other luggage retailers in the centre – which she undoubtedly was. When, in fact, all she did was convince me that I didn't know enough to make a buying decision.

The sad thing for her employer is that a lot of time and money was spent giving her all this knowledge...and it didn't result in a sale. And, remember, Valerie was the manager.

If only she had remembered the value of listening – particularly in a sales context. Perhaps then, she would have recognised the clues (verbal and non-verbal) that I was giving and said something like: "Sounds like you've been through some suitcases in your time – what's been the biggest problem?" or "With all your experience, have you found any brands to be better than others?" She would have recognised that I had some very definite ideas about what I did and didn't want and that I wanted specific advice on one or two points – and she would have sold me a suitcase.

In today's world, consumers are better informed than ever before. (I could have found out all the things that Valerie told me with a search on the net.) What they crave is human interaction with somebody who appears to understand their needs – and the only way that you'll find out their needs is by listening to them.

Listening is the first communication skill we use as human beings, yet, ironically, it is the one that is the least studied. Nearly half our waking communicating time is spent listening, with the remainder divided between speaking, reading and writing; yet, it is

a fairly safe bet that very few of the staff who interact with customers have ever had a moment's training in this most basic communication skill.

So, what do you do? Here are some suggestions –

1. Give them some basic knowledge of active listening skills –
 - a. Paraphrasing (be able to repeat back to the customer in your own words what they have said)
 - b. Reflection of Feelings – no, it's not about turning them into counsellors; but, if most buying decisions are emotional decisions, those who are able to interpret a customer's feelings (especially from non-verbals like tone of voice or facial expression) will surely have the edge.
 - c. Open and closed questions – knowing the difference and the best times to use them.

2. Establish a customer service standard that forces them to listen. Try this three step strategy –
 - a. Focused Attention – as far as possible, you will give the customer your complete and undivided attention. You will face them front on and really listen – by looking at them and concentrating.
 - b. Check the Information – if you are not completely clear on what the customer needs, check it with them, using, as far as possible, your own words. For example: “So, it sounds to me like you need something that will...”
 - c. Ask Open Questions – these start with how, what, why, when, etc and are great for getting information from a customer about what they want the product or service to do. Try to ask at least one or two open questions before showing the customer anything.

I can vouch for the success of the ‘ask two questions’ strategy in retailing – where, if nothing else, it forced staff to focus more on the customer – and resulted in a better sales conversion rate.

The standard of listening skills in customer service is generally so appalling, it's easy to stand out with just a little effort. Improve these skills in those who interact with customers and you will increase your sales and customer loyalty – and think what it might do for staff communications.