

## Controlling the Conversation Through Listening

Advertising and marketing gurus will tell you about the importance of a singular, well crafted, and short message. The next time you're watching television, listening to the radio, or reading a magazine, take a moment to check out the commercials. The good ads will be short and concise, conveying a message of many ideas in very few words.

GEICO's "so easy a caveman can do it," is 7 words that tell you using their insurance is an easy process and implies that other insurance companies can be complicating. Since shopping for insurance is not something anyone would ever do for fun, their ad tells the listener that by using them, you don't have to put any effort into it, you can get the insurance you need, and get on with your day. Within those 7 words, they've effectively targeted their audience and created several comical and popular commercials based on this central theme.

So what does this have to do with listening? You have a message that you want to get across. Whether you are marketing yourself, your product, or your service, you are a walking commercial trying to push your message. And like a commercial, it must be short and concise. And **the best way to get people talking about your service is to actually get people talking about your service, while you simply listen and nod your head.**

But how does one accomplish this feat? Here are a few steps for controlling the conversation through listening.

**1. The Introduction.** When meeting a potential client or reference, introduce yourself and your product or service, and then stop. One of two things will happen: either they will be interested and immediately talk about your service, making your job easy, or they will have no interest, give you the polite, "oh, that's nice," and then change the subject.

If they have no interest and change the subject, don't fret. Chances are they know someone in the room who is interested, they will be interested in the future, or they can refer you to someone they know who is interested. For this reason, don't allow them to forget who you are and what you offer simply because they don't presently care.

**2. Find common ground.** Whatever your "listener" is talking about, bring the conversation back to your service. For example, if I am selling widget X, and my listener is talking about company Y, relate the two. "Oh, I sold 100 widget X's to company Y. I heard they increased productivity by 20% after that." Too easy? How about, "I just saw in the news, company Y is expanding. Widget X could really help their new operation." Whatever the correlation is, make it. And then stop.

Are they biting yet? Or has your listener diverted again, still not caring about Widget X? Rather than discussing Widget X with you, they've decided to talk about the horrible coffee offered at this event. Find common ground. "Well, I've gotten used to the bad coffee by now. I travel so much selling widget X that I've learned to just take what you can get." Then stop.

Do you see a common theme here? Whatever the conversation, find common ground between what your “listener” is talking about the product or service you offer. Make that correlation, and THEN STOP. Let your “listener” take it from there. One or two sentences will place your message in front of them and then allows them to do with it what they will.

**3. Be an active listener.** Once your “listener” is focused on you and your service, take an interest in what they have to say about it. Active listening is more than nodding your head and interjecting the occasional “mm-hmm.” It is processing the information your “listener” is providing and making it ready for recall later in the conversation. A few minutes later, as the conversation is coming back around, feel free to note, “that goes back to what you were saying about x, y, and z.”

Doing this shows your “listener” that you were actually listening to what they had to say. They will feel that their opinion is valued. Even if you find their information and opinion to be off-base and nonsensical concerning your particular service, by recalling their points, you have created an atmosphere of participation – they feel that they may have helped or planted a seed for the future of your service.

**4. Ask open-ended questions.** By asking open-ended questions, you accomplish a few purposes. First, you show your “listener” that you’re interested, while still allowing him or her to do all the talking. Once you’ve found your common ground and are actively listening, keep the conversation going by asking short, open-ended questions. Give your “listener” a one sentence question that will require a 10 sentence response. But keep it related to your product or service, however loose that relation may be.

Second, by asking open-ended questions, you are finding new common ground. Think of it as your own personal data mining. Once you’ve found some correlation between your product or service and your “listener,” build on that and try to find more. Let them talk until you find a second and third correlation. Then build on that to find a fourth and fifth. By doing this, you can show them that your product or service is all around them and always present, and you keep your name in front of them.

Third, asking open-ended questions allows for more of point number three, active listening. Yes or no questions will cause awkward silences while you think of what else to ask; open-ended questions give your “listener” something to talk about while you sit back and do the listening and the thinking.

Whatever your purpose, try to do far less than 50% of the talking, while keeping the conversation on what you want to talk about. The more your “listener” is talking about it, the more they will feel they need your product or service. Rather than selling to them, let them sell to themselves. The more they talk about it, the more they’ll convince themselves.