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The Trusted Advisor Sales Engineer Series

#2 – Active Listening / Shut Up And Listen!

"What am I going to say when this idiot finishes talking?"

Knowing when to speak and when to listen is the most important skill of a Trusted Advisor Sales Engineer. Add to that the understanding that when you are unsure if you should be speaking or you should be listening – you should probably be listening! Get that wrong, and you will be in the position of advising without trust, and no one will listen to you. So now layer on top of the fact that it is not good enough to listen; you have to demonstrate that you are listening and make the customer feel like you are paying attention.

This is not an easy skill to acquire or maintain, yet it is essential (in any culture) to becoming a top-class Sales Engineer and a trusted advisor. It is sad that so many SE organizations invest so much time in practicing their outbound skills around demonstrations and presentations that they neglect their inbound skills around listening and confirmation.

So let's look at the role and usage of Active Listening for the Sales Engineer. First, we will start with a definition and the distinction between hearing and listening. **Hearing** is the process of sound waves leaving the customer and entering your eardrums. It is the acknowledgement of noise (or silence) and nothing else. So, for example, you might say, "Can you hear that?" adjusting the volume on your speakerphone, or my wife will say, "did you hear that?" when a floorboard creaks late at night in our house.

Listening implies an active process within your brain once the sound waves hit your eardrums. For example, if the CEO of your company speaks directly to you, I would bet that you are listening to her, rather than just hearing her talk!

The second part of the definition distinguishes between different styles of listening.

- A. **Vacant Listening.** Have you ever had a conversation with someone and just known that they are not really listening to you? They may be on the end of a phone doing their email or physically in the same room as you (possibly even uttering encouraging "uh-

huh" and "ok" phrases), yet you are 100% certain that they could not repeat a word you have said? That is Vacant or "Sorry I was distracted, can you repeat that?" style listening.

- B. **Self-Oriented Listening.** Although the other person is both hearing you and listening to you, the only reason they are doing so is to promote their point of view instead of thinking about yours. The big clue here is that as soon as you finish speaking (or possibly even before), the other person jumps into the break to either counter your statement or one-up it. We've all been in that situation of meeting a person who always has a better story to tell about any given situation than yours. I characterize this as "*what will I say when this idiot finishes talking?*" listening. Sales Engineers fall into this category when they immediately diagnose a customer's problem early in a Discovery meeting and interrupt the customer to tell them about their great solution!
- C. **Passive Listening.** The listener is actively listening and understanding you yet provides no reflective or indicative signals that they are in this behavior mode. Think about speaking to someone for five minutes by phone, and they never utter a sound – how do you know they are listening? Maybe they are asleep or doing email?
- D. **Active Listening.** This occurs when you are genuinely interested in what the speaker is saying, how they are saying it, and attempting to understand how they feel about it. This involves not only listening but also confirming in various verbal and non-verbal ways that you are both listening and understanding.

So How Does This Apply To A Trusted Advisor Sales Engineer?

As a practical application, let's focus on a Discovery meeting – where you should be listening far more than speaking. So here are a dozen tips for you to consider and practice – and always remember Rule Zero:

The only thing you can really learn when presenting to your customer is how little you know about them.

1. **Stop Talking!** It's hard to be an active listener when your mouth is moving. Without significant training, our brains cannot handle speaking and listening concurrently (think simultaneous translators!)
2. **Provide non-verbal signals** to emphasize that you are listening. This would include nodding/wobbling your head, making eye contact, and hand gestures. Lean slightly towards the speaker and keep your posture open (do not cross your legs away from them, for example). When dealing with men – face them squarely, meet women at a

slight angle, and perform all the gestures and nodding even if operating remotely via a webcast as they affirm your mental intent, which is communicated non-verbally. Taking notes also counts as a non-verbal signal – just do not overdo the notes to the point that you lose track of the conversation!

3. **Provide verbal signals** to encourage conversational flow. Think of these as brief, positive verbal prompts. Examples would be "OK," "I understand," "and?" and "then what happened?"
4. **Be Patient.** Not everyone processes information or explains events the same way you do. Give the customer time to make their point in full before you jump in. An extra moment of silence often yields a valuable nugget of information. The exception to this tip is when one of you communicates in a non-native language and just needs help with the "right" word.
5. **Show Empathy.** When a customer is talking about a difficult personal or professional situation, please take a few seconds to look at it from their viewpoint. You can follow up with a statement such as "*how did that make you feel*" or "*what do you think the business users thought about that?*"
6. **Restatements: Using your** judgment, restate or paraphrase what the customer has said. (Note I do not say repeat, or parrot, their words). You can lead into this with phrases like "just so I'm clear on this" or "let me confirm I'm getting this." Use this technique both to prove to the customer that you are listening and to remove any doubt from your mind about what the customer actually said.
7. **Summarize.** During a natural pause in the conversation, or if the customer has covered much ground/discussed many issues, briefly take the opportunity to summarize. For example, "*so it sounds like to me that you are concerned about three things, and those are ..*"
8. **Don't Rush To Judgment.** You may be able to diagnose the customer's problems within 5 minutes as you have seen them many times before. For the customer, this is their first occurrence, and they need time to explain and process them. You are probably right – but interrupting after 5 minutes doesn't make you look smart; you'll probably give the impression of arrogance instead. Be patient – you may be wrong, and you may learn something useful when it takes the customer to feel they have fully explained themselves.

9. **Resist the DAC!** Step away from the temptation to Disagree, Argue or Criticize until you have collected all the facts and emotions from the customer. Even then, you may want to show some patience. Once you dive into the DAC, your listening mode will revert to Self-Oriented instead of Active.
10. **Probe.** When you sense there may be more to an issue or customer statement, try using a probing question once the customer has finished their statement. Examples would be *"who else is typically impacted when?"* or *"what do you think will happen if this problem re-occurs?"*
11. **Don't Be Defensive.** Sometimes it is challenging to sit there and hear the customer out when they are attacking you, your company or are (in your opinion) completely wrong. Just remember that the more information you have about how they feel, the better you will be able to handle the situation. My wife always tells me, *"stop being such a guy – you don't always need to rush in and fix things; sometimes, all you need to do is listen."* Wise advice indeed!
12. **Follow-Up.** A lack of follow-up can destroy sixty minutes of effective active listening. So if you have promised or committed to any action items – get them done As Soon As Possible. It also helps (in most cultures) to send back a summary of key points from the conversation to ensure that you did "get it."

Relating Back To the Trust Equation

$$T = \left[\frac{C+R+I}{S} \right] P$$

The First Article of the Series, "[The Trusted Advisor Sales Engineer](#)" laid out the basics of the Trust Equation. Active listening will improve every factor in the equation. Credibility will improve as the customer feels you are not rushing

to judgement but are weighing the facts. Reliability increases as you have an opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the conversation and act upon it. Intimacy improves as you start to move towards how the customer feels. Positivity increases as you work together to create a positive outcome for a business problem. Finally, Self-Orientation decreases as the focus is not on you but the customer. The not-so-simple act of listening can have a major impact on your "T" scores.

In Summary

There is a children's party game trick of lining up 10-12 kids in a row. You whisper a message to the first in line, who whispers it to the second, and so on. The message that comes out of the mouth of child #12 is very different from the original. (The anecdotal military story tells of a British army officer who signaled 'send reinforcements, we are going to advance', which was converted into 'send three and fourpence, we are going to a dance')

SE organizations spend hours and hours perfecting demonstrations, fine-tuning PowerPoint, planning installations, and building impressive ROIs. Yet unless you collect the correct information, it is all a futile exercise. So listen, listen actively and listen hard!

"Listen or thy tongue will keep you deaf."

Indian Proverb

"I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."

Robert McCloskey

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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