

Listening to Customers with “Inner Ears”

by Michael Penny, President, Savvy Rest, Inc.

TTrue listening is selfless. Selfless listening calls for hitting “Pause” on your inner monologues and agendas. There is no other way to truly focus your attention on the customer.

The good news: It’s that simple.
The bad news: It’s not easy.

When a customer comes into your store, that person brings a constellation of issues. Foremost is the need to sleep better in some way — more deeply, for a longer time, or more comfortably. With couples, two people need to meet their own needs while also thinking about what will help their partners. Customers bring along their past shopping experiences, too — pleasant, unpleasant, or confusing. Much of this stress is just carried in the door, and often not even consciously.

Their needs, and their memories or associations — are both “drivers” and “distractors.” Needs drive individuals to come to your store for help. And previous experiences can distract them from receiving the help they’re looking for.

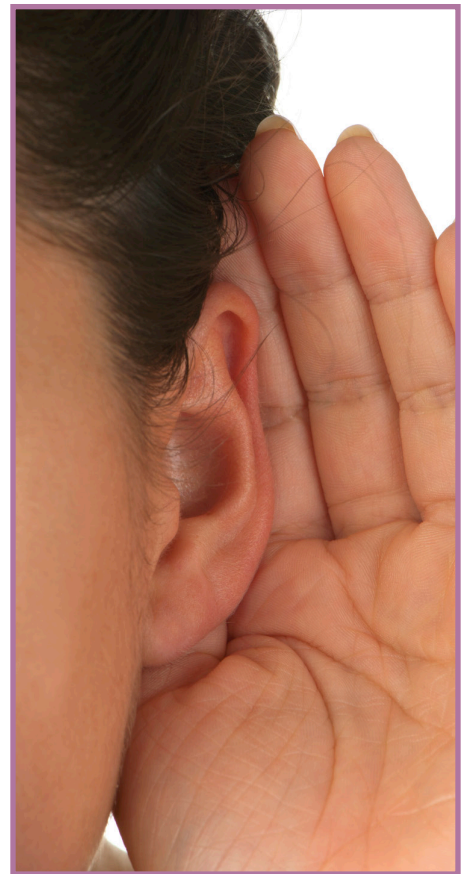
You might think of some customers as distracted shoppers in the way that some are distracted drivers, too. There’s a goal or destination, but there can be competing things that keep them from clearly — or safely — finding their way.

If a salesperson has unspoken distractions or agendas and a customer does too, how can an honest interchange happen, let alone a sale? At the most superficial level, a customer has a problem and a salesperson has products that can help solve the problem. That’s straightforward, and many sales happen at that level. Big-box stores or online sites can offer that basic exchange. (But not much more.)

What lifts a customer’s experience out of the fog can be as simple as an unexpected behavior from a salesperson. That behavior is listening. First, you recognize that any customer is vulnerable. Think about that for a moment — vulnerability. They’re bringing in their fatigue or pain, their stress or mistrust, their memories and distractions — all of which make them vulnerable.

Instead of seeing each person as a sales target, try a shift in your own awareness when someone walks in: *This is a vulnerable person. What is most likely to make them feel safe, in this moment?*

The answer? It’s the quality of your listening. To gain that person’s trust isn’t about manipulating. It’s really a series of internal actions. First, you drop all the agendas that are distracting you



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— bonuses, quotas, commissions, what’s going on after work, what happened yesterday, past interactions. Intentionally pause, and let them go. Now you’re ready to fully listen. Now you can really hear their needs. Selfless listening opens your “inner ears.”

Why focus so much on this awareness? A customer shopping for a mattress is considering a major product that will: require a real investment, have a long-term impact on their health and well-being, and be moved into their home’s most intimate sanctuary. That makes this person vulnerable. But as a salesperson, because of your knowledge and because you’re interacting within your familiar place of employment — you’re actually in a position of power. And consider another aspect of this relationship, which happens fairly quickly. The customer is asked to lie down — an awkward and exposed public position to be in — while the salesperson remains upright. As you can see, customer vulnerability is more than an imaginary notion.

People think and talk a lot about independence, but in interactions

with others, we also love the chance to be vulnerable — safely. That’s what opens us to one another, and it can also happen in your interactions with customers. Listening selflessly shows them that it’s all right to bring their baggage in the door, and it’s also all right to relax and learn from you. Your caring focus on them and the quality of your listening will automatically convey

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this intention. And it will make them feel safe, whether they’re consciously thinking about it or not. It’s a lot to expect, though, isn’t it? Yes, it is. Nobody’s 100% successful at this practice. (Perfectionism is a big-league distractor.) Yet anyone can practice, and with practice, it gets much easier and becomes more natural. Selfless listening benefits not just your customer, but you, too. The experience of being truly present and tuned in is very fulfilling — once you’ve practiced it and have found some measure of success.

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However you approach it, you’ll find that practicing selfless listening leaves both you and your customers happier, more relaxed, and more peaceful at the end of the day.

This way, everybody gets a chance at better sleep!