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Listen up: four ways to connect with clients

By ANNETTE RICHMOND

Want to connect with your clients? That's easy. Become a better communicator. If you want to build a relationship become a better listener.

Most people think of communication in terms of speaking or writing. When they talk about communication skills they rarely mention listening. Maybe we think that way because we've all taken classes with names like composition, creative writing and speech. However, most of us never took a course in listening.

But, despite old adages, you can teach an old dog new tricks. If you put your mind to it, you can begin becoming a better listener today. Use these four techniques to get started.

Stay in the moment

Have you ever tried to carry on a conversation with someone who keeps gazing out the window, glancing at her watch, paying attention to everything but you? Think about how that made you feel. Not very important I'll bet.

When you're having a conversation it's important to keep your focus on the person you're talking with. Naturally, you'll want to avert your gaze from time to time to avoid staring. But try not to become distracted by your surroundings.

Don't think it's OK to multitask when you're talking on the phone. It's easy to tell, and annoying as heck, when the person on the other end of the line is checking her e-mail.

Next time you begin a conversation commit to giving the other person your undivided attention.

Quiet your inner voice

When you want to pay attention, you'll need to quiet your inner voice. You know, the one inside your head that's saying things like "How does my new suit look?" "Does this person find me interesting?" "I wonder where she got those shoes?"

Your inner voice can be hazardous to conversations. You run the risk of missing half of what the other person is saying when you're listening to yourself. Well, now's the time to shut that nuisance down.

When you begin a conversation, mentally click off your inner voice. Try to stay focused on the other person. Listen to what they're saying.

Stop rehearsing

Recently, I came across an interesting quote by Ed Howe, "No man would listen to you talk if he didn't know it was his turn next." While I don't believe this entirely, there is probably a degree of truth to it.

This becomes a problem when people begin planning their response while the other person is still talking. How can you be listening to someone else if you are busy preparing a snappy reply? If you're honest with yourself, you know you can't.

Don't feel the need to fill up every moment of silence with words. Learn to gather your thoughts after the other person has finished speaking.

Listen to the music

Language is musical. It's filled with rhythms and rhymes and beats. Notice as you read this article, you hear the sound of

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the words in your head. But that's not what I'm talking about here.

When someone speaks to you listen to the music, the tone of his or her voice. Do the words and tone agree? It's similar to looking at a fake smile. When someone really smiles her eyes sparkle and her face lights up. When the smile is "fake" only the corners of her mouth turn up. Big difference.

The next time you're having a conversation pay attention to the music. If the words and tone do not agree, he or she may be sending you a mixed message. Ask questions to find out what they really mean.

To paraphrase an old saying, "Nature gave us two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we speak."

That's good advice when it comes to communication.

At least half of the communication equation is listening. But, listening is more than being there while someone else is talking. Good listening means understanding what is said.

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