

Dick Maggione: Understanding customers requires listening

By [Dick Maggione Special](#) to The Canton Repository

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Jack Welch, longtime CEO of General Electric, was known for his wise counsel on all manner of business matters.

One of his famous quotes really hits home for companies as they come to terms with the importance of their relationships with customers. “No one can guarantee you a job other than satisfied customers,” Welch said.

It should come as no surprise the customer takes center stage in just about any business plan. A customer is someone who must be satisfied for the company to exist. The customer is the focal point around which the business should be built.

Companies must find and fulfill needs. You could be a startup discovering an unmet need and focus on meeting it. You already might be meeting a need, but you came up with an innovative approach to fulfill it better.

Or you might be a long-established organization taking another look at who your customer is and how she might be changing. Does she still value your product or service? What’s changing in your marketplace? Did her priorities change? Does your product or service continue to contribute to satisfying her?

The most direct way to know this is to understand who our customer is.

The key to this understanding involves listening. The skill of listening is the Achilles heel for many, maybe most, organizations. Why is it that something so desperately needed rarely is understood and applied?

With most credit going to one of our clients from the late 1980s, we developed a [communications campaign](#) directed toward its 5,000 new employee-owners — an internal audience.

The message was all around the concept of “listening.” The graphic that accompanied the campaign was an illustration of the human ear. The objective was two-fold. Leadership knew they had to become better listeners. The staff and union members had become employee-owners and had the opportunity to contribute in new ways.

We discovered that just as we have to be taught how to build a house, row a boat or code a website, we also have to be taught how to listen.

Listening requires effort

Listening is a verb. It's active, not passive. It's hard work.

The employee-owned company learned this new skill and experienced positive results. It was natural to take the listening skill and use it with all of its stakeholders, including its customers.

Here are the seven rules of listening we all learned during that process:

Rule 1: Be quiet. Have you tried to sit and walk at the same time? You can't. It's also true that you can't talk and listen at the same time. Don't interrupt. Don't judge. Just be quiet and listen.

Rule 2: Ask questions. Repeat in summary fashion what you heard. Clarify and confirm. Be in the moment. Really try to understand what the speaker is saying and what she or he is feeling by asking probing questions.

Rule 3: Don't plan your response while you are listening. Just as you can't sit and walk at the same time, you can't plan your response while you're listening.

Rule 4: Use listening responses, such as occasionally nodding your head. Eye contact should be maintained. Even saying things like, "yes" and "uh-huh" is helpful. Taking notes can be appropriate and signals you are interested.

Rule 5: Concentrate. Focus your attention on what the person is saying. Practice not to be distracted by other activity in the room or other thoughts in your head. This is hard work. Don't eagerly look to jump on the speaker as he or she ends a sentence. Allow for some silence.

Rule 6: Be alert to the speaker's nonverbal cues, including tone of voice, such body language as hand gestures and facial expressions, and how they react to your responses. Somewhat copy the speaker's posture and movements.

Rule 7: Look for opportunities to practice listening in everyday conversation with your co-workers, friends and family. There's a very good chance you will strengthen and deepen these relationships.

With all the data so many companies have today, you'd think the challenge of knowing our customers has finally been overcome.

But it's not working out that way.

Listening builds success

Managing the numbers is not a replacement for satisfying your customer at every touch point. The customer journey is an experience. The data are too opaque. It doesn't really allow us to see how our customer is feeling.

If you can't meet one on one with your customers, a simple and often overlooked method to understanding them is to make phone calls and ask questions using some of the listening skills we've learned.

Listening to your customers might not only increase customer retention, but also increase what they spend with you. They might become your brand ambassadors and best referral sources. You'll also learn what your customers value most.

Listening works wonders. It builds success. Noted financier, statesman and philanthropist Bernard Baruch said it well: "Most of the successful people I've known are the ones who do more listening than talking."

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