

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



NA MI

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- Manage customer expectations
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- *Managing Expectations*
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The Art of the One-Way Dialogue

A vendor called one day while I was out and left a message. He began by thanking me for visiting his booth at a recent tradeshow. He told me his product was just what I needed — it would solve some of my biggest problems — and he assured me I'd benefit in many ways. He then asked if I'd call him back so we could continue the conversation. Conversation? This fellow had mastered the Art of the One-Way Dialogue!

Actually, I *hadn't* visited his booth; he'd probably gotten my name from a list of trade show attendees. As I listened to his message, my reaction was: We've never met. We've never talked. You don't know a thing about me. You understand neither my problems nor what I'd find acceptable as a solution. How can you claim to know what I need when you've never *asked* me what I need?

This was, by the way, the third time since the trade show that this fellow had left the same message; I suppose I should give him credit for not sounding like he was reading from a script.

Pssst, wanna buy a watch?

If you're trying to sell something — whether it's a product, service, idea, attitude or action — you'll be much more likely to succeed if you start by making a connection with those you're trying to sell to. Depending on the nature of what you're selling, you can create this connection in any of several ways. For example, make customers feel welcome in your store or on your website. Find something you have in common with prospective buyers and comment on it. Learn something about your prospective customers that you can empathize with. Ask them about their perspective, and demonstrate that you're listening to what they tell you.

In the business world, decision-makers are becoming leery of the product-focused approach taken by my caller; increasingly, they expect vendors to be client-focused and to do consultative selling. The biggest difference between product-focused and client-focused selling is the difference between talking and listening. In product-focused sales, the vendor's focus is on touting the wonders of the product or service. In client-focused sales, the vendor's focus is on inquiring, listening, and clarifying, so as to understand the customer's challenges, fears, obligations, and responsibilities.

I was tempted to call back the trade show vendor and leave a message of my own. "Thanks for visiting my voicemail system. My explanation for why I don't like your sales process is exactly what you need. It will solve some of your biggest problems, and I assure you you'll benefit in many ways. Please call me back so we can continue the conversation." (I resisted, though.)

SALES STRATEGIES

PRESENTATION SKILLS

Boring Triggers Snoring

Once attended a presentation by an executive who began by saying, “I want to get through the initial slides so we can get to the interesting stuff.” How would you react to this remark if you were in his audience? Think about it.

Maybe you would decide to tune out rather than bothering to listen to material the speaker considers boring. Perhaps you’d conclude that the speaker didn’t think enough of you to want to make the initial slides interesting. If you’re like me, you’d wonder whether the later slides would be any better than the initial slides. As it turned out, they weren’t. Slide after slide was crammed with tedious, eye-straining, color-clashing detail. Even with my spectacle-assisted 20/20 vision, I couldn’t see his slides clearly or grasp the points he was making.

This was right after lunch, mind you, and it was one of those carbo-laden lunches from the cook-book, *How to Eke By on 8000 Calories a Day*. To make matters worse, we were in a room darkened just enough to feel like naptime. And the speaker droned on and on about each successive slide.

Instead of informing, persuading, educating or entertaining his listeners, this executive was making them regret their decision to attend.

When you deliver presentations, think about the impact of your words — whether you’re presenting to customers, prospective customers, senior management, or anyone else. It’s so easy to toss off a comment or make a flip remark and in doing so, convey a message that’s other than what you intended. Such as that listeners will have to sit tight

and endure the first several slides that have been included in the presentation even though they’re boring.

As important as your words are in influencing listeners’ reactions, your energy in delivering the presentation is also important. If you want your audience to feel enthusiastic about what you’re presenting, be enthusiastic in presenting it. This applies especially to your opening remarks, because that’s when listeners draw conclusions about the quality of your entire talk. Get off to a yawn-inducing, put-’em-to-sleep start, and you may have difficulty reversing the negative impression you created,

even if an orator-quality delivery follows.

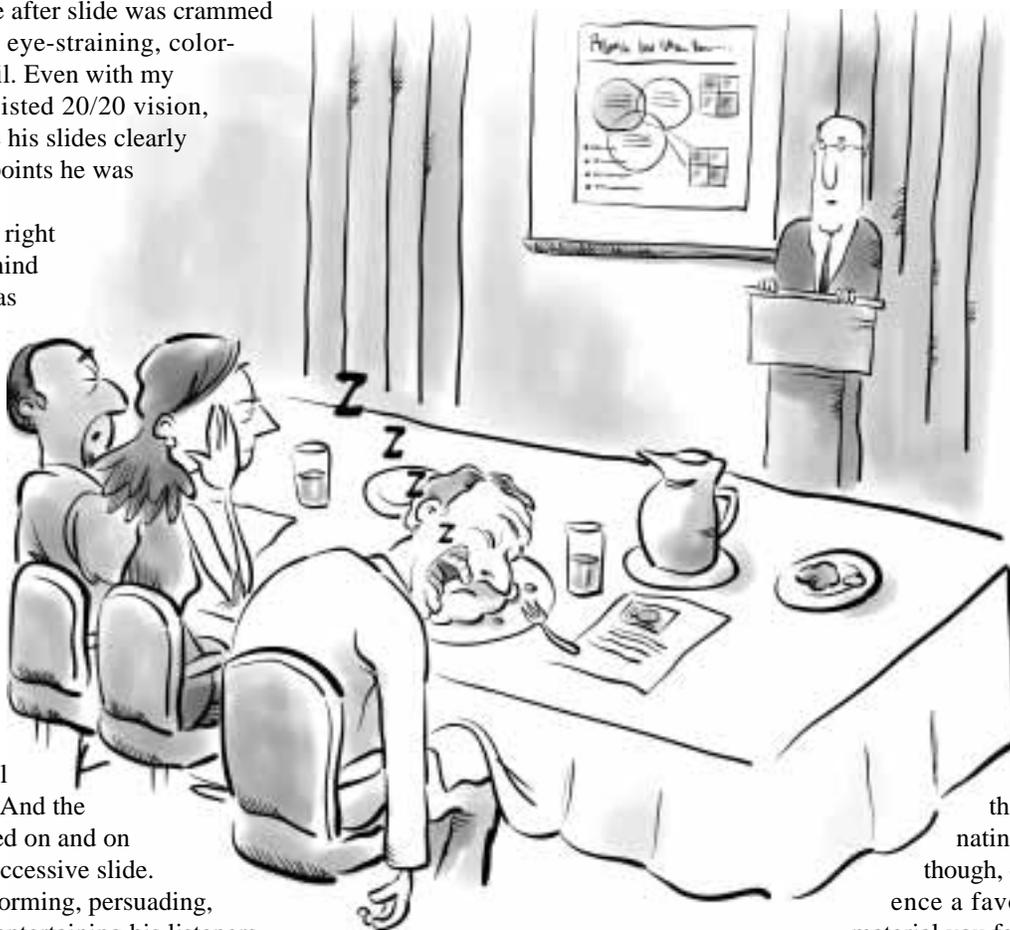
If you believe part of your talk is dull, tedious, tiresome, obtuse, monotonous, or fatiguing (my thesaurus offers these words as alternatives for “boring”), whatever you do, don’t announce that fact to your audience! Who knows, maybe what you consider

mind-numbing, they’ll find fascinating. Even better,

though, do your audience a favor and eliminate material you feel compelled to

apologize about. And trash all visuals that lead you to say, “I know you can’t see this, but...”. If you audience can’t see it, omit it!

Delivering your presentation with energy, enthusiasm, ebullience, exuberance and exhilaration (my thesaurus is big on presentation Es) will make all the difference between whether your audience enjoys it or spends the time catching up on their Zs.



SURVEY SAVVY

Chocolate! Chocolate!

The candy shop beckoned me. Unable to resist, I went in. From display cases, shelves, bottles and jars, delectable chocolate treats drew my attention. Oh, how I wanted to taste a little bit of everything. Or even a little bit of anything.

Actually, this is an article about surveys. Many of the surveys I've seen in my travels and many of those I've reviewed for clients are flawed. This is unfortunate, since surveys can be a great tool for learning how customers experience your products and services.

One of the most common types of flawed surveys is the ratings-only survey. This type of survey asks respondents to rate a particular product or service in terms of various attributes, such as responsiveness, accuracy, and ease of use. But the survey doesn't ask them to explain their ratings. As a result, the people who sponsor the survey have no way to know what led a respondent to rate an attribute as "2," "6," or even "10" on a ten-point scale. Clearly, a "2" suggests a serious problem, and a "10" suggests a happy customer. But in the absence of explanations, these ratings offer no clue about what to change so as to increase customer satisfaction — or what *not* to change so as to avoid reducing it.

Which brings me back to those delectable morsels and my encounter with a ratings-only survey while visiting a client recently. Just down the street from my hotel was a Great Big Shopping Plaza, with jewelry shops, pottery shops, stuff-you-don't-need-at-great-prices shops — and, oh yes, the aforementioned candy shop.

At various spots around this plaza were people administering shopping-satisfaction surveys to willing passersby. When a Survey Taker approached me, clipboard in hand, I

agreed to participate. Thus followed a series of questions that called for numerical ratings. Not once was I asked to explain the high ratings I gave in response to some questions or the low ratings I gave in response to others. And not once did the Survey Taker ask me what differences in my shopping experience might have resulted in higher ratings.

Yet, just one difference would have led me to give a higher rating. When I went into the candy shop, I gazed longingly at the magnificent munchies. But a wave of common sense stimulated my subconscious calorie counter, and after several yearful moments I left, candyless. If, however, the shop had offered me a few tiny tasting samples from its scrumptious assortment, I (being a chocoholic at heart) would have been so delighted as to rate my entire shopping experience superlative. I'd probably also have purchased some

Goodies To Go in case my evening needed sweetening. But the Survey Taker didn't ask.

It seems pointless to run ratings surveys if you won't know what the resulting ratings signify. Therefore, when you request ratings in your own surveys, aim to get supporting information as well. For example, in face-to-face or phone surveys, ask respondents for both their ratings and the reasons for their ratings. In printed or web-based surveys, follow items that request a rating with

"Please explain your rating" or Please describe what led you to give this rating." Certainly, not everyone will supply this added information, but many will, and you'll find the resulting information invaluable.

Whether the ratings are poised at the high end of the scale, slithering off the bottom, or somewhere in between, ask respondents what one or two differences in their experience would have driven the ratings higher. In my case, the answer would have been simple: Chocolate! Chocolate!



MANAGING CHANGE

Communicating During Times of Change

Managers who are responsible for implementing change often expect those affected by the change to instantaneously accept and support it. In fact, the attitude some managers convey is: “You learned about it yesterday — get used to it already!” Yet adjustment to change takes time — and always will. Coping with the turmoil and uncertainty that change engenders and journeying to a new sense of stability are not overnight processes.

People generally go through an adjustment period with all types of change, whether it’s an announcement of a layoff, an unanticipated promotion, an upgrade people have craved (or dreaded), an abrupt shift in priorities, or yet another reorganization (to name just a few). Whether people experience the change as positive or negative, their initial reaction may include confusion, forgetfulness, withdrawal, and a variety of emotions, such as anger, frustration or excitement. As they adjust to the New Way, they may experience a dip in performance and an increase in errors. This unsettled and perhaps unsettling transition period is familiar to people who have excelled at a sport or hobby, and who then endure a temporary period of awkwardness and incompetence as they strive to attain the next level.

The duration of this adjustment period varies from one person to another and one situation to another; however, if you are in charge of implementing the change, the way you communicate can shorten that adjustment period — or prolong it. To expedite the adjustment process, consider explicitly explaining to those affected that you know they need time to adjust. Point out that adapting to something that’s new and unexpected can be difficult. Show respect for the reality of what they are experiencing.

The lesson: *If you accept the fact that implementing change takes time, you will save time in implementing change.*

Shut up and adjust, already!

An example of how *not* to communicate during times of change occurred in the context of a service level agreement (SLA) implementation. After extensive negotiation, service provider and customer personnel completed an SLA that both parties

were satisfied with. But the service provider manager then made a huge mistake: He told his staff — the people who would have to deliver service that met the terms of the agreement — “It’s done, so live with it!”

Most of his staff were unfamiliar with SLAs and knew nothing about how the agreement would affect their service strategies. Fearing the worst, they were thrown into chaos by this sudden announcement. Morale plunged, taking productivity with it.

The manager didn’t appreciate that everyone who would be accountable for the success of the agreement needed time to grasp what was in it and to understand how it would affect their workload, their responsibilities, and their relationships. They needed help in understanding what they would now have to do differently. They needed to know how they’d benefit by the agreement. They needed information, education, and the feeling that someone understood what they were going through.

The organizations that are most effective at easing people through the chaos associated with SLA-triggered change recognize the importance of two important communication practices. First, they communicate the terms of the agreement to affected personnel, explaining how these terms came to be, and inviting employees to voice their concerns and questions. Second, before making the agreement operational, they seek feedback from those who will be responsible for its success.

This process of two-way communication — presenting information *to* affected personnel and soliciting information *from* them — helps people adjust to change. It’s an especially valuable approach when the change involves a new technology, methodology, tool or process. 

This article is adapted from the section on communicating during times of change from my book, **Communication Gaps and How to Close Them**. For the table of contents, an excerpt on change, and an interview about the book, see <http://www.nkarten.com/book2.html>.

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