

# **Value-Added Sales & Strategic Communication**

**Communication Awareness: What do you see in the picture – an older or younger woman?**



Communication is the most frequently-used tool in the selling process. Unfortunately, miscommunication happens more than most of us realize, as it is quite common for different people to see and hear different things while being presented with the same information; or, as the image to your left indicates, to suddenly see familiar things in a very different way (hopefully you can see both an older and younger woman... if not, look closely; the *younger woman's chin* is the *older woman's nose*; the *younger woman's left ear* is the *older woman's left eye*...).

What you may not know is that this image has been used in studies on *predisposition*, which can be defined as “a tendency to believe or behave in a particular way before being presented with the facts.” Consider this definition and then ask yourself, “Are others *predisposed* to think a certain way about salespeople?” Most agree that the answer is, “Yes!” And also that it is our job, via strategic communication, to make sure we overcome these common predispositions and instead find ways to impact customers and prospects so they think about us in the right way. To get started, consider three simple rules about communication – simple, but not always easy!

**Rule #1:** Good communication rarely “just happens”

**Rule #2:** When engaged in managerial or coaching activities, we must take 100% of the responsibility for the creation, quality and delivery of communication.

The effectiveness of our communication is influenced by many factors. While word choice is important, we must recognize the importance of both the direct and implied messages we send. Therefore, careful consideration must be given to:

- What we say
- How we say it (implied message)
- How we look when we say it (implied message)
- What happens as a result (Follow-up)

**Rule #3:** As the sender of communication, we must strive to structure our message in a style that meshes with the thinking process and needs of the receiver – What’s in it for them! (WIIFT)

- Our value proposition... the key benefits (not features!) of our products and services
- What is our audience hoping to accomplish (versus what they “think they need”)
- Value... the implications of their problems and our solutions

**Impacting others...** When interacting with others – including customers, colleagues, managers, and prospects, what impact do you hope to have? In which ways might you hope to influence their opinions or actions... the degree to which they buy-in? In which ways might you hope to impact their predispositions and impact your business relationship?

In other words, in which ways might you hope to influence what they think, feel and say about you and your organization, and the consequential decisions they might make?

**EXERCISE:**  
When you interact with others, what would you like them to think about you and your organization?

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**EXERCISE:**  
When you interact with others, how would you like to make them feel:

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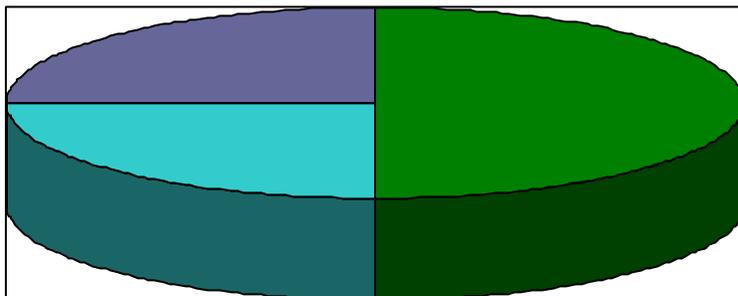
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**Why people buy-in...**



**Critical skills:**

While most tend to think of communication as primarily consisting of speaking, the truly critical skills required are:

- Planning
- Listening
- Probing
- Proactive Style

“Asking the best questions has always been more important than making the best presentations.”

—*Author, Jack Falvey*

“No man ever listened himself out of a job.”

—*Calvin Coolidge*

To be consistently successful, we must have a conscious awareness of, and a plan to manage, our communication, inclusive of all the above-listed components as well as *talk/listen ratio* during interactions with others. The ideal ratio will vary, of course, depending upon the purpose of our interaction.

**Probing & Listening** have a major effect on one-another. Good questions promote conversation, which enhances our ability to listen. Effective listening often prompts us to ask more relevant and / or clarifying questions, the answers to which enhance the effectiveness of our presentation or message.

Potentially, strong probing skills have an additional benefit. Consider political debates and other open communication forums and think about who was in control of the conversation during these exchanges... in most cases, the person asking the questions is the one in control.

The key to mastering the art of probing is to create and work from a list in advance.

**Are you “interested?”** Prior to sales calls, meetings, sales presentations, networking events and other sales-related situations, people often work hard at being INTERESTING. However, for sales, business development and client service purposes, it is much more important to be INTERESTED!

Interested people tend to ask questions. Many also take notes while others are speaking. What type of implied message might we send to others by engaging in these practices? How might this concept apply to your role as sales professionals?

**Listening – key facts and skill-builders:** Studies indicate listening is the most important of our communication skills, but it’s the one at which people are the least efficient. Listening is different from simply “hearing,” and should not be confused with having a good memory; good listening involves comprehension.

Three of the top barriers to good listening are associated with distraction:

1. Environmental distractions (external noise, ringing phones, other people...)
2. Personal or internal distractions, such as hunger, headache, or preoccupation. The most common preoccupation or distraction involves thinking about what WE will say next!
3. Rebuttal tendency – developing a counter argument while others are still speaking

**Listening skill-builders:**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Minimize distraction by preparing for sales calls, appointments or meetings in writing</li><li>• Set a talk/listen ratio as part of your pre-sales call plan – you'll behave differently if you do!</li><li>• Eye contact improves interpretation; use it! On telephone sales calls, ask more questions to compensate for the lack of it</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledgement... reference things others have said during conversations or sales calls</li><li>• Periodic summarization/clarifying questions will increase focus, engage others (3-6 times max!)</li><li>• Take notes... you'll bridge the gap between speaking/listening rates, send a positive implied message, and create a useful resource too.</li></ul>
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**4 supporting articles...**

**5 Keys to a Good Question...**

When involved in selling or business development (and also sales management!), it is critical that we truly understand our customers' needs, interests and priorities. Otherwise it is nearly impossible to gain a commitment for next steps.

Need assessment requires good communication skills —primarily probing and listening, which we have found are complementary in nature. Consider that by asking better questions we are able to uncover better information, which enables better listening and leads to better need assessment.

But be careful! It can be easy to get carried away and ask too many questions, in which case our sales call can take on the feeling of an interrogation!

Instead, it's best to prepare a series of strategic questions in advance.

**One effective exercise** is to list at least twenty things we might like to know about our customers or prospects, and then craft five or six open-ended questions that might get us the answers to all twenty items in a *more conversational* manner.

If this sounds like an exercise you might find helpful, here are five keys to implementation and, ultimately, to better probing, enhanced listening (due to the "better" answers we'll get) and greater sales success:

1. As you begin to think about the questions you will create, focus on what people hope to accomplish rather than what they "think they need" — this is consistent with a consultative style. You might also work backwards from the typical problems you and your organization solve.
2. Create a list of questions in advance (in writing!) based on these guidelines:
  - a. Create both open-ended and closed-ended questions — then you will be able to select appropriately during sales calls to control flow. Open-ended questions (those that can't be answered with a simple "Yes" or "No") promote conversation, while closed-ended questions tend to curb it.
  - b. Create polite "prompts" — these are helpful for asking others to continue... to tell you more.
  - c. Create trial closing questions to test receptivity — as opposed to "closing" questions, which seek decisions, trial closing questions seek opinions; they facilitate easier closing because we are gaining useful feedback throughout the process. What do you think so far?
  - d. Create statement / question combinations to promote or confirm understanding or to give people "amnesty" by explaining others have encountered similar issues. These combinations begin with a clarifying statement, such as, "Many people tell us they have trouble handling X, Y and Z... how does your organization deal with these challenges?"
3. Ask only purposeful questions — each question is asked for a reason, so it is important; don't accept vague or incomplete answers (see item #2-bullet b); keep in mind that vague answers are often due to poor questions! Always acknowledge answers.
4. Ask only one question at a time, and let others answer each question
5. Use your list during meetings and sales calls. Conduct on-going post-call assessments — were your questions effective? If so, use them again; if not, improve as necessary!

## I Heard, but I Didn't Listen

### 10 SKILL-BUILDERS FOR BETTER LISTENING

Research data indicates that "listening" is the most important communication skill, and that it is also the most frequently-used communication skill. Unfortunately, it's also the one at which most of us are the least efficient. To improve our skills, it might be wise to first recognize a few often-forgotten truths about listening.

To begin, **listening should not be confused with "hearing."** Hearing is something we can do without thinking, as in hearing background music or the sounds of traffic while we work or drive. Listening, on the other hand, involves comprehension; it can also have an impact on our audience because others can observe the fact we're listening to them and they tend to react with positive feelings about us as well as about themselves (i.e., they feel important or that their message is being deemed as important).

In addition, **listening should not be confused with having a good memory.** If people don't remember what we tell them it may not be due to the fact they are poor listeners. Some people are unable to retain information over time, despite having listened attentively to those who shared the information with them.

It might also be helpful to recognize the fact that **we all have a tendency to refute what others say.** In fact, this rebuttal tendency has been identified as one of the top three barriers to good listening because as soon we shift our focus away from what others are saying and instead focus on how we will argue with it, we have compromised our ability to listen.

Similarly, it's important to recognize that **we can't listen well if we are distracted;** and one of the most common distractions involves shifting our focus away from what others are saying and instead focusing on what WE will say or ask next. Fortunately there are a number of things we can do to improve our ability and capacity to listen. Here are 10 listening skill-builders:

1. Maintain eye contact during face-to-face conversations. Studies show that our ability to both listen and comprehend increases significantly when we do so.
2. Don't talk as much. Consider that it is nearly impossible to listen if we are speaking!
3. Make a conscious effort to associate what people say; ask clarifying questions. This is especially important when communicating by telephone since we have no eye contact.
4. Ask more open-ended questions (i.e., those that require more than a one-word response). This can help us to talk less because the structure of our questions will be prompting others to speak more.
5. Don't interrupt
6. Create a written plan for meetings and important conversations; include a list of objectives as well as a few questions you'll ask and statements you might make
7. Maintain an open mind and objectivity — a conscious effort to do so reduces our rebuttal tendency.
8. Take notes during meetings and important conversations (if possible) — this enables us to "listen" with not only our ears, but also our sense of touch and vision.
9. Use what is said in conversation — respond/build on what's said
10. Periodically summarize what is being discussed. This tests the quality of our listening and can motivate us to implement some of the other skill-builders that might be applicable.

## **The Next Step in Communication – Developing a Proactive Style**

Effective business communication is a critical component of success, whether selling, managing, marketing or just trying to get along with others.

While there are obviously many facets of communication, there is one simple habit that, if well developed and consistently executed, will improve your business communication and success level significantly.

When asked to identify this habit, most people think it involves the conveyance of one's message – either a smooth or powerful delivery, or a pleasant voice tone. Others suggest that the best communicators are good listeners, and some opine that the art of asking good questions is the key.

These are all very important elements of good communication, but none of these represents the habit to which we refer. The critical skill we have in mind is the one that helps you make things happen. It is the habit that brings about action! And, as promised, it is simple...

It is the practice of specifically identifying and scheduling the next steps that are consequential to your communication – consequential to your discussions, your meetings, your teleconferences, your interviews, your sales calls, and so on.

If this seems too simplistic, please think again. Consider the fact that all business communication, regardless of its form, must be purposeful. We conduct meetings to share information on which people must act. We make sales calls so that people will buy. We run training sessions to help people perform better. We go on interviews with hopes of being hired; we conduct interviews with hopes of hiring. Each form of business communication has a purpose, and that purpose involves action.

So, for example, at the end of each sales call, what can we do to make something happen? What can we say at the end of each meeting to make sure everyone is on-board with the conclusions drawn and that each participant is clear on his or her role in implementing agreed-upon solutions or processes? After meeting a new prospect at a networking event, is there a way to end our conversation that will result in a meaningful future discussion about a business relationship?

The answers to all of these questions may vary in content, but in principle they're all the same – we must identify and then arrange the next steps, and we must do so definitively.

For instance, after meeting a good prospect at a trade show, it is far better to arrange a specific follow-up plan such as, "I'll call you Monday at 3pm," rather than a vague plan such as, "I'll call you next week!"

"It has been nice meeting with you today, Ms. Buyer. Based on the information you've shared, I'll put together a formal proposal for outfitting your facility with widgets. Can we schedule a brief meeting to review the proposal's details? How about next Wednesday or Thursday...?"

"OK sales team, our goals for the upcoming week are clear. Along with our regular sales calls, each of us will make twenty-five additional courtesy calls to current customers because we've all agreed that retention levels must be improved. These calls will be documented in the newly-created section of our CRM program, and we'll get together on Wednesday at 4pm to discuss progress – any questions?"

## **Follow-up & Glue...**

Selling is a process, not a one-time event, and it is best to adopt the proper long-term perspective if we'd like to achieve long-term success.

Using the circular visual below as a guide, there are two important yet often over-looked fundamentals to consider:

1. The selling process never ends; once we meet a prospect and go through the cycle once, our goal is to maintain an appropriate contact frequency based on a number of need-based variables, and to identify a new need at some future point
2. The ability to move at an optimal pace from one step to the next and to do so in unison with our customers is the key to success

Once we adopt the proper long-term view, the means by which we will move from step to step is follow-up. In fact, we often refer to effective follow-up as the "glue" that keeps the process together and moving forward. If we follow-up diligently, on a value-added basis and with the right frequency, we'll be able to keep the process (and the customer) moving toward our ultimate goal.

But be advised! If we move too slowly, we run the risk of losing-out to a competitor or to shifting priorities; if we move too quickly, or skip steps, we're likely to alienate or lose the customer.

Therefore it is imperative that we maintain a keen awareness of the process steps, establish goals for each and master the art of follow-up.

## Planning Our Communication

A simple yet extremely effective method of planning *exceptional sales calls* – as well as customer meetings, appointments, follow-up interactions, or even internal meetings – involves the 3 P’s:

### Purpose: (objectives)?

- If all goes well, what do I hope to accomplish?
- What fall-back positions might I consider?
- Multiple objectives based on how we’d like to impact others (make them think & feel about us), and what we’d like to learn about them...
- What should happen next as a result...? (proactive)

“There are three types of people – those who make things happen, those who wait for things to happen, and those who don’t even know anything *is* happening!”  
– Howard Wight

### Process:

- What will I say? (i.e., for meetings this will include creating and using an agenda...)
- What will I ask? (open-ended & closed-ended questions to promote interaction)
- How will I say or ask it...? (how will my message be perceived)

### Payoff:

- W.I.I.F.T.?
- Why should they listen to me? (In terms of benefits)

Executing the above-listed plan and then using the planning document as a post-sales-call or post-meeting review sheet can help to refine the process. This will result in greater and more consistent success for all interactions – sales calls, customer meetings, important telephone conversations and so on... and as the following exercise will show you’ll often be able to do more in less time!

When planning your next sales call, consider that there are additional objectives and inclusions that go beyond your primary objective... beyond the task or business at hand.” Can you list six?

Primary objective: \_\_\_\_\_

Other objectives:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

3 P's Planning Worksheet:

(see sample on page 11)

**PURPOSE:** If all goes well, what do I hope to accomplish?

**PROCESS:** What will I ask? What will I say? Body language?

**PAYOFF:** Why should they listen to me? WIIFT?

Sample 3 P's Planning Worksheet:

**PURPOSE:** If all goes well, what do I hope to accomplish? Here are 10 sample possibilities:

1. Build or further the business relationship
2. Complete a thorough situational analysis... including business drivers, priorities or related initiatives
3. Identify or confirm decision making and evaluation processes
4. Identify or confirm the identity of influencers and stakeholders, such as procurement or finance contacts
5. Identify ideal timelines
6. Learn about the competitive landscape
7. Learn about related past experiences with competitors or possibly with your organization (did this prospect work with your organization while employed elsewhere?)
8. Identify short-term and long-term needs; related needs
9. Present value based on what you've learned
10. Schedule a proactive next step that keeps the process moving forward – this might be your primary objective; if, however, the meeting or conversation didn't go as well as planned, this 'next step' might be one of your secondary or back-up objectives. In either case, BEWARE of the one-sided close in which the customer or prospect does not commit to any action step; to truly move the process forward the customer or prospect must agree to take action.

**PROCESS:** What will I ask? What will I say? Body language

**Sample**

Complete the exercise on page 5 as an example of how you might complete the PROCESS section

**PAYOFF:** Why should they listen to me? WIIFT? Here are 5 sample "value-prop" benefit statements

1. Increase productivity by 25% within 90 days...
2. Reduce cycle time by one-third within the first month...
3. Increase sales revenue by 10% per year, and grow your competitive advantage...
4. Improve customer satisfaction and loyalty by a significant margin within the first quarter...
5. Enhance team morale, and reduce turnover and absenteeism by ½ in the first six months