

The Point of Listening Is Not What You Hear, but the Hearing Itself

by [Charles H. Green](#) on Friday, October 26, 2007 (post #193)

In the category of “Things We Find Completely Obvious—But Aren’t True,” number one—the classic in this category—was “The Earth Is Flat.”

Number 27 is: “Listen to Customers to Identify their Needs and Wants.”

Seems obvious. Listen to learn, so that you can then:

- tweak what you’re selling to fit what they need, or
- find someone else who can give the customer what they need, or
- change the problem definition so you can help them get something else they need.

That’s what just about any sales book will tell you.

But—just like Flat Earth—it turns out to be wrong. Or, to be clear—less than 100% right. Way less.

Sure, you listen for specs. And you listen for missing benefits. And you listen for opportunities to meet those needs and wants and provide those benefits.

But there’s something much, much bigger at stake.

The *main* reason for listening to customers is to allow the customer to be heard.

Really heard.

As in, another human being actually paying attention to them.

Listening for the sake of listening.

Listening to understand, period—no strings attached, no links back to your product, no refined problem statements.

Not listening to do a brain-suck.

Not listening to pounce on needs, which are one nano-second away from selling opportunities.

Not listening with an ulterior motive, or even a secondary motive.

Just listening for the sake of listening.

Because that’s what people in relationships, at their best, really do. They listen because they want to know what the other person thinks. About whatever the other person is interested in talking about.

You won’t find that in sales books. You’ll find a million questions aimed at furthering problem definition, or moving toward a close, or “handling” objections.

But you won't find too many books ([mine is an exception](#); so is Brooks and Travesano's "[You're Working Too Hard to Make the Sale](#)") that talk about the power of just plain listening.

But that power is huge. Pure listening, for its own sake, validates other people. It connects us to them. It provides meaning.

Brooks and Travesano note that people greatly prefer to buy what they need from those who understand what it is that they want.

Read that over again, carefully.

People prefer to buy what they need (stuff they're going to buy anyway), from those who understand them on the basis of what they want (things in life they'd love to have—wishes, hopes, desires.)

You don't even have to give them what they want; it's enough to understand them.

This triggers the reciprocity interchange between people; according to [Robert Cialdini](#), the most powerful factor affecting influence.

And therein lies the paradox. The most powerful way to sell depends on giving up your attachment to selling—and instead, just listen. Not listening for anything. Just listening.

Listen not for what you hear—but for the act of listening itself.

It is that act that creates value, and relationships.

And—if you can let it be a side-effect, not a goal—sales too.

(Here are some ideas on [how to do it](#)).

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