

Why Listening Is So Hard

There's an old joke that goes something like this: When God was passing out brains I thought he said trains and I missed mine. And when He was passing out looks, I thought He said books and I said I don't want any.

Then there's this one:

Man #1 - "I thought you said your dog doesn't bite."

Man #2 - "That's not my dog."

In the world of humor it can be funny when people misunderstand each other. In the world of customer service, not so much. Here's just one example I came across on my internet scavenger hunt for agent listening fails (from katenasser.com):

"My father passed away. I called a credit card company to cancel his account. I said, "My name is Debra. My father Pat passed away and I am the Executor of the Estate. I am calling to cancel his account."

The rep replied, "Well, I need to talk to Pat."

I said, "Listen very carefully. He's DEAD – now if you want to talk to him, you'll have to figure out how to. GIVE ME YOUR SUPERVISOR!"

See? Not funny.

Call centers recognize the importance of listening. Many train their agents in the art of active listening. It's a skill in which the listener asks clarifying questions during the conversation and then sums up the facts at the end in order to confirm with the speaker that they have understood them. It's a great skill to have and transforms the simple act of hearing into the more fruitful act of listening.

But is active listening enough? Perhaps not always. There are times when simply being able to recite what someone says may not be enough to really comprehend the situation. For example, in the second joke, the first guy properly synthesized part of the information (that the other guy's dog doesn't bite), but he missed a critical piece of information - which dog belongs to man #2?

I see this happen pretty frequently just in my every day interactions and I've witnessed it in the call center. Sometimes people get the facts but still don't really understand what the other person is saying. This is an indication that someone needs to work on their listening comprehension skills. In fact, a lot of people would benefit from such an effort.

If you think about a typical K-12 curriculum, there is a respectable amount of focus on reading comprehension. It's even a topic on some standardized tests. But students are not normally taught listening comprehension skills. That's a shame because according to researchers [Ralph G. Nichols and Leonard A. Stevens](#), "As a fair reader and a bad listener, the typical student is graduated into a society where the chances are high that he will have to listen about three times as much as he reads."

There are a couple of ramifications for contact centers. The first one is to expect to train all agents on listening skills, and try to take it beyond active listening techniques and into real

listening comprehension. The second one has to do with screening tools for job applicants. Does it make sense to screen for listening skills if so many people are under-trained in this area? Just some food for thought.

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