

RENTONS' BUSINESS TIPS



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HAPPY NEW YEAR

Thank you to all of those who told us they enjoyed reading Rentons' Business Tips and in particular, Peter Renton's article *Working From Your Soul* in the October 2001 issue. Another article from Peter Renton - *The Art of Listening* is included in this issue.

To read articles from earlier editions you can click on Free Business Tips at www.austcredit.com.au.

Thank you for all of your business in the past year, especially to those who helped make 2001

our busiest Christmas season ever. This is much appreciated. I hope you all have a successful year in 2002.

Happy New Year

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ian Renton".

Ian Renton
Managing Director
Australian Credit Stationers



Ian Renton
Managing Director
Australian Credit Stationers

THE ART OF LISTENING

In today's world it is difficult to be a good listener. We are bombarded with noisy distractions and vast amounts of information every day. Televisions scream at us, cell phones squeal, drivers honk, and then we go to work and sit in front of a computer all day. Is it any wonder our brains have erected barriers to protect us from sensory overload - we need these barriers in order to function in the modern world. But the price we pay is that we become more closed. We have less real interaction with other people and so we feel less connected with each other. Our ability to genuinely relate with other human beings is reduced and truly listening to each other has become more difficult.

Listening is a skill that is so important in our professional and personal lives. Yet, it is almost never discussed. It is taken for granted that anyone who has ears can listen, even though we recognize some people are better listeners than others. In business, being a good listener can make the difference between making and losing the sale, or as is the case in collection - between collecting the money and writing the money off as a bad debt. So here I will explore some things you can try to help you become a better listener.

1. Be Present

How many times have you been in a conversation with someone and found your mind wandering? Before you know it, you have "left" the conversation and you have no idea what the other person is saying. We have all done it. In these situations I try hard to let go of my thoughts and bring my focus back to the present moment, to what is being said right now. It is only when I am completely in the moment

that I can hear what is really being said.

When you are really present with someone, particularly in person, you can hear not only what they are saying, but what they are trying to say - the whole truth of it. There are the more obvious non-verbal clues such as facial expressions, gestures and posture. There are also subtle changes in tone of voice that can be picked up in person or in a phone conversation that can add meaning to the words being said. And you will only pick up these subtle clues if you are completely present with the person who is talking.

2. Reflective Listening

This is a technique that is really useful when talking with someone about a complex problem or a difficult topic. It is something that therapists and psychologists have been using for generations. It involves just repeating in your own words what the other person just said. For instance, if someone says to you, "I am so mad he said that to me", you could say "I can see you're angry about it - what did he say?" Rather than try and fix anything or give an opinion, you are allowing them to feel what they are feeling and encouraging them to share it with you.

In collection, reflective listening can be a really useful tool. Obviously when you get a payment promise from your customer you should repeat it to them so there is complete agreement on the expectations. You can also use it when the person is getting a little upset or angry, similar to the example I used above. In this way it can diffuse a potentially combative situation as the person talking feels seen and understood.

THE ART OF LISTENING (cont.)

3. Control Your Reactivity

Being a good listener is difficult, and this is probably the most difficult component of all. If someone says something provocative, that makes us feel angry or hurt, it is natural to want to react and respond in a similar fashion. But is that really serving us? It might make us feel a little better but we know in these situations we often say things that we wish later we hadn't said. Not only that, we can miss entirely the point the other person is trying to make when our emotions take hold.

In business situations, particularly in collection, when someone is angry it is rarely personal. They might feel the company has mistreated them, or they may be feeling very stressed because they have major financial problems. If you can just listen to them without a reaction, eventually they will end their tirade and at this point you can show them that you have really heard them. Often, that is all they are seeking. And if you can listen to them without reacting you will be far more likely to reach agreement.

4. Keep an Open Mind

Listening can never be complete if we are hearing everything through the filter of our own judgments and assumptions. If we do this, we often fill in the blanks ourselves and we miss what the other person is really trying to communicate. That is how misunderstandings occur, usually because we have assumed something that the other person did not mean at all.

Keeping an open mind, free of your own ideas and judgments, is easier said than done. The first step is really just being aware that you do it. The next time you are in a conversation, notice your thoughts and you will see many judgments and ideas arise as your mind attempts to "fill in the gaps" in the conversation. Not only that, but if we are talking with a good friend or spouse, we make so many assumptions because we "know who they are" that we can miss subtle changes, and consequently misunderstand what they are trying to say.

5. Practice Listening

The great thing about listening is that you can practice it all the time. The next time you meet with a customer, make a collection phone call, talk with your boss or a loved one you can give some of these things a try. Just try listening with more awareness; that in itself can make a huge difference.

In collection, we get a LOT of practice listening. Every time you pick up the phone it is another opportunity to hone your listening skills. Not only that, but we often come up against very challenging situations, where good listening and a calm mind are distinct advantages.



Peter Renton
President
Rentons Inc.

Listening is an underrated and underdeveloped skill in today's world. But like anything else, it is a skill that can be developed.

When I first started trying to listen more consciously I was amazed by how much more I could learn from a conversation. It can make a huge difference, not just in your job, but also in your relationships with friends, your spouse and your children. And best of all, it is fun. Thanks for your attention.

16 QUICK MANAGEMENT TIPS

1. Set an example.
2. Give clear instructions.
3. Delegate responsibility and authority as well as tasks.
4. Keep employees informed.
5. Get to know each employee personally.
6. Be honest.
7. Provide regular feedback on performance.
8. Encourage staff development including the learning of new skills.
9. Improve your knowledge and skills.
10. Treat everyone equally.
11. Provide a pleasant working environment for your staff.
12. Be positive and motivated.
13. Challenge your staff.
14. Explain how your staff fit into the bigger picture and the future direction of the business.
15. Blend the skills of your staff to make a successful team.
16. Create a sense of fun in the work place.

FOR MORE INFORMATION



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QUOTATIONS TO PONDER

Insanity is hereditary — you get it from your children. - Sam Levenson

It is through the creative art of listening that we at once love and are loved.

- Brenda Ueland