The Baron Group, Inc.

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Are you Listening?

It never hurts to step back and think about listening. Some call it a skill; others call it an art; still others call it a behavior. Call it what you will—the one thing we know for sure is that it is a very hard thing to do well all the time.

The research makes this abundantly clear. Here are some of the statistics we have shared with you in the past. They vary a bit as they are derived from different sources, but the message is certainly consistent:

- People remember 10% of what they hear; 20% of what they see; 50% of what they hear *and* see.
- If you go to a 30-minute lecture in the morning, you will forget 70% of what you heard by mid-afternoon.
- Attention spans are short—depending on whose research you are quoting, they can range from 5 to 90 seconds.
- We process information at a rate that exceeds the rate of speech by a factor of six to eight, or in simple terms, we think much faster than the people to whom we are listening to can speak.

Listening is difficult. Many people believe that we simply aren't wired to listen effectively. Our minds are always racing ahead and as a result we tend to miss so much of what people say. That is why those frightening statistics hold up.

As sales professionals we have to listen. We talk so often about the critical importance of questioning, but if we don't listen at 112% to the answers, the brilliant questions don't get us the results we need.

Our job is to do whatever we can to offset our tendencies that work against our ability to listen. Remember, as sales professionals we are the eyes and ears of the organization.

Most salespeople can quickly explain why it is so difficult to listen. They have no difficulty listing the barriers. Here are ones we hear most often:

- Thinking about what we want to say
- Anticipating what the client will say
- Rehearsing our response
- Trying to understand what was said
- Preoccupation with something else
- Boredom, disinterest, discomfort

The list goes on and on, but those are the most common responses. They probably sound familiar as we discussed them at length during the training.

And when you put all this in perspective, you realize that listening is not a passive act. That is why so many communication skills advocates consistently refer to *active listening* as the approach we need to use.

And as salespeople, we must never forget that quite often what someone says later in a sentence or later in a conversation is more important to them than what they say early. So when we tune out we risk not learning what is most important to them.

So what do you do about it? Here are five reminders to consider:

1. **Be aware of the problem—**"Forewarned is forearmed." Knowing how challenging listening can be is the first step.
2. **Take notes—**or as we prefer to say, **make notes.** Any time an idea or response or need or objection or even a distraction occurs to you, drop out for a second or two and get it on paper. Write down that key word or two that will remind you of what you were thinking.

3. **"Double Click"**—Asking the client to say a little more about what is on their mind gives you a better opportunity to hear what they are saying. So if someone says: "this is making me uncomfortable," ask them "what is it about it that makes you uncomfortable?" By double clicking on *uncomfortable*, you will learn a lot more and listen better.

4. **Paraphrase, paraphrase, and paraphrase again—**Let the client know you heard them. Review your understanding. Review those needs. Restate or reframe those objections. Do whatever it takes to make sure you understand what the client has said.

5. **Be present—**Stay in the moment. Don't digress. Do what you can to keep those barriers from impacting your listening ability. If you are distracted, force yourself back. If you are preoccupied, make a note and jump back in. If you are bored, remind yourself that only boring people get bored.

The bottom line is that you have to listen. You know that as a sales professional, everything you do has to focus on the client. There is no alternative. When you look at the barriers you can't help but notice that the items on the list have one thing in common—we are listening to ourselves, not the client. It's about us. And that is not so good, but of course, you know that.

Remember the old adage: when you meet someone new and like them, it is usually because they listened to you, appeared interested in you, wanted to learn about you and let you speak. It is hard to like people who are self-absorbed. Let's make sure that when we interact with our clients, when we leave they know that they have been heard and that we were listening. Chances are they will like you a heck of a lot more than the guy who didn't focus on them.

And you know what's coming—impress those people in your non-working life by letting them know you heard them. They want you to listen as well. Maybe even more than your clients do!

Very truly yours,

The Baron Group