

The Importance of Listening

Most of us start our work week with a thousand things on our minds. We spend a lot of time thinking about what we're going to do to keep our business in the black. We make decisions and give directions, advertise our messages and try to communicate the uniqueness of our brand. In spite of our best efforts, it can be a struggle just to keep our doors open, especially in a challenging economy. Rushing about, selling and buying, paying bills and planning, some days it may feel like we are going in circles, swimming against a downward spiral threatening to pull us under.

If you're reading this right now, perhaps while you hurriedly gulp down a quick bite, I want to ask you to do something, just for a few minutes. Stop. Be still. Something may be missing in your marketing and the way you run your business. It is absolutely crucial to your success and to your well-being that you cultivate strong listening skills...and that you act on what you hear. Let's look at a few different ways to listen and see how they can help you and your customers enjoy your business more.

Listen to your customers. How often do you really talk to them and hear what they think and feel? Do you know what's going on in their lives, their needs and their challenges. Forget about telling them what you think they need and discern what they actually need. If you truly hear them, truly feel what they do, then you will be able to serve them in a mutually-beneficial way.

Listen to the market. What is motivating people right now in the decisions they make? People are trying to drive less, eat out more often, cut back on expenses. Why? Because we are all feeling the pinch of rising prices and market uncertainty. A business, a restaurant for example, may react by raising menu prices to make up for increased food costs and diminished traffic. Makes sense on paper. But stop. Be still. Listen. People are not eating at home more because they like fitting meal preparation and cleanup into their already busy days. In stressful times, they need more than ever to have the experience of eating out now and then. What if a restaurant owner stopped listening to the voices telling her or him to raise prices and really saw and heard the customer? The owner might realize that, instead of raising prices, making it even more difficult for people to justify eating out, it might make more sense to lower prices. What if cutting back portion sizes a little bit or making other adjustments could help people afford to still enjoy the dining

out experience? What if a restaurant focused on giving present customers reasons to come back and bring others with them, like giving them incentives for bringing in guests? Imagine if advertising spoke to people's desire to to enjoy eating out on a budget? What if the menu was changed around a bit and some "small plates" in the \$8.00 range were made available in addition to the full \$16.00 meals? Maybe that "plate-splitting fee" could go bye-bye for a while. Your customers understand the pressures every business faces. They will understand and may have some great ideas to share. Ask and listen.

Listen to yourself. No, not that chatterbox called the human brain—listen to your heart. It will tell you what you need to do, if you take the time to listen to it. Sometimes, this subconscious "knowing" will run counter to what your mind tells you to do. But if you can block out the yammering mind for a bit, you may hear a small but persistent voice communicating a creative solution. If you are feeling stressed and unhappy, maybe your heart is trying to tell you that you are struggling too hard to open a locked door and you need to try another one.

I want you to do four things as soon as you have a chance. **One:** Sit down with a customer and listen to what they have to say. **Two:** Look around you, aware of the people going by, their body-language and expressions. What are they feeling, and what does that tell you? **Three:** Take a few hours, or a day, to go somewhere quiet and listen to your heart while your head stays quiet for a while. You might be surprised at the insights you gain, and you might just find that what you thought was the wolf at your door was actually opportunity knocking.

Oh, yeah...and the forth thing is to call us or send us an email and share your ideas with us. We're ready to listen. hello@sublimecreativeagency.com. ●