

Listening for those unspoken questions

By Linda Julian

Many professionals are good listeners. Some are not. Just about every lawyer or other professional would do well to hone their listening skills, and to listen ultra-carefully for all those important - but unspoken - questions.

Nearly everyone likes a good listener. In the professional services arena, clients want more than listening, they want action, but careful listening is a great start.

Here are a few pointers to help you hone your listening skills, and leverage the benefits which can follow.

Hearing. If you're in even the slightest doubt, get your hearing checked out. Don't expect to be a great listener unless you can hear well.

Beyond the age of forty, most of us have some measure of hearing loss, sufficient to diminish our ability to hear well within normal conversation ranges.

So, if you do have hearing loss, either become adept at compensating, or if it's significant loss, get some help from today's great technology. Let's be clear, it's far better to be pigeon holed as someone needing hearing help than as someone who just doesn't get the message !

Mindset. Good listening depends on a mindset of truly wanting to listen to another's story, opinion, or experience.

Many professionals have been too strongly acculturated to spending any silent time preparing the next argument, piece of information, or advice to be superb listeners.

Mood. Patience is integral to good listening. Allow time for the full story to be told. That may mean resisting the temptation to interrupt.

Calm acceptance that stories take time, and that story tellers may "wander" around a subject is a good first step.

If there isn't time to really listen, consider rescheduling the conversation for a time when there is.

Mirroring and pacing. A good listener will mirror - to a reasonable extent - the posture and body language of the storyteller. This increases personal rapport and comfort in the listening process.

Extreme mirroring won't help - be careful not to caricature or parody by crassly copying the exact gestures or poses you see across the table.

An effective listener will also carefully "pace" a conversation to manage emotion and energy levels. Picking up the pace to "energise" a story teller often proves effective.

Probing. Gently asking other questions which probe out more information, signals your understanding, comprehension, and acceptance of the listener's story. This is a technique worth refining.

www.julianmidwinter.com.au

Tel +61 2 9968 4168
Fax +61 2 9960 4480

Suite 16 357 Military Road
Mosman NSW 2088
Australia

Email julianmidwinter@julianmidwinter.com.au

ACN 002 118 818

Support and rapport. Gentle nods indicating that you are listening and focussing, small interjections in agreement (like "yes, I see" and similar) will help you support their storytelling and confirm that you are actively listening.

Note making. In business settings, note making is a useful way of indicating that you are truly listening, concentrating, and doing your best to understand.

Plus, notemaking will help you recall what you've heard !

Summarising. Retaining and summarising confirms you've listened and heard.

By honing your listening skills, you'll go a long way to developing trust, instilling confidence, and confirming yourself as the right choice expert.

Unspoken questions

Before a client selects a new lawyer or other expert professional, they need answers to several questions.

While it might be easier if these questions were clearly articulated, you'll score high marks for anticipation by dealing effectively with "unspoken questions".

From our research, here are the general questions, which almost every prospective client has on their mind:

- Do you really know about the field in which I need help ?
- Are you the right lawyer to work with me and my team ?
- Will you give my work the attention I want ?
- Is your firm good to deal with - reliable, stable, safe, reputable ?
- Will my reputation be enhanced (or might it be damaged) by dealing with you ?
- Will you do my work at a price that I can afford ?
- Will I get value for the money I spend with you ?
- Will you be easy and comfortable for me to deal with ?

For each new client, take a few minutes to work through these unspoken questions until your answers are short, clear, and truly persuasive.

Then, listen ultra-carefully for the answers

About the author: *Linda Julian is a director of Julian Midwinter & Associates, strategic practice development consultants to the legal profession. Nearly three decades experience working with legal practices throughout Australia, Asia, and the Pacific, place her in a unique position to advise on strategic marketing and practical business development issues. Her down-to-earth, pragmatic approach to the critical business issues facing the profession, combined with creative ideas and pragmatic advice, make her a popular conference speaker, regular contributor to professional journals, and an in-demand consultant and advisor.*