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DEVELOPING STRONG LISTENING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

In this chapter you will learn:

♦ The characteristics and benefits of active listening

♦ How to avoid the distractions that prevent good listening

♦ How to build rapport and trust with customers who have varying communication styles

Listening and communication skills are two of the most basic and important skills that help desk analysts must possess. Analysts take in information by listening. They use both verbal and nonverbal skills to communicate. These skills are important because analysts must communicate and listen actively when customers provide information about their problems or requests. In return, analysts must respond in ways that give customers a sense of confidence that they are being heard and understood. They must also deliver information in a way that is meaningful to their customers. Good listening and communication skills benefit both of the parties involved in a conversation and can be improved through practice.

Learning to communicate with customers around the world is particularly important to the growing number of help desks that provide global support. Communicating with people of different cultures can be challenging. Languages and rules about proper behavior when communicating may vary from one country to the next. A willingness to learn about cultural differences and make a conscious effort to overcome those differences are keys to communicating with international customers.

When working as a help desk analyst, you must develop strong listening and communication skills so that you can communicate effectively with customers, coworkers, managers, and other service providers, such as internal support groups and vendors. This chapter focuses on how to be an active listener and

avoid the distractions that prevent good listening. You will also learn how to be an effective communicator and how to identify and respond to the varying communication styles you may encounter.

THE POWER OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Listening is a skill that is important to many professions. For example, skilled negotiators listen carefully and understand the other party's needs before they make a compromising offer. Top salespeople concentrate on listening to avoid talking customers out of a sale. What does this have to do with customer support? Well, at times in customer support, analysts must be skilled negotiators—remember that *can do* attitude—and at times analysts must be sales-people. You can't always give customers what they want, but if you listen actively you can at least acknowledge and try to address what customers need.

In a survey conducted by the Help Desk Institute, 94.5% of respondents cited listening as the most important quality for a support person ("Help Desk Institute 2003 Practices Survey," Help Desk Institute, 2003, p. 51). In fact, listening has been ranked the most important quality since the Help Desk Institute began surveying its members in 1990. Why? Because customers are living, breathing human beings and a basic human need is to be heard and understood.

> *You can convey no greater honor than actually hearing what someone has to say.*
> Philip Crosby

Listening, like speaking and writing, is hard work; it requires thought and can be improved through practice. You have to *want* to listen. Listening is even more challenging when you are facing a difficult situation such as an upset or angry customer. In difficult situations, you need to stay calm and focused and avoid becoming defensive or offensive.

NOTE Chapter 5 explores techniques for handling difficult customer situations.

TIP Self-listening is an important form of listening. If you could assume the perspective of others and hear what you say and how you say it, you might, at times, be appalled. You need to listen to yourself to ensure you are presenting yourself in a positive manner. When others do not respond in the way you expect, you need to honestly assess your words and tone of voice in an effort to become a better communicator.

Whether you are interacting with customers, coworkers, friends, or family members, listening enables you to understand the other person's needs. Only then can you concentrate

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on fulfilling those needs. Furthermore, it is not enough to just listen, you must listen *actively* so the other person knows that you are listening.

Being an Active Listener

Listening means making an effort to hear something—paying attention. Analysts with good listening skills can focus on what the speaker is saying to obtain the information needed to handle problems and requests quickly and correctly. They can convey a caring attitude and build rapport with the speaker by using active listening. **Active listening** involves participating in a conversation and giving the speaker a sense of confidence that he or she is being heard. **Passive listening** involves simply taking in information and shows little regard for the speaker. Table 2-1 compares the characteristics of active and passive listening.

Table 2-1   Active versus passive listening

Active Listeners	Passive Listeners
Ask questions and respond to the speaker	Take in information without questions
Verify understanding	Accept information at face value
Pay attention to *what* is being said and *how* it is being said	Show little regard for the feeling with which the information is being communicated

This section explores each active listening characteristic and discusses ways you can demonstrate that you are actively listening.

Ask Questions and Respond to the Speaker.   Customers do not typically contact the help desk because everything is going well. They are calling because they have a problem or because they need information about a product or service. Sometimes, customers can articulate their needs succinctly. Other times, customers aren't exactly sure why they are experiencing a problem or what it is that they need. They just know they can't get their job done. By asking appropriate and relevant questions and by assimilating and acknowledging the information the customer is providing, you can solve the problem or at least determine the next steps to take.

Successful analysts often develop checklists they can use to diagnose problems and methodically identify solutions. In some companies, level two service providers also develop checklists in an effort to enhance the abilities of level one analysts. These checklists help to ensure that analysts have correctly identified the failing hardware, software, or network component. A methodical approach also enables analysts to avoid making assumptions when diagnosing problems. Remember, just because a customer was using Microsoft Word when a problem occurred does not mean that the software package is the failing component. By asking questions and validating the facts given, you can better ensure that you fully understand what the customer needs.

NOTE Chapter 6 discusses how to develop problem-solving checklists.

Knowing what questions to ask is an important skill for analysts. It is also important to know when to question the answers received. This is because customers occasionally provide information that can be misleading. Customers do not intentionally provide misleading information, they may simply lack the skills to provide an accurate diagnosis. Good listening and tactful questions help you assess your customers' skill level, which in turn helps you determine how to respond or proceed. Tactful questions obtain information without offending customers. For example, asking a customer "Can you describe the steps you took before this problem occurred?" is much better than asking "What did you do?" The latter question has a condemning tone and most likely will make the customer defensive.

Keep in mind, too, that not all customers feel comfortable using technology. Some customers may be just getting started and have not yet mastered the basics. Asking a customer questions such as "Do you have Internet access?" or "Do you know how to download a patch?" is much better than assuming that the customer has Internet access or simply stating that he can download the needed patch from the Internet. On the other hand, some customers may be quite sophisticated and, in fact, may have a better understanding of a product or system than some analysts do. Active listening enables you to avoid asking questions that are unnecessary or too simple. For example, if a customer says, "I looked on your Web site and could not find any information about this problem," you know not to ask the customer if she has Internet access. Asking questions that are too simple will offend a sophisticated customer just as quickly as asking questions that are too complicated will alienate a customer who is just getting started. Asking questions that are too simple may also undermine the analyst's authority and effectiveness in the customer's mind. In other words, the customer may perceive that the analyst is new to the job.

You can get a good idea of customers' skill levels by listening to how they use jargon to describe a problem or request. **Jargon** is the specialized or technical language used by a trade or profession, in this case, the computer industry. For example, a customer who reports in a panicked voice that he has "lost" the report for his boss that he worked on all afternoon will need to hear some assurance that you can help before you begin asking questions in a nontechnical manner. On the other hand, a customer who reports that she is having a chronic, repeatable problem when running a spreadsheet macro, but only in a certain spreadsheet, will need you to acknowledge the detailed information she has given and then proceed accordingly.

How or if a customer uses acronyms can be another indicator of his or her skill. An **acronym** is a word formed from the first letters of a series of words, such as TSC for Technology Support Center. For example, a customer who reports that he is new in the Accounting department and is having trouble logging on to the system will need tactful probing in an effort to determine what system he is trying to use. On the other hand, a

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customer who calls and indicates that she got a "Cannot Open" message when trying to access a file in the AAS (Advanced Accounting System) is demonstrating a higher level of skill.

> **TIP**
> Resist the temptation to make assumptions about customers' skill levels based on their use of jargon, acronyms, and terminology. Customers may be very familiar with the technologies they use on a daily basis, but may be unfamiliar with others. Conversely, many long-term users have a fairly broad base of technical knowledge, but may not have any experience at all with specific systems. It is also important to remember that customers may know and use jargon, acronyms, and terminology that is unfamiliar to analysts. For this reason, it is best avoid language that may be confusing or uncommon to customers.

Good listening also enables you to learn the business language that customers are using to describe their work. When you understand how customers are using the technology you support to do their work, you can then provide useful tips that will help them. You may also identify ways your company's product can be enhanced to better fit your customers' business needs. If nothing else, you can help bridge the gap that can exist between the business needs of your company and the technology used to fill that need. Remember that many customers simply want to *use* technology to do their work. When they have a problem using technology or want to use the technology more efficiently or effectively, they turn to the help desk for support. Good listening enables you to understand and adjust to your customers' needs—no matter what their skill level.

Knowing when *not* to ask questions while still being responsive to customers is one of the nuances of customer service. For example, when customers are angry or in a highly agitated state, it is best to let them vent before asking questions. Customers who are upset have a story to tell. If you interrupt their story with questions they may become more upset.

> **TIP**
> In most cases, it is best to curb any tendency you may have to interrupt a speaker. Interrupting is generally considered rude and sends a signal to the speaker that you are unwilling to listen. If you catch yourself interrupting, quickly halt your interruption and say, "Excuse me. Please continue."

> **NOTE**
> One situation where it may be appropriate to interrupt a customer is if that customer is being abusive, for example, if the customer is criticizing you personally or using particularly foul language. Chapter 5 provides techniques you can use to deal with this type of situation.

When customers are angry or upset, it is best to simply listen, and, in the least intrusive way possible, respond to what the customer is saying. For example, when interacting with a customer face-to-face, maintain eye contact and nod your head to let the customer know you are listening. When interacting with an upset or angry customer over the telephone, use a verbal nod of the head to let the customer know you are listening. Verbal nods of the head include phrases such as "Uh-huh," "I see," "Go on," and "I understand" at appropriate points in the conversation. For example, use the phrase "Uh-huh" or "Go on" when you

want to encourage the customer to continue. Use phrases such as "I see" and "I understand" when you understand what the customer is telling you or when you can appreciate his or her point of view. Although you may be tempted to just be quiet and listen, that may cause the customer to become more upset. If a customer asks, "Are you listening?" you are not being responsive enough.

TIP When in doubt, keep asking questions until you feel comfortable that you have the information you need to solve the problem.

Verify Understanding.   One of the most important aspects of active listening is to verify understanding. For help desk analysts, this means verifying that you understand what a customer said and verifying that the customer understands your reply. If you are unsure of the customer's meaning or think they may be unsure of yours, then you can ask a follow-up or clarifying question. For example, when interacting with a customer face-to-face, the customer may furrow his brow or stare vacantly at you, his computer, or something on his desk. In other words, he will *look* confused. When interacting with a customer over the telephone, you may hear silence on the other end of the telephone. In either situation, the customer may question the course of action you are suggesting by inquiring, "Are you sure?" The following questions will enable you to determine the customer's level of understanding in any of these situations.

> Would you like me to repeat that?
>
> Would you like to go through that again?
>
> How does that sound?

These questions enable you to verify that the customer understands the course of action that you are proposing.

Another good technique for verifying that you understand what a customer is telling you is to **paraphrase**, or restate, the information given by the customer using slightly different words. Paraphrasing repeats something using new words and enables you to verify the meaning of, or clear away any confusion about, the information you have received.

> **Customer:** I printed the page and the words were okay, but the pictures didn't print right.
>
> **Analyst (paraphrase):** Let me make sure I understand. You printed a document and the text printed correctly but the graphics did not?

When you verify understanding, you not only satisfy the customer by ensuring the customer's needs are being met, you also promote a good working relationship with other

service providers. Level two service providers commonly complain that they received a problem from the help desk that they perceive the help desk should have been able to solve or that should have been assigned to a different level two group. Very often this occurs because help desk analysts failed to ask a sufficient number of questions or assumed they knew the answer to an unasked question. For example, when a customer reports that her printer is not working, you may be tempted to send a field engineer to her office to investigate. However, a customer may have trouble printing for a number of reasons, many of which can be diagnosed over the telephone. Asking questions is the only way to determine the actual source of the problem. Again, it never hurts to ask additional questions in an effort to make sure you fully understand your customer's needs. Be sensitive, though, and be aware that customers can become impatient or frustrated if you ask too many questions or if you ask the same question over and over. Choose your questions carefully and actively listen to the responses so that you can quickly determine what your customers need.

Pay Attention to *What* Is Being Said and *How* It Is Being Said.   Ultimately, your goal as an analyst is to solve a problem a customer is experiencing or to provide the customer with needed information or instructions. This is the "what" component of a conversation for which you need to listen. How the customer is delivering that information is also important. Customers are often experiencing emotion as a result of having a problem or not having what they need to use the products or services you support. For example, they may be confused by the instructions shipped with the software. Or, they may be frustrated that the hardware they purchased is not functioning properly and they have just spent a considerable amount of time trying to determine why. Or, they may be angry because they have experienced this same problem before and they perceive that a solution offered by another member of the help desk did not work. By listening actively, you hear both the problem and the emotion, and acknowledge both. You hear *what* is being said and *how* it is being said.

A basic human need is to be understood. When you acknowledge customers' emotions, you address that need. Often, what customers want most is for analysts to say that they understand. When you acknowledge customers' emotions, customers perceive that you care about their well-being and are more willing to work with you to resolve the problem. When you don't acknowledge customers' emotions, the customers may become more upset or angry. Have you ever contacted a company and expressed dissatisfaction with a product or service only to hear, "There's nothing we can do"? Didn't that response make you feel more frustrated or angry than you were to begin with? A much better response would be, "I'm sorry you're frustrated," or "Those instructions can be confusing. Let's walk through them together."

Some help desk analysts have a hard time dealing with emotions and they lack the people skills needed to interact effectively with customers. They are very logical thinkers and just want to solve the problem. Most customers, however, are unable to actively participate in problem solving until the analyst acknowledges their emotion.

TIP

Pay attention when you are the customer. Notice how service providers respond when you are upset or angry. Do they acknowledge your emotion? When they do, does it make you feel better? Most likely you will find that it does.

Being a good listener requires concentration. Communicating the fact that you are listening requires thought and caring. If a customer does not *perceive* that you are listening, you must take responsibility and determine why that is. Are you ignoring what the customer is saying? Are you failing to acknowledge how he or she feels? Determining how you can be more responsive requires that you listen to what the customer is saying. When a customer says, "That doesn't answer my question" or "Let me say this again," you are being given strong cues that the customer *perceives* you are not listening. Good listeners acknowledge what the customer has said when responding and they respond to both *what* is being said and *how* it is being said.

NOTE

It is important to control your own emotions when interacting with customers. In other words, it is important to pay attention to *what* you say and *how* you say it. When a customer is angry or upset, it is neither helpful nor appropriate for you to become angry or upset as well. Chapter 5 provides specific techniques you can use when facing "sticky" customer situations, such as calming an irate or extremely demanding customer or saying "no" to customers while maintaining their goodwill.

It is also important to pay attention, or "listen," when communicating with customers through channels such as e-mail and chat. For example, customers may ask multiple questions in a single e-mail and will quickly become frustrated if each question is not answered—particularly if they have had to wait for a response. Customers may also provide cues as to their emotions by using words, punctuation, and capital letters. For example, customers may include words such as *frustrated* or *disappointed* to describe their feelings about a situation. Or, they may use an exclamation point or capital letters to emphasize a point.

Don't assume, however, that you can fully understand the customers' point of view when it is provided in writing. For example, although you may assume that an e-mail written entirely in capital letters was written in anger, the customer may have just mistakenly hit the Caps Lock key. When in doubt and when possible, pick up the telephone and verify understanding.

Chapter 4 explores how to effectively use technologies such as e-mail and chat to communicate with customers.

> *Nothing is ever gained by winning an argument and losing a customer.*
> C. F. Norton

The Benefits of Active Listening

The benefits of active listening far exceed the benefits of speaking. Active listening helps you establish rapport with a customer. The most common way to build rapport is to listen for the customer's name and use it respectfully during the remainder of your conversation.

TIP Listen carefully to how customers provide their name. If a customer uses a title, such as Professor Brown, Dr. Jones, or Ms. Smith, address the customer using that title until the customer gives you permission to use a first name or nickname. When supporting international customers, avoid using first names unless you have been given permission to do so.

Active listening also enables you to determine the customer's emotional state. If a customer is upset or angry, you must acknowledge and address that emotion before you can begin to address the technical problem. Active listening can help you build trust by enabling you to respond in a way that acknowledges your customer's sense of urgency. For example, helping a customer route a presentation she is scheduled to make in an hour to another nearby printer when her personal printer jams will go a long way in terms of building trust. Quick thinking and a viable workaround may not solve the actual problem, but it can satisfy the customer's immediate need. If you do not at least try to satisfy the customer's immediate need—that is, if you do not respond in a way that acknowledges the customer's sense of urgency—the customer may become demanding and challenge you to do more than is possible. When customers understand that you will go the extra mile when they have a critical need, they may not feel the need to be as demanding in the future.

In addition to enabling you to establish rapport, address emotions, and build trust, active listening helps you keep the conversation on track so you can quickly determine the nature and likely cause of the customer's problem or request. If you are not listening carefully, you may miss an important detail or you may have to ask the customer to repeat what he or she said. Either scenario may instill a lack of confidence if the customer perceives that he or she has to repeat information because you were not listening. Active listening will also enable you to determine situations that require management involvement. For example, if a customer is unhappy with the service he received from another department in your company, you need to pass on that information to your manager. It is then your manager's responsibility to relay that information to the manager of the other department.

What is most important, active listening enables you to show customers that they are important and that you want to do all you can to satisfy their needs. This leads to customer confidence, and the customer is left with a positive image of you and your company.

Avoiding Distractions That Prevent Good Listening

At least half of our time is spent listening, and, yet, we're not good listeners (*The Business of Listening: A Practical Guide to Effective Listening*, Crisp Publications, 2001). In fact, studies indicate that we usually listen using about 25% of our listening capacity and that we ignore, forget, distort, or misunderstand 75% of what we hear. Given that we spend much of our

time listening, why aren't we better listeners? In today's society, a lot of things get in the way, including those listed in Figure 2-1.

⚪   Distractions and interruptions

⚪   "Third ear" syndrome

⚪   Jumping ahead

⚪   Emotional filters

⚪   Mental side trips

⚪   Talking

Figure 2-1   Factors that prevent good listening

This section looks more closely at each of these factors that influence your ability to be a good listener.

Distractions and Interruptions.   Whether you work for a large or small help desk, you work in a high-energy environment. In a typical help desk on a typical day, telephones are ringing, electronic reader boards are flashing information and may be sounding alarms, customers and service providers are wandering about talking and perhaps entering your workspace, and all are demanding your attention. Figure 2-2 shows these typical distractions at a help desk. It is easy to lose focus in this dynamic working environment. Good listeners find ways to minimize these distractions by, for example, turning into their workspace when talking on the telephone or working on problems and signaling to visitors when they are already engaged.

Figure 2-2   Distractions and interruptions at a help desk

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"Third Ear" Syndrome.   Many analysts believe they can listen to their customers and keep a "third ear" tuned in to what is happening around them. This concept of being aware of what is happening is valid, but must be used appropriately. Few people can truly listen and still do other things at the same time. For example, if you are speaking with a customer and hear a coworker discussing a similar problem, you may want to ask the customer if you can put him on hold while you determine if there is a system-wide problem. On the other hand, if you are speaking with a customer and hear several coworkers talking about their lunch plans, you must focus on your customer's needs and avoid the distraction your chatting coworkers represent.

Jumping Ahead.   The concept of jumping ahead is best explained by the adage, "Listening is not waiting for your turn to talk." Unfortunately, analysts sometimes decide they know the solution to a problem or they have rehearsed a standard response to an inquiry and they are simply waiting for the customer to stop talking so they can begin. Analysts who jump ahead run the risk of missing key information from the customer that changes the nature of the problem. They may waste time diagnosing the wrong problem because they were not listening and missed important information. They may also appear insensitive because they have failed to hear out the customer. As a result, the customer may become defensive or uncooperative. The customer may reject an analyst's solution because she does not feel that she has been heard or understood. Good listeners wait until the speaker has provided all available information before reaching a conclusion.

Emotional Filters.   We all have prejudices that influence our thinking and, as a result, our ability to listen. You may not like a speaker's appearance, voice, race, religion, or nationality. You may not like a speaker's temperament. For example, some people have a hard time dealing with negative people or people who whine. You may simply disagree with what the customer is saying. It is important to remember, however, that as a help desk analyst it is your job to uphold the policies of your company and assist all customers to the best of your ability.

Mental Side Trips.   As a card-carrying member of the human race it is inevitable that your "life" will at times intervene when you are working. It may occur to you that you need to buy your friend a birthday gift or that you have to take your child to baseball practice after school. As these thoughts race through your mind, they make it hard for you to listen. This ability to manage several conversations in your mind at once is because most people can listen to 125 to 250 words per minute, but can think more than 1,000 to 3,000 words per minute ("Sssh! Listen Up!," HighGain Inc., June 2000). Good listeners focus on what the speaker is saying and resist thoughts that sidetrack their attention.

> **TIP**
>
> Consider keeping paper and pen nearby to maintain your personal "To Do" list. Write down items that you don't want to forget to give your mind a sense of satisfaction and enable you to focus your energies on the task at hand.

Talking.   Talking is a necessary part of communication, but it is possible to talk too much. A common mistake in customer service is delivering too much information. For example, a customer asks you for the status of an outstanding problem and you answer by saying that Joe Brown in the Programming department is working on it. The customer promptly calls Joe Brown and asks him for the status, thus taking him away from solving the problem. Also, the customer now has Joe Brown's name and telephone number and may call him directly in the future, rather than calling the help desk. A more appropriate response is to let the customer know the problem is being worked on and that you will give the customer a call when the problem has been solved. Or, if the problem is critical, promise the customer you will provide periodic updates. Then, make sure you do!

> **TIP**   In Western cultures, silence is perceived as negative and so people often feel compelled to fill quiet moments by talking. People tend to speak first, listen second, and observe third. If you are working or visiting abroad, a better approach is to observe first, listen second, and then speak. Seek to understand the varying approaches to communication that you encounter and make an effort to avoid misunderstandings and appear rude.

Knowing when not to talk too much is also an important part of communication. This is because it is sometimes necessary to listen for cues that the customer is following your instructions. For example, if you asked a customer to restart her computer, you can listen for the Microsoft jingle to know the restart is underway. There is sometimes the tendency to engage in idle chatter during a lull in the problem-solving process, but remember, you cannot listen if you are talking too much. It is better to stay focused on working with the customer to solve a problem. For example, rather than simply chatting while a customer is restarting her computer, you may want to describe for the customer what steps you will be taking once her computer has restarted. Use the active listening techniques described earlier in this chapter to verify that the customer is following the plan of action.

Knowing What to Listen For

Listening requires concentration and it helps to know what you are listening for and how to record the information you receive. Begin by taking note of the key points the customer is making. If your company has a incident tracking or problem management system, record the information directly into that system, so that you do not have to handle the information again when you finish your conversation with the customer. If your company does not have a system, the system does not facilitate real-time logging of information, or you are simply not in a position to log information (for example, you are at a customer site), take notes as neatly and precisely as possible. Be as specific as possible so you can restate, using the customer's words when appropriate, the information the customer provides. A good guideline is to note who, what, when, where, and how. That is, who is experiencing a problem or has a request? What product or service is involved? When is the problem occurring, for example, chronically, intermittently, and so forth? Where is the problem occurring, for example, where is the failing device located or on what server is the failing software

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installed? How severe or widespread is the problem or how is the problem affecting the customer? *Why* the problem is occurring is determined once a solution is identified.

> When taking notes about a problem or request, capture details such as who, what, when, where, and how.
>
> TIP

When listening to customers, your ultimate goal is to determine their needs. It is important to remember that customer needs can go beyond obtaining details about a technical problem or request. It is also important to remember that you and your company can learn a lot by listening closely to customers. Challenge yourself to comprehend and retain as much as possible when communicating with customers. Skillful listening will enable you to:

- Detect any emotion the customer is experiencing that you need to acknowledge and address.
- Obtain the details of the customer's problem or request.
- Graciously receive any complaints the customer has about your company, its products, or its services.
- Detect any misconceptions the customer has about your company and its products and which you or others in your company such as the Sales or Marketing department need to clarify.
- Learn ways that your products and services can be enhanced and improved.
- Gain insight about your customers that will enable you to improve the quality of your services.

Remember, too, that listening involves keeping your eyes open as well as your ears. When interacting with customers face-to-face, watch their face and body language. Speakers often deliver information through nonverbal cues, such as folded arms, a furrowed brow, or poor eye contact. These cues may indicate that the customer is having a hard time understanding or believing what you are saying. If a customer rubs her eyes or scratches his head, it may be because they are confused and need you to slow down or restate your instructions.

> In the Americas and most of Europe, steady eye contact is considered a sign of trust and respect. In Asia, eye contact is considered a personal affront and is kept to a minimum.
>
> TIP

When interacting with customers over the telephone, remember that silence can be very telling. If a customer is unresponsive or fails to comment on the information you are delivering, the customer may be confused or may disagree with what you are saying. Although there is nothing wrong with a brief interlude of silence (for example, the customer may be processing what you have said), you want to avoid the temptation to view that silence

as acceptance. A tactful clarifying question, such as "Would you like for me to repeat that?" or "Is that acceptable to you?" will enable you to avoid incorrect assumptions.

Good listening requires discipline and begins with a willingness to fully comprehend and retain everything that customers are saying, both in terms of *what* they are saying and *how* they are saying it. Also, good listening does not begin and end with the conversations you have with customers. Listening is a skill that you can use and apply on a daily basis in all areas of your life.

COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS

Communication is the exchange of thoughts, messages, and information. It requires skills such as listening, speaking, and writing. It also requires the desire to convey information in a meaningful and respectful way. Technology is helping us to communicate faster and with a larger audience, but it cannot help us formulate the information we transmit. Knowing what to say and how to say it when communicating with customers takes practice and patience.

NOTE Chapter 4 explores ways that analysts can improve their writing skills.

Building Rapport and Trust with Customers

What you say is a simple matter of knowing and selecting the right words to use for a given situation. The words you choose should also communicate to customers that you appreciate their business and want to assist them in any way you can. *How* you say it is much more complex and requires an understanding of how people communicate. Figure 2-3 illustrates the factors that influence customer perception when people are communicating face-to-face and over the telephone (*Effective Telephone Communication Skills*, 1995, pp. 6, 7).

It is easy to see from this chart that communicating with customers over the telephone requires a very different approach than communicating face-to-face. When communicating over the telephone, "how people say it" makes all the difference.

NOTE Customers will sometimes say things over the telephone that they would never say in person. Customers may also tend to come on strong if they think their request is going to meet with resistance. This can cause analysts to become defensive because the analysts perceive they haven't even been given the opportunity to try to help. A better approach is for analysts to remain calm and avoid overreacting. Controlled breathing is an excellent way for analysts to release tension and reduce any symptoms of anxiety or panic. Chapter 9 contains breathing techniques analysts can use to relax and stay in control.
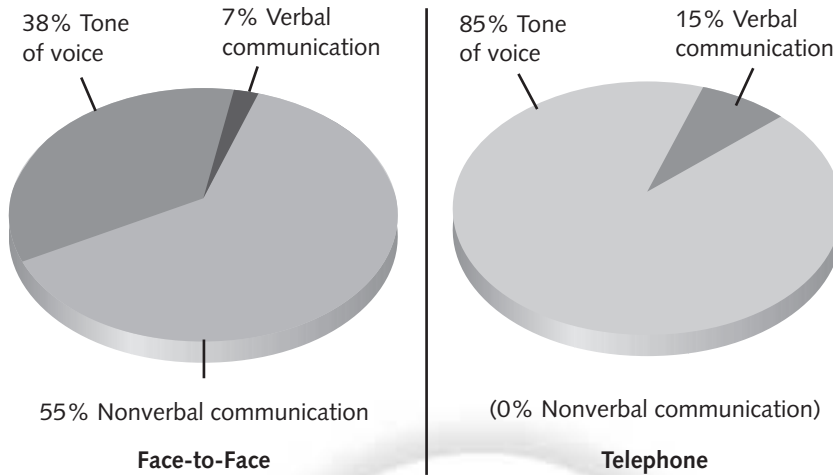
38% Tone of voice

7% Verbal communication

85% Tone of voice

15% Verbal communication

55% Nonverbal communication

(0% Nonverbal communication)

Face-to-Face

Telephone

Figure 2-3 How people communicate

Verbal Communication

Verbal communication is the exchange of information using words. The words you choose to use can greatly influence the response you receive from customers. If you speak in a straightforward manner using everyday language that customers can understand, then your message will be well received. If you speak in riddles or use technical language that customers cannot understand, you can alienate customers. If you acknowledge customers' emotions and let them know that you will do all you can to help, then most customers will be willing to open up and tell you their problem. If you use phrases, such as those listed in Figure 2-4, you can quickly turn even a reasonable, calm customer into a charging bull. These phrases tend to provoke customers and should be considered forbidden phrases.

There may be times when you are faced with the need to deliver the message these forbidden phrases represent. However, even when you have to deliver bad news to custom-ers, you can present it in a positive, respectful way. Look at how these "forbidden phrases" can be replaced with more positive statements.

- **"It's against our policy."**   This is a tough one because what your customer is asking for may very well be against your company's policy. Rather than state the negative, try stating your response as a positive. For example, "Our policy states. . . . " Or, if the policy enables you to offer the customer options, let the customer know what those options are. For example, "According to our policy, what I *can do* is. . . . "

- **"That's not my job."**   It may not be your job, but it *is* your job to determine who *can* assist the customer. Here's where you put your *can do* attitude to work. Phrases such as "What I can do is transfer you to the person who handles that area" or "What I can do is give you the telephone number of the company that supports this product" enable you to keep the customer's goodwill even when you are unable to assist the customer directly.
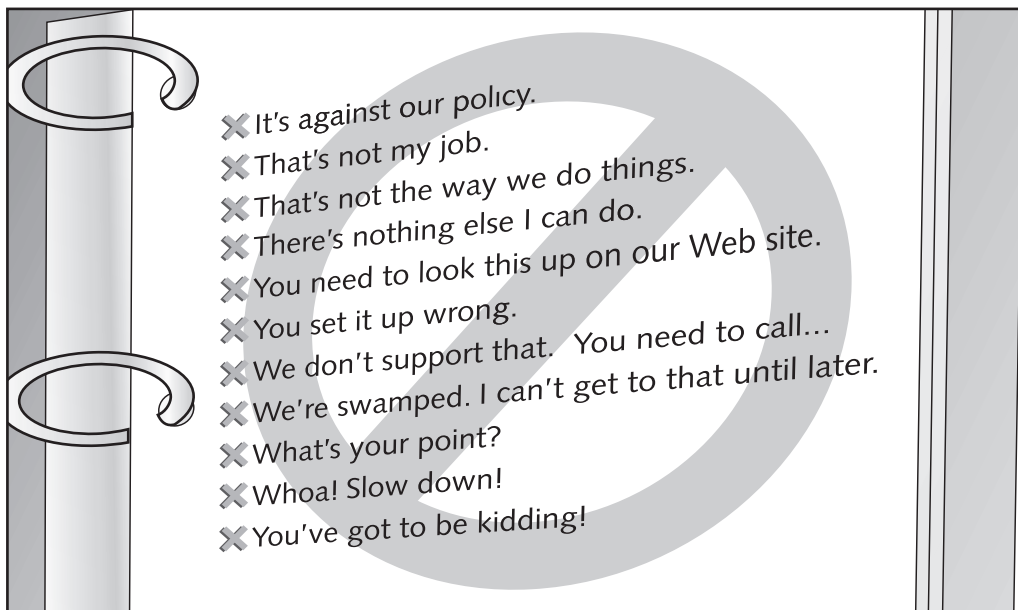
Figure 2-4   Forbidden phrases

- **"That's not the way we do things."**   This phrase rejects the customer's request without offering an alternative or positive option. Rather than state the negative, turn this phrase into a positive statement that addresses the customer's request. "I need you to fill out a form and obtain your manager's signature, and then I can assign those rights to your account."

- **"There is nothing else I can do."**   This phrase, and its counterpart, "I don't know what else I can tell you," rejects the customer's request and implies you are unwilling to explore other ways to meet the customer's needs. It also undermines your credibility. Remember that there is always something you *can* do. When in doubt, offer to let the customer speak with your manager. Although you do not want to engage your manager in every conversation you have, there are times when management involvement is needed to satisfy the customer.

- **"You need to look this up on our Web site."**   This phrase begs the response "I don't need to do anything!" A better way to approach this situation is to ask "Have you tried finding a solution to this problem on our Web site?" Also, a good technique is to replace "you" with "Let me" or "Let's." For example, "Let me show you how to locate that information on our Web site." Although customers may prefer you simply give them the answer, this technique enhances their self-sufficiency while acknowledging their need to get information quickly.

- **"You set it up wrong."**   There is nothing to be gained by pointing out the fact that a customer has made a mistake. Here is another example of where the "Let's" technique can be used. "Let's look at the system parameters and make sure they are

set up correctly." If the customer figures out that he made a mistake, offer empathy. Giving the customer an encouraging "It happens to the best of us" response will go a long way in restoring the customer's confidence.

■ **"We don't support that. You need to call. . . . "** Stating the negative disempowers you and may alienate the customer. Remember that there is always something you can do. A more appropriate response would be "What I *can* do is give you the telephone number of the group that supports this product." Using a positively stated phrase leaves the customer with the impression that you have helped. And you have! You have directed the customer to the best possible source of help.

■ **"We're swamped. I can't get to that until later."** We are all busy. The fact that you are busy is not the customer's fault nor does the customer really want to hear about it. Although it is appropriate to let the customer know that there are other customers who also are waiting for service, the best thing to do when you can't respond to a customer's request immediately is give an *honest* estimate of how long it will take to satisfy the request. When an SLA is in place, you may want to communicate the terms of that agreement. For example, "Per our SLA with your department, this request will be completed within 48 hours."

■ **"What's your point?"** A more appropriate way to ask this question would be "Let me make sure I understand" or "Would you explain that again? I'm not sure I understand." Remember that you are the one not getting the point or you wouldn't be asking that question. If you don't understand, ask the customer in a respectful way to clarify what she means.

■ **"Whoa! Slow down!"** You may be tempted to use this phrase when a customer is speaking very quickly. Although it is appropriate to let the customer know you are having trouble following the conversation, a more appropriate approach would be to get the customer's attention (for example, call the customer's name if it has been given), and then respectfully ask the customer to slow down. "Mr. Lee, could I ask you to slow down just a bit so that I can be sure I am getting all of your information correctly?"

■ **"You've got to be kidding!"** This is where the golden rule comes into play. How would you feel if a service provider said this to you? There will be times when you are amazed by what a customer says or requests, but you must always be respectful. Consider the customer's request and positively and respectfully let the customer know what you *can* do. For example, "What I can do is take control of your system and work on this problem remotely. That will save the time it would take a technician to travel to your home office."

Choose your words carefully when communicating with customers. The wrong words not only can alienate your customer, they also can disempower you and undermine the credibility of your entire company. Practice using phrases that are positive and respectful.

When you support a global customer community, it is a good idea to know a few words—such as "Hello," "Could you hold please?", and "Thank you"—in each of the primary languages that your customers speak. This way, you can politely place on hold any customers who do not speak English while you obtain translation services.

CLOSE UP

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One of the things that analysts may find difficult in a customer support setting is understanding people who have accents. Conversely, customers sometimes have difficulty understanding analysts who have accents. When you add technical jargon to the equation, communication can quickly break down. Ann Cook, author of *American Accent Training*, answers a few questions about accents, particularly as they relate to American English. Ann Cook is the Director of American Accent Training, an international program that teaches people who speak English as a second language how to speak standard American English. She has developed a diagnostic speech analysis that identifies each aspect of a person's accent and pronunciation.

Question: What is an accent?

Answer: An accent is how we deliver a particular language. An accent has three main parts: the speech music or intonation, word connections, and the actual pronunciation of each sound. If you don't have speech music, your speech will sound flat and monotone: "He. Is. In. A. Dark. Room." With intonation, you'll be able to say, "He is in a DARK room" (developing photographs) or "He is in a dark room" (the room is dark). With intonation, you can also indicate how you feel about something. Think of the difference between "I should CALL him" and "I SHOULD call him." In the first case, it is likely that you will pick up the telephone; in the second case, you are indicating some degree of reluctance.

How you run words together, or make word connections, is also very important. A sentence that looks like "He is in a meeting room" actually sounds like "heezina meeding room."

Finally, pronunciation is the difference between phrases such as "I like tennis" and "I like Dennis."

Question: How do people get an accent?

Answer: People learn their original accents in infancy. Babies hear the speech rhythms of the people around them and mimic those rhythms, long before they acquire grammar and vocabulary. When they learn a second language in adulthood, they bring those patterns and pronunciations with them, and that results in a "foreign" accent. For instance, in languages other than American English, the R sounds like a D, the T always sounds like a T, and there are only five vowel sounds. In American English, the R is a kind of growly semi-vowel (ARRR), the T is frequently pronounced as a D ("meeting" sounds like "meeding"), and American English has 14 vowel sounds. The result is that when a person who was not born in America says, "Eet eess hoeddeebel," they are trying to say, "It is horrible." In American English, it would come out "Idiz horrabul."

Question: What perceptions do people have about people who have accents?

Answer: To a large extent, it depends on the accent. If a person's accent is very light, people frequently respond positively. If an accent makes communication difficult, however, the response can be extremely negative, to the point of considering the speaker less capable or less intelligent. Americans and Europeans generally understand each other's accents, as they all speak western languages. Asians, on the other hand, tend to have difficulty both speaking and understanding western languages.

Question: Are there any stereotypes associated with people who have accents?

Answer: Quite sadly, people think that someone with nonstandard speech is speaking with an accent on purpose or isn't quite bright enough to talk "right." Many age-old notions about people from other countries arise, in large part, from the fact that foreign-born people don't use intonation the way a native American English speaker does. For example, to a native speaker, the sentence "Ben has a red pen" can be inflected many different ways:

- BEN has a red pen (not Sue)
- Ben HAS a red pen (he already has it, so don't offer him one)
- Ben has a RED pen (not a blue one)
- Ben has a red PEN (but no pencils)

A non-native American English speaker will frequently say BEN HAS A RED PEN, so the listener has to try to imagine which interpretation to make. Also, most other languages don't use the words "A" and "THE," so words that are important in American English may be left out. Think about the difference between:

- A teacher bought a book (an unspecified teacher bought an unspecified book)

- The teacher bought a book (a specific teacher bought an unspecified book)
- A teacher bought the book (an unspecified teacher bought a specific book)
- The teacher bought the book (a specific teacher bought a specific book)

Given all of those possible interpretations, it is easy to see that if a person were to say, "Teacher bought book," the American listener would have to struggle to interpret what the speaker meant.

Question: What techniques can people use to better understand people who have a strong accent?

Answer: To better understand people who have a strong accent:

1. Speak slowly and clearly, but not loudly.

2. Acknowledge and accept that their speech isn't "perfect."

3. Don't sweat the details: try to grasp their main idea, as opposed to trying to understand each and every word they are saying.

4. Don't try to correct them, even if inadvertently. (Oh! THE teacher bought THE book.)

5. Listen for a key word, no matter how it's pronounced.

6. Don't interrupt. Make notes and go back to the problem point when the person finishes speaking. The calmer you are, the calmer the other person will be.

7. Avoid colloquial, or conversational, speech. Foreign-born speakers are usually more familiar with longer words rather than the short words Americans prefer. For instance, "postpone" would be more familiar to someone who does not speak American English than "put off," and "arrange" would be more familiar than "set up." When you think about English verbs and prepositions, it's mind-boggling. With the word "get" alone, you have "get up," "get over," "get away," "get away with," "get off," "get on," "get through to," and many, many more. These are very difficult for foreign-born speakers.

Question: Is there one most important thing that people can do to better understand people who have an accent?

Answer: It's like learning a new dance—try to catch the rhythm without being judgmental of how it "should" be.

Question: How is interacting over the telephone with a person who has an accent different than interacting face-to-face with that person?

Answer: There is so much more information available face-to-face. You can point to things, hand things back and forth, and use facial expressions and body language to communicate. Over the phone, you are limited to the sound of the other person's voice.

Question: What techniques can people use to reduce their accent?

Answer: To reduce an accent:

1. Focus on the rhythm of an entire phrase instead of word by word.

2. Learn to "hear." Listen to the radio and write down exactly what the person says based on pronunciation, not spelling. For example, the word "water" would be "wahdr," not "wa-ter."

3. Don't worry about sounding fake—Americans don't tend to notice if a foreign-born person speaks with a heavy American accent. They'll just think that your English has improved.

4. Don't sound too perfect—native American English speakers don't talk that way. Let all your words run together. "I'll get it" should sound like "I'll geddit." This is not slang; it's perfectly standard colloquial American speech.

5. Take a course that is specifically oriented to "accent training" or "accent reduction," rather than grammar or vocabulary based.

Question: Is there one most important thing that people can do to reduce their accent?

Answer: Imitate and learn the American intonation. One way to do that is to listen to and repeat ballads and children's books on tape.

Question: Is there anything else that you think it is important for students to know about accents?

Answer: For a person to have an accent means that they communicate perfectly in a entirely different language—not that they are deficient in their second language, which is English. Also, English is the hardest language in the whole world. It has more synonyms than any other language. Think of the difference between to tap, to rap, to pat, to pet, to stroke, to caress—these are all very similar words for using your hand to touch something, but look how different and specific each one is.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is the exchange of information in a form other than words. Nonverbal communication can say as much as words and includes qualities such as facial expressions, body language, and even clothing. When communicating with customers over

the telephone, by e-mail, or by chat, these nonverbal qualities have no impact whatsoever. When communicating face-to-face, however, they make up over half of our conversation. This is because people read meaning into nonverbal cues. For example, if you wink while telling a story to a friend, he knows that you are kidding or teasing. If you avoid eye contact and tightly fold your arms across your chest when speaking with a customer, she may perceive that you are not listening or that you are rejecting what she is saying. If you dress sloppily or do not practice good grooming, people may perceive your thinking is sloppy as well and may resist your ideas.

To communicate effectively, learn to use your nonverbal vocabulary in the same positive way you use words. Be respectful, be attentive, and "listen" to what the speaker is telling you with his or her nonverbal cues. If a customer steps back when you approach him to discuss a problem, you may be standing too close. Allow the customer to establish a distance that feels comfortable. You can also observe and consider emulating the nonverbal techniques used by someone that you believe is an excellent communicator. Also, be aware of the culture at the company where you work. Although some companies allow a more casual dress code, there is such a thing as too casual. A neat appearance and good grooming always serve you well.

TIP People in the United States are much more casual in terms of how they speak and dress than are people in other countries. When interacting with a customer, an effective technique is to mirror that customer's behavior. If the customer's manner is formal, respond in a formal manner. If the customer's manner is more casual, you can relax a bit. However, it is your responsibility to remain professional at all times. When traveling for business, ask people who have been to the country you are visiting, or ask your coworkers who live in that country, for guidance on how to make a good impression.

Tone of Voice

Figure 2-3 illustrated the dramatic difference tone of voice makes when you are interacting with customers face-to-face and even more so over the telephone. A number of factors, including those listed in Figure 2-5, make up your tone of voice.

- Energy
- Rate of speech
- Volume and pitch

Figure 2-5   Factors that influence tone of voice

We all have different voices and we can change our voices by controlling the energy, rate of speech, volume, and pitch we use when we speak.

Energy.   Enthusiasm is contagious and the energy in your voice often reflects your personality and your attitude. Answering the telephone with a bored "Yeah" will not impress and instill confidence in customers. Facial expression mirrors mood, and mood mirrors facial expression. One technique that works well is to approach all interactions with customers as if they were standing in front of you. In other words, even if you are speaking to a customer over the telephone, put a smile on your face, focus your attention on what the customer is saying, and be as responsive as possible. Don't overdo it, however. False enthusiasm can be just as offensive and distracting as no enthusiasm. Be yourself! And remember, some days it can be tough getting excited by the prospect of handling one problem after another. Stay focused on the fact that you chose the field of customer support because you enjoy helping people. Hang inspiring quotes in your office or place a funny picture on your desk that will help you put a smile back in your voice on even the toughest days.

> *Everyone smiles in the same language.* Author Unknown

TIP   To monitor your facial expressions and posture, place a mirror on your desk at eye level. Placing the mirror at eye level ensures that you are sitting straight and practicing good posture. By taking a quick look in the mirror before you answer the telephone, you can ensure you have a relaxed and pleasant facial expression. You can put a smile on your face, give the customer (who you pretend to see in the mirror) your full attention, take a deep breath if needed to get focused, and then answer the telephone. Give it a try!

Rate of Speech.   A normal rate of speech is about 125 words per minute. Speaking too quickly or too slowly can be distracting to customers and affect their ability to listen. A good technique is to determine your normal rate of speech. You can do this by placing a tape recorder next to you to record yourself while you are conversing or reading aloud casually from a book. The trick is to forget about the tape recorder so you get a more accurate reading of your rate of speech. You can then replay the tape, marking time with a stopwatch, to determine the number of words you speak per minute. Once you have determined your normal rate of speech, strive to adapt your pace to the needs of your customer. Factors to consider include your customer's rate of speech and the information you are delivering. For example, if you tend to speak quickly and a customer is speaking slowly, you may want to slow your speech slightly as well. Or, if you are walking the customer through an important set of instructions, you may want to slow your speech slightly. You may also want to slow down a bit if you are speaking to a customer in his or her second language. On the other hand, if you are asking a routine set of questions or simply validating information, you can pick up the pace *a little*.

Speaking too quickly at any point in a conversation can cause confusion or alienate the customer. This is particularly true when you are wrapping up a call. There is often a temptation to rush through the closing and move on to the next call. Unfortunately, you can

undo any goodwill you have created by hanging up before the customer is satisfied. Take your time and listen to your customers; their needs will help you adapt and adjust your pace.

Volume and Pitch.   The volume of your voice should always be loud enough that your customer and any of the other people involved in your conversation can hear you. The volume of your voice should not, however, be so loud that it disturbs the people around you.

Help desks can get loud. All analysts must do their best to be courteous and respectful in terms of keeping the volume of their voice at an appropriate level and utilizing speaker-phones appropriately. If things get too loud on any given day, don't be afraid to politely signal coworkers that they need to keep it down. Graciously accept and respond to any such signals you receive from coworkers.

> **TIP**
> Make sure you are speaking closely, but not too closely, into your headset or telephone receiver. Speaking too far away from the receiver can make it hard for the customer to hear properly and allow outside noise to interfere with your speech. Speaking too closely to the receiver may cause your voice to sound muffled or so loud that the customer may perceive that you are shouting.

Pitch refers to the highness or lowness of vocal tone. Generally speaking, high-pitched voices are viewed as weak. We also tend to associate a high-pitched voice with someone who is excited, possibly even in a state of panic or out-of-control. Low-pitched voices are typically viewed as strong, and we tend to associate a low-pitched voice with someone who is confident and in control.

Voice pitch is influenced by the way you hold your head and by the way you breathe. For example, if you tend to have a high-pitched voice, practice lowering your head slightly when you speak. If you tend to have an exceptionally low-pitched voice, practice raising your head slightly when you speak. Your posture could also be influencing the quality of your voice. Good posture enables you to project your voice and makes it easier for customers to understand what you are saying. You can improve your posture by making sure you have a good chair that enables you to sit up straight and by making sure your workspace is ergonomically aligned.

> **NOTE**
> Chapter 9 discusses how to set up an ergonomically aligned workspace.

You can also influence the pitch of your voice by learning to take long, slow, deep breaths, especially when you are under pressure. Most people become shallow breathers when they are under pressure. When this happens, your vocal cords tend to tighten, making your voice go up and sound strained. By slowing down your breathing, you lower the pitch of your voice and create a calmer tone.

Coupled with the right words, the tone of voice you use can dramatically change the message you communicate to a customer. Consider the differences between the following two phrases:

Stated using a frustrated tone of voice: What do you expect me to do about it?

Stated using a calm tone of voice after taking a deep breath: How would you like to see this situation resolved?

Both questions ask how the customer would like to see the situation resolved. The first example not only fails to engage the customer, it also fails to have the speaker take responsibility for the customer's satisfaction. The second example encourages a dialogue with the customer and at the same time avoids false promises. By selecting positive words and using a calm tone of voice, you communicate a completely different message—one that is much more empowering to both you and your customer.

Customers recognize and respond to your "words," whether they are spoken or communicated through nonverbal cues or your tone of voice. Practice using each of these techniques to establish rapport with your customers and gain their trust. Understanding the communication style of your customer is another tool you can use to enhance communications.

Identifying and Understanding Customer Communication Styles

Becoming an effective communicator requires that you acknowledge the fact that customers are people, and people are different. They have different personalities, different ways of handling change and stress, and different communication styles. To communicate effectively, you must first identify the communication style of your customer. You can then respond, rather than react, to your customer in a way that is meaningful. Figure 2-6 lists some of the most common communication styles you will encounter.

- Aggressive people

- Chatterers

- Complainers

- Know-it-alls

- Passive people

Figure 2-6   Common communication styles

You determine every customer's communication style by listening to the information they provide and to the responses they give when you ask questions. Use the following techniques to determine which communication style your customers exhibit and how to respond to them.

Aggressive People.   Aggressive people like to be in control. They are usually unwilling to engage in social conversation and want to get to the point immediately. Aggressive people may be quick to inform you that they "don't have time for this." They can become hostile and will often try to bully and intimidate people, or they will make a scene in order to get their way. For example, an aggressive person may challenge you to "Get someone out here right away" or "Put your supervisor on the phone." When interacting with aggressive people, give them time to tell their story and then jump into the conversation when they pause or ask you a question. You can also try to get their attention and then take control of the conversation. For example, respectfully call out their name and then state specifically what you *can* do. Always restate the information that aggressive people give you and their opinions of the problem. This technique enables aggressive people to feel that they have been heard.

Chatterers.   Chatty customers can be fun, but they can also be a challenge when you are busy. The first way to deal with a chatty customer is to avoid encouraging them. For example, resist the temptation to ask a chatty customer how his vacation was. You are asking for a prolonged answer. When a chatty customer asks you a question that lends itself to a prolonged response, reply with a minimum response. For example, if a customer asks if you are busy, you can politely respond "Yes, very. How can I help you?" Another great technique is to take control of the conversation by asking closed-ended questions. **Closed-ended questions** prompt short answers such as "yes" and "no." Once you have taken control, you can ask open-ended questions as needed to obtain more information. **Open-ended questions** cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no" response.

> **Closed-ended questions:**
>
> Have you ever been able to access this system? [Yes/No]
>
> Is there another printer close by that you can use? [Yes/No]
>
> **Open-ended questions:**
>
> What other applications did you have open when this problem occurred?
>
> When was the last time you were able to use this device?

Complainers.   Complainers whine and object but cannot always identify reasons why a solution will not work. They cannot or will not take responsibility for problem solving and often deflate the creativity or optimism of others. When interacting with complainers, empathize but do not necessarily sympathize with the customer's complaint. For example,

it is okay to acknowledge that computers can be frustrating, but agreeing that they should all be banished from the face of the earth is probably not a good idea. Also, when interacting with complainers, paraphrase their main points and make sure you understand the specific nature of their complaint. Try not to waste time talking about generalities. You can also ask complainers how they would like things to turn out. By empowering them to participate in developing a solution, you enhance their self-sufficiency and increase the likelihood that they will be satisfied with the final outcome.

Know-It-Alls. Know-it-alls believe they know everything and tend to resist advice or information they receive from others. They may go to great lengths to convince you that they are right. They can be condescending and pompous and in extreme cases take pleasure in making other people feel stupid. When interacting with know-it-alls, suggest alternatives without attacking their opinions. For example, avoid phrases such as "That won't work," which tend to be perceived negatively. Instead, use positive phrases such as "In my experience, this will work." Also, be respectful when asking questions and acknowledge the customers' knowledge. When appropriate, use phrases such as "What if . . ." and "Let's try this." These phrases will engage customers in the problem-solving process without rejecting their perspective.

Passive People. Passive people avoid controversy at all costs and they often cannot or will not talk when you need information. They never volunteer opinions or comments and will tend to go along with suggestions from other people whether or not they feel those suggestions are correct. When interacting with passive people, ask open-ended questions in an effort to encourage a prolonged response rather than a "yes" or "no" response. Also, do not feel you have to fill the silence when waiting for a passive person to respond. If you have posed a question, wait for them to answer. Resist the temptation to jump in and put words in their mouth. Listen responsively when passive people are talking. If they perceive you are not listening, they may resume their silence.

Although these are the most common communication styles, they represent only a handful of the different kinds of people that you will encounter during your career in the support industry. It is also important to remember that people can use different communication styles depending on the situation they are facing or the response that they are receiving. For example, a customer who is getting pressure from his boss may tend to be much more aggressive than he normally would when he is experiencing a problem. Or, a customer who perceives that you have been rude may suddenly become very passive and unresponsive. The more carefully you listen and strive to understand the different ways that people communicate, the more effective a communicator you will become.

Speaking the Customer's Language

It may not have occurred to you before, but you and your customers are bilingual. You may not speak French or Spanish in addition to English, but you *do* speak Business and

Technology. Customers tend to speak Business. Analysts tend to speak Technology. Table 2-2 lists some examples of how customers and analysts speak different languages.

Table 2-2 Sample translations between Business and Technology languages

Customers Say	Analysts Hear
I can't log on.	The system is down.
I can't print.	The printer is down.
Analysts Say	**Customers Ask**
FPS1 (File and Print Server #1) is down.	Why can't I print?
The mainframe will be unavailable this weekend.	Does this affect Payroll?

To keep communications on track, and to avoid alienating your customers, avoid jargon and acronyms that they may not understand, or worse, may think they understand but actually do not. When customers do use jargon or an acronym, ask clarifying questions to avoid making an invalid assumption that they fully understand what they are saying. We all know it is possible for two people to have a conversation, walk away thinking they agree, only to find out later that they did not communicate. The excessive use of jargon and acronyms increases the likelihood that this will occur.

Remember that most people consider technology a tool. They typically are using it to *do* something, not just for the sake of it. The best way to serve your customers is to understand their business and learn to speak its language. You can then translate that language into your language, the language of technology.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

❏ Listening is the most important skill for a support person. Active listening involves participating in a conversation by asking questions, responding to the speaker, and verifying understanding. Good listening requires discipline and begins with a willingness to fully comprehend and retain everything that customers are saying both in terms of *what* they are saying and *how* they are saying it. Listening brings many benefits and is a skill that you can use and apply daily in all areas of your life.

❏ Communication is the exchange of information. It requires skills such as listening, speaking, and writing. It also requires the desire to convey information in a meaningful and respectful way. What you say—the words you choose to use—greatly influences the response you receive from customers. How you say it—the nonverbal ways you communicate and your tone of voice—can say as much as your words because people can read meaning into your nonverbal cues.

❏ You can determine and influence your customers' response by listening and by learning to speak their language. Most people consider technology a tool. They typically are using it to *do* something, not just for the sake of it. The best way to serve your customers is to

understand their business and learn to speak its language. You can then translate that language into your language, the language of technology.

KEY TERMS

acronym — A word formed from the first letters of a series of words.

active listening — Listening that involves participating in a conversation and giving the speaker a sense of confidence that he or she is being heard.

closed-ended questions — Questions that prompt short answers, such as "yes" and "no."

communication — The exchange of thoughts, messages, and information.

jargon — The specialized or technical language used by a trade or profession.

listening — To make an effort to hear something; to pay attention.

nonverbal communication — The exchange of information in a form other than words.

open-ended questions — Questions that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no" response.

paraphrase — To restate the information given by a customer using slightly different words in an effort to verify that you understand.

passive listening — Listening that involves simply taking in information and shows little regard for the speaker.

pitch — The highness or lowness of vocal tone.

verbal communication — The exchange of information using words.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the most important skill a support person must possess?

2. What is a basic human need?

3. You have to _____ to listen.

4. Why is active listening important?

5. What is active listening?

6. What is passive listening?

7. How can analysts use checklists?

8. What are tactful questions?

9. What can you learn about a customer by listening to how the customer uses jargon?

10. When is it inappropriate to ask questions?

11. What are two ways to let a customer know you are listening when you are interacting face-to-face?

12. What is a verbal nod of the head? Provide two examples.

13. How can you obtain the information you need to solve a problem?

14. What are three cues that a customer may give when confused or unsure?

15. What is paraphrasing?

16. What two things should you listen for when interacting with customers?

17. Why is it important to acknowledge a customer's emotion?

18. What must you do if a customer indicates he or she does not perceive you are listening?

19. List six benefits of active listening.

20. What percentage of our listening capacity do we normally use?

21. List the six distractions that prevent good listening.

22. What should you do if you are speaking to a customer and hear one of your coworkers discussing a similar problem?

23. What are three risks you run when you jump ahead?

24. What information should you capture about a customer's problem or request?

25. What can silence tell you when you are interacting with a customer over the telephone?

26. What factors influence customer perception when communicating face-to-face?

27. What factors influence customer perception when communicating over the telephone?

28. What is a good substitute for "forbidden phrases?"

29. What are three nonverbal ways that people communicate?

30. Name the three factors that influence your tone of voice.

31. What is a normal rate of speech?

32. What three factors influence your voice pitch?

33. How can you lower the pitch of your voice?

34. How can you determine the communication style of your customer?

35. What is an open-ended question?

36. Which language do you need to speak—Business or Technology? Explain your answer.

2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In today's busy world, people often pride themselves in their ability to multitask. For example, a person might work on the computer while talking on the telephone, or check instant messages while in a meeting. Can people really do two things at one time and still be an active listener?

2. Many technical support providers believe that customers need to become more technical, and so they use jargon and acronyms in an effort to teach customers. Conversely, many customers believe that technical support providers could avoid jargon and acronyms, but they just don't want to. Who is right?

3. Have you ever forgotten someone's name within minutes of meeting them? Why does that happen?

HANDS-ON PROJECTS

Project 2-1

Assess your listening skills. Table 2-1 compares the characteristics of active and passive listening. Review these characteristics and identify the active listening characteristics that you possess. Discuss these characteristics with at least three of your friends or family members. Ask them to provide feedback in terms of what kind of listener you are. Review your list, consider the feedback you received, and then prepare a list of ways you can become a more active listener.

Project 2-2

Discuss the pitfalls of passive listening. Assemble a team of at least three of your classmates. Discuss each of the characteristics of passive listening. Discuss the ramifications of these characteristics in terms of meeting customer needs. Write a brief summary of your conclusions and then discuss them with the class.

Project 2-3

Practice becoming a better listener. Two common traits of poor listeners are (1) assuming you know what a person is about to say or that you understand the point he or she is trying to make, and (2) interrupting. For the next 21 days—at which point these techniques will become habit—pick one or more good listening techniques and apply it at least once a day. Techniques you may want to practice include using a verbal nod of the head, paraphrasing, and halting your tendency to interrupt. Prepare a one-page report describing your efforts and observations.

Project 2-4

Pay attention when you are the customer. Over the course of a week or two, pay close attention when you are the customer. Keep a list of any situations where you experienced emotion, such as confusion, frustration, or anger, as a result of a customer service encounter. For each situation, answer the following questions:

❑ How did the service provider treat you?

❑ Did the service provider acknowledge your emotion?

❑ How did that make you feel?

In addition, write a paragraph describing the conclusions you can draw from your experiences.

Project 2-5

Avoid distractions. Review the list of distractions that prevent good listening. Select two distractions that you can honestly say have influenced you in the past or continue to affect you in your current job, hobby, or home life. Prepare a list of three things you can do to minimize the impact of each distraction.

Project 2-6

Collect and rewrite forbidden phrases. During the next week, pay close attention to the service you receive (*see* Project 2-4) and keep a list of any "forbidden phrases" that you hear. Refer to Figure 2-4 for a sample list of forbidden phrases. For each phrase, state a more positive, respectful way of delivering the message. Share your list with three classmates and have them critique your restatements.

Project 2-7

Determine your rate of speech. Place a tape recorder next to you while you converse or read aloud casually from a book. If you don't have a tape recorder, simply read aloud casually from a book. Determine the number of words you speak per minute. Is your rate of speech faster or slower than the average rate of 125 words per minute? Prepare a list of situations in which you may want to adjust your rate of speech.

Project 2-8

Assess the effectiveness of nonverbal communication. Over the course of a day, take note of the various nonverbal ways that people communicate. Write a paragraph describing two or three nonverbal cues that you found to be particularly effective. Conversely, write a paragraph describing two or three nonverbal cues that you found to be particularly ineffective or annoying. Write a final paragraph describing any conclusions you can draw from your observations.

2

Project 2-9

Determine your voice pitch. Record your voice and replay the recording, listening for the pitch of your voice. If you do not have a tape recorder, leave a voice mail message somewhere that you can play it back. Do you have an exceptionally low- or high-pitched voice? Prepare a list of ways that you can adjust the pitch of your voice to project confidence and strength. Practice changing the pitch of your voice. Record your voice again and replay the recording. Have you improved the pitch of your voice? Consider asking a classmate to listen to your recording and provide feedback.

CASE PROJECTS

1. Diagnose Printer Problems

Your boss has asked you to develop a problem-solving checklist that can be used to diagnose printer problems. She has asked you to "keep it simple" and list only a half a dozen questions. Prepare a list of three open-ended and three closed-end questions that can be used to determine why a customer may be having trouble printing a report.

2. Coach an Analyst to Keep It Positive

You are the team leader for a large internal help desk. Your boss recently overheard an analyst ask a customer, using an incredulous tone of voice, "You want it by when?" He asks you to provide the analyst with some coaching. Speak with the analyst (choose a classmate) and help the analyst determine a more positive, respectful way to respond to a customer's seemingly unreasonable request.

3. The Business of Listening

This exercise illustrates how to be an effective communicator and a good listener.

1. Select volunteers who are willing to read out loud to the class.

2. Students who are not reading must close their books and prepare to listen.

3. Volunteers read from an article in one-minute sequences.

4. As a class, discuss how effectively each volunteer communicated, and how well the students listened. For example:

   ❏ Was the volunteer's tone of voice energetic?

   ❏ How was the volunteer's rate of speech? Fast? Slow?

   ❏ Did the volunteer read as fast or slow as the class perceived?

   ❏ How was the volunteer's volume?

   ❏ How was the volunteer's pitch?

❏ Did any factors influence the students' ability to be good listeners? If so, what factors?

❏ What were the students listening for?

5. As a class, discuss the main points of this article.

4. One-Way Communication

CASE PROJECTS

This exercise illustrates how analysts and customers benefit when they can ask questions and receive responses. In other words, they engage in two-way conversation as opposed to one-way communication, which does not allow the exchange of questions and answers.

1. Select one volunteer to describe a diagram to the class.

2. Other students place a clean sheet of paper in front of them and prepare to listen. Students are *not* allowed to ask questions or communicate in any way with the volunteer. Students must remain silent throughout this entire exercise.

3. The volunteer describes the diagram to the class. The volunteer must use only words to describe the diagram. The volunteer cannot use any nonverbal techniques to communicate, such as facial expressions, hand movements, or body movements. The volunteer cannot ask the students if they understand the information that is being communicated.

4. Students draw the diagram the volunteer is describing on their clean sheet of paper. Remember, students cannot ask clarifying or follow-up questions.

5. Once the volunteer has finished describing the diagram to the class, reveal the diagram. Compare the students' drawings to the original diagram.

6. As a class, discuss how effectively the volunteer communicated, and how well the students listened. For example:

❏ How explicitly did the volunteer describe the diagram?

❏ Did the volunteer use any jargon that the class did not understand?

❏ Did the volunteer go too fast or too slow?

❏ Did any students become confused or frustrated and just quit listening? Why?

❏ Why was the one-way communication difficult to follow?

❏ If the students had been allowed to speak, what questions would they have asked the volunteer?

7. As a class, discuss the benefits of being able to engage in two-way conversation. Also, discuss ways to become better listeners and communicators.