Why Active Listening Skills Matter When Providing Technical Support

On the surface, it was a textbook response to a customer problem: The technical-support representative listened carefully as the customer described the issue at hand, then quickly transferred him to the appropriate support level when she realized someone else was better equipped to solve it. The second rep fixed the glitch without missing a beat, and the customer was sent on his way.

So why wasn't the customer satisfied?

Great customer support goes beyond fixing problems and resolving technical issues. The customer here called because he wanted help solving his problem, of course, but what he was really after was someone who could explain how to keep it from happening again. He came away unhappy not because his problem remained, but because the rep failed to show empathy, focus and — most importantly — active listening.

What is Active Listening?

Active listening requires listeners to paraphrase what they've heard and restate it out loud to make sure the other party understands what was said. Most commonly used in conflict resolution, this three-step communication technique helps ensure both sides fully grasp the issue.

1. Really listen. No, really.

Most of us are passive listeners, multi-tasking as someone speaks or only listening for the highlights. We get the gist of something and assume that's good enough. Active listening requires that you not be distracted or inattentive; you must focus on the other person and try to comprehend everything they're saying.

Listen for emotions as well as facts. Try to hear why the customer is having a problem, what they are feeling and how they are presenting the information (i.e., short and direct or lots of detail and questions). These details can shape the entire interaction. If it seems like the issue is complex or includes several parts, it may be helpful to take notes while you're listening.

2. Pull out key information *and* feelings.

Now that you've done your best to fully engage in the listening process, you can begin to process the information. Review what you've heard — both the facts and the emotions — and list the key pieces. If you do not have all of the information you need to really understand the facts and your customer's feelings, now is the time to ask the right questions.

What are the right questions? For starters, they focus on the customer, not just the problem. By understanding your customer's state of mind, you can provide customized support to best meet their needs and expectations.

A good question will rephrase a piece of information already provided with a confirming question attached. For example, if a customer has problems installing a new program after reaching the download page, you could ask, "You can see the download page, but you cannot get the program to launch, correct?" This type of question puts the customer first and shows that you heard what they were saying.

Ask as few questions as possible. What's more frustrating than telling someone something only to have them ask a question about it two seconds later? If you're actively listening, you'll get the information the first time. Only ask a question if someone leaves out an important piece of the story or if you need to clarify what they said.

This is also when you'll need to evaluate your customer's feelings. Note their tone of voice or level of agitation so that you can use these details to help diffuse negative emotions and resolve the issue with an amazing customer experience.

3. Mirror everything back to the speaker.

Let's recap: So far, you have focused on the customer and have a good understanding of both what they said and the emotion with which they said it. Now you need to replay everything — both fact and emotion — back to the customer.

If a customer is hurried or rushed and just wants a quick resolution without detail, recap that back out loud to the customer. You might say, "OK, let me make sure I understand. You can't get the program to launch, and you just want me to get it started, right?"

If customers are aggravated or frustrated, put yourself in their shoes. Phrases such as, "I completely understand why this is frustrating" or "I understand why you would feel this way" let customers know that you actually heard their frustrations and that you understand their feelings.

In your playback, summarize what was said in your own words and reflect the appropriate level of emotion for the customer.

Why Do You Need Active Listening Skills to Provide Great Technical Support?

While active listening and its key parts — focusing, comprehending and reflecting — are great for all areas of your life, they can take your customer support from adequate to amazing pretty quickly. What does active listening do for technical support?

It helps the customer — not just the problem.

Resolving issues should be just a byproduct of your main goal, which is to help customers and make them happy. Active listening puts you in the customer's place and focuses on them. If you're only paying attention to the problem, you weren't actually listening and may inadvertently come across as condescending or rude. A problem that seems simple to you may be utterly bewildering to your customers. You may still fix the problem, but you have irritated your customer even more in the process.

It builds customer relationships.

Helping your customers builds rapport. You understand what your customers do and how they work. You build a relationship that is mutually beneficial, and through that you build loyalty. Active listening in technical support shows that you care about and truly value your customers' feelings and time. You want what's best for them.

In many cases, it may seem easier or more helpful to just jump onto a remote session or request to sit down at the desk so you can quickly fix the problem. While this might resolve the current issues, it doesn't help your customer become more confident with technology. Active listening and understanding helps you prevent future issues rather than constantly reacting to current ones.

It can increase productivity and boost revenue.

Taking the extra steps to actively listen can reduce the total number of calls and help you handle future calls more quickly. The less time you spend asking (or, in many cases, re-asking) about something a customer has already told you or someone else, the more you can get done. And, should that customer call back someday, the details you gleaned from actively listening can save you time down the road. Helping them understand their problem rather than simply fixing it may even mean they don't have to call again at all.

Active listening is good for your company, too. A sales person may get a customer in the door, but amazing customer service will keep them around for the long haul and increase revenue.

A happy, loyal customer can be an evangelist and advocate for your brand.

Technical support is the frontline for customer contact past the point of sale, and support representatives are the face of it all. Actively listening in support shows you really care about your customers, and that helps your entire company succeed.

" By actively listening in support, which shows that you really care about your customers, you can help your entire company succeed. "

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