

One

of your biggest challenges is developing your staff's listening skills. Yes, listening skills. Listening has been rediscovered in corporate America and has been called the towering "sleeping giant" of success skills. C. Paul Lyet, former chairman of the board and CEO for Sperry Corporation, names listening as the skill that most helped him become chairman of the board.

Just as CEO's can't fail to listen, listening is an important part of the success formula in today's optometric office. In fact, each month my consultant colleagues and I visit both big and small optometric practices across the country, and doctors consistently ask us two questions: *How can I increase staff effectiveness?* and *How can I increase profits?*

The answers are right under their noses, but hearing — not listening — blocks the messages. If they would just listen to staff members and patients, they'd find the answers they're looking for.

Here, I'll give you some insight on how you can listen better, plus I'll suggest ways that you can train your staff to really listen to messages patients are sending.

Game strategy

The office's goal is to fulfill — or exceed — the patient's unspoken expectations at all times. But, because lens and frame options are more complex than the patient realizes, savvy eyewear consultants should use a consultative rather than transaction-driven approach to service. Be mindful that you already know what you know. You don't know what the other person has to tell you. This is why



you'd be far better off listening and learning from the patient.

This means spending time listening at the beginning of the examination rather than quickly offering what you think is a solution. Before offering a recommendation, make sure you understand exactly what the patient needs — in other words, listen to what he wants.

To better understand how listening will help you be a high scorer in the optical, let's explore three common myths of good listening:

Myth #1. "I'm a good listener because I always get the facts and figures straight." You may be a selective listener. You listen to the facts and figures, but you don't hear or comprehend the rest of the information, such as questions the patient raises, emotions he shows or opinions and ideas he discusses.

For example, "how much" questions are potential home runs for the optical. Unfortunately, they can turn into lost opportunities if not handled properly. Someone who takes the time to call and ask "how much" questions doesn't merely want the answer to a question. He's calling for a reason.

Not long ago, I was in an optometrist's front office and overheard someone call and ask, "How much are frames?" Susan cheerfully told the caller that frames began at \$69 and went as high as \$285. The caller thanked Susan, who cheerfully responded with a hearty "you're welcome" before hanging up.

If Susan had been listening, the conversation might have sounded something like this:

Skill-building Sources

Do you need to improve your listening skills? Two good resources include:

1. **Building a Successful Optical by Harriett Stein**, Baltimore, MD. This set includes three videos and workbooks for \$299. Call (800) 828-8459.
2. **Focused Listening Skills with Sally Scobey, ETC** /w CareerTrack, Boulder, CO. ETC/w Career Track is a business management training company. The Listening series can be ordered with audio or videotapes and/or workbooks. Prices vary, depending upon what you order. Call (303) 440-7440.

Caller: "How much are frames?"

Assistant: "Thank you for calling! Are you a new patient to our office? Great, we're delighted you called. Are you having trouble with your present frame?"

Caller: "Yes, I broke it."

Assistant: "I understand how inconvenient that is. How

old is the frame you're wearing now?"

"When was your last eye exam? Dr. _____ recommends to our patients that they not use a prescription more than 2 years old because your eyes may change without obvious symptoms.

"We have a large selection of frames which vary from \$69 to our designer line that starts at \$150. Our eye-wear consultant, Debbie, can help you select the frames that are comfortable and look best on you. I can make an appointment for you to have your eyes examined and then have your new prescription put into a new frame. Would a morning or afternoon appointment be more convenient?"

The assistant gave the patient feedback that told the patient she understood the problem. If the problem deals with a cosmetic issue, first-time presbyope or a significant vision change, it's important to recognize the patient's emotional feelings about the problem and acknowledge its importance to him.

Connecting with telephone shoppers

How much can telephone shoppers mean to you? If you get 10 such calls a week and convert a modest 30% to an average \$150 sale, you've generated \$450 extra a week or \$23,400 extra a year!

So why aren't more optometric practices successful at doing this? Because to many, listening is difficult. Many people confuse listening with hearing — a mistake no office can afford to make.

It's human nature to immediately evaluate or judge the speaker's words, without really listening to the message. For instance, if your staff perceives "how much" questions as inconvenient, their ability to listen will be affected by their emotional response. If you allow your emotions to come into play, defending or making excuses even inside your own head, there will be little or no communication. Which leads me to myth #2.

Myth #2. "I'm a good listener because I never interrupt when a patient is speaking." A good listener doesn't hesitate to interrupt if the information provided by the patient is unclear. You must be an inquisitive listener to be an effective listener.

Listening doesn't mean passively waiting for your turn to speak. Patients are willing to spend 15% more for a product if they feel they've received good advice and service. Listen carefully for hidden objections and ask clarifying questions. Move patients from vague information to specific information by using open-ended questions, then move to specifics.

Here's an example of how this listening skill can lead to more personalized frame selection for your patients who have eyewear insurance plans.

Patient: "The doctor told me about ultraviolet protection and the no-glare coating. Because I fish, those sound

like good things. Now, you know I have insurance, and I only want what's covered. So, I don't want to spend a penny more."

Assistant: "Mr. Smith, I'm going to show you two options today: those frames and lenses covered under your vision care plan with ABC Company, and those frames and lenses you can have if you want to supplement your program.

"Your insurance plan will pay only for basic lenses. That means no ultraviolet protection or anti-reflective treatment, which are two options the doctor recommends and that you wanted. Look through these anti-reflective lenses and see the difference in the clarity of your vision."

Patient: "Oh yes, I see what you mean. It seems brighter, clearer."

Assistant: "And it will reduce the annoying glare you were complaining about.

"Mr. Smith, over here is the limited selection of frames that are covered under your program. The frames that have the memory flex would be extra. Why don't you try on this style. It complements your face shape and won't be going out of adjustment like your old frames."

Patient: "Yes, this is what I like."

Assistant: "Mr. Smith, let me go over the difference in cost for the premium lens and the designer frame you've selected."

Notice that the assistant answered Mr. Smith's spoken and unspoken questions. Insurance patients fear "bait and switch." No one likes to feel like they've been duped. And, never forget that insurance patients are just as interested in getting quality eyewear as other patients. The intuitive assistant listens to patients' needs and then educates them as to what options are available if they are willing to spend more.

Which leads us to the third myth of good listening.

Myth #3. "I'm a good listener because I pay attention to what I hear." Concentrating on what the patient says doesn't necessarily make you a good listener — unless you can also assimilate, understand and respond to the information you get.

Here's how this listening technique would convert to extra points in your optical.

Assistant: "Mrs. Jones, what did you like most and least about your current glasses?"

Patient: "Well, what I like least is that the frame leaves marks on my nose. Also, the frame went out of adjustment so easily. What I like best is the way they make me look, you know? They're pretty."

Assistant: (Thinks to herself) Let's see . . . I could look for a different bridge design and recommend plastic lenses instead of glass to reduce weight. And we'll need spring hinges or a more sturdy frame to cut down on the adjustment problem. (To the patient) "I can help you, Mrs. Jones. I know we have frames that won't leave marks on your nose, will stay in adjustment, and keep that attractive look you like.

"Mrs. Jones, because you have a great oblong face, I'm going to select a frame that has soft corners and horizontal lines. This frame combines an elegant design with a flattering shape. Notice the detail. I like the way the frame follows your brow line and gives you a very up look."

Fear of complaints

Another reason that staffers may not listen is because they fear they'll hear complaints. That fear will surely lose you patients.

If your staff is well-versed in pinpointing patient complaints, you can address problems before the patient leaves your practice for Dr. Doe down the road.

Even if you think you don't know how to handle a difficult problem, don't be concerned — you and your staff are consultants and problem-solvers. And in order to consult and solve problems, everyone needs to listen. After all, consider the alternative: If you don't take the time to listen to your patients now, your competitors will surely jump at the chance.

Team practice

In your next staff meeting, focus on becoming a better listener. With your staff, do the following exercise: Break into groups of two. Person A talks for a few minutes about the importance of eye care. The role of Person B is to keep quiet and listen: No matter what is said or how long the speaker pauses, Person B must remain silent. Call time after 2 minutes. Next, Person B relays what he or she heard. Person A then tells Person B how accurate the feedback was. Then, participants trade places.

When we consult with optometric offices, we first identify poor listening habits as a group, role-play and then work with a co-worker coach to increase proficiency.

After a period of 3 weeks, we introduce mystery shoppers into the offices and give team members a listening score.

Don't underestimate the importance of practice. Everyone needs to try out a new skill. The more exercises you do to strengthen your ability now, the more quickly the new skill becomes habitual. ▀

Donna Suter is president of Suter Consulting Group, a business that offers practice management and marketing services for doctors seeking to grow their practices. She can be reached at (423) 892-3638.