



**Customer Service:   
Walking in your customers shoes**

Workbook

Christian McGrath

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# How we interpret information differently

“To effectively communicate, we must realise that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.” - Anthony Robbins

Not everyone thinks the same as we do, by knowing and understanding this individualism can help toward dealing with customers in a way that meets both their needs and yours.

Take for example the following scenario:

You are working on your reception desk and a customer is looking for the main meeting room in the block, how do you give your instructions?

For some it will be easy to visualise the way, to describe the different floor layouts, colours of walls, signs and pictures that are on the corridor to look out for.

For others it will be clear to them that a written down list of directions, from A to B via C then reading out this list as it has been written.

Another person might identify the feelings they have with the route, the smells that relate to this such as flowers, canteen areas, the warmth of the corridor or brightness form the clear windows along the way.

Which one of the above are you?

The way we describe things and the words we use are very important to developing an understanding of those we wish to have rapport with. Rapport is not just about chat, it also includes understanding the individuals, recognising how they think, speak and interact.

We use these senses to interpret the world and tend to use one more than another. For good customer service, being able to recognise an individual’s first representational system can build rapport and allow many conversations to be led by you

Try the following questionnaire to determine your own way of thinking, which appeals to you from the following list of Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic (VAK) examples.

# The Representational System Preference Test

For each of the following statements, please place a number next to every phrase. Use the following system to indicate your preferences:

**1= Least Descriptive of you 2= Next Best you**

**3= Next Best Description 4= Closest to describing**

1. I make important decisions based on:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| \_\_ | Gut level feelings |
| \_\_ | Which Way sounds the best |
| \_\_ | What looks best to me |
| \_\_ | Precise review and study of the issues |

1. During an argument, I am most likely to be influenced by :

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| \_\_ | The other persons tone of voice |
| \_\_ | Whether or not I can see the other person’s argument |
| \_\_ | The Logic of the other person’s argument |
| \_\_ | Whether or not I feel I am in touch with the other person’s true feeling |

1. I most easily communicate what is going on with me by :

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| \_\_ | The way I dress and look |
| \_\_ | The feelings I share |
| \_\_ | The words I choose |
| \_\_ | The tone of my voice |

1. Its easiest for me to:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| \_\_ | Find the ideal volume and tuning on the stereo system |
| \_\_ | Select the most intellectually relevant point concerning an interesting subject |
| \_\_ | Select the most comfortable furniture |
| \_\_ | Select rich, attractive colour combinations |

5.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| \_\_ | I am very attuned to the sounds of my surroundings |
| \_\_ | I am very adept at making sense of new facts and data |
| \_\_ | I am very sensitive to the way articles of clothing feel on my body |
| \_\_ | I have a strong response to colours and to the way a room looks |

## Scoring the Representational Preferences

**Step One:**

Copy your answers from the test to the lines below:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | K | 2 | A | 3 | V | 4 | A | 5 | A |
|  | A |  | V |  | K |  | Ad |  | Ad |
|  | V |  | Ad |  | Ad |  | K |  | K |
|  | Ad |  | K |  | A |  | V |  | V |

**Step Two:**

Add the numbers associated with each letter. There will be five entries for each letter.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | V | A | Ad | K |
| 1 |  |  |  |  |
| 2 |  |  |  |  |
| 3 |  |  |  |  |
| 4 |  |  |  |  |
| 5 |  |  |  |  |
| Totals |  |  |  |  |

V = Visual, A = Auditory, Ad = Auditory Digital, K = Kinesthetic

**Step Three:**

The comparison of the totalled scores gives the relative preference for each four major representational systems.

## Characteristics of VAKAD

**Visual People**

* Process information quickly moving from picture to picture in their own minds
* Have a concern over there external appearance and looks
* Sit upright a lot to see what’s going on
* Speak faster than other styles and so breathe differently
* Keep a much bigger distance from others so they can see the whole picture wherever possible
* Find it difficult to memorise verbal instructions and might need it “drawing out”, have an awareness of how things looked, and might forget the smells and sounds that were present at the same time

**Auditory people**

* Appear to have their head titled to one side quite regularly
* Talk to themselves a lot
* Are distracted by external noises
* Are able to recollect conversations
* Can use the telephone easily and build on communications
* Are sensitive to different tonal use

**Kinesthetic people**

* Breath deep down, taking longer between breaths
* Have deep voice and lower pitched tones
* Move much slower and more deliberate
* Memorise through taking action and learning the processes involved
* Wear comfortable clothing and enjoy a comfortable environment

**Auditory Digital**

* Can dissociate from feelings easily
* Learn by firstly making sense of things
* Experience more tensions and neck pains as the main area of concern for them is in their own heads

# Chunking Information

Are you a big chunker or a little chunker!

When people tend to give or receive information the amount of information taken on board will differ dependent on the type of person receiving, or giving it.

**Big Chunker**

* A big chunker will like:
* The big picture
* The concept first
* An outline with minimal detail
* Ideals and not specifics

**Little Chunker**

* A little chunker will like:
* As much detail as possible to make up the picture
* Step by step details
* Reasons why something can or can’t be done
* The will be a need to analyse things

There needs to be some understanding of both types to ensure effective communications, and on knowing this, an ability by the person giving the information, to meet the needs of the person receiving it.

A little chunker will see a big chunker as having no structure, being too hasty and not clear enough, sometimes even coming across as thinking some things are not that important that they don’t need mentioning.

A big chunker will see a little chunker as being nitpicky, going on too long about things, going into unnecessary detail.

To be effective in customer service, meeting the personal needs to match how they interpret information will help to get any message, instructions, directions or misunderstandings across.

# Body Language

MC900423171[1]  
Interaction between individuals is much more than by language and talking alone. Albert Mehrabian in his research “*Silent Messages”* identified that 7% of the information we give is in the words itself. Imagine an email, the written word can be clear enough but sometimes because tone is missing, the information may be miss interpreted, using exclamation marks, capital letters even smiley faces are used to try and display tonality and expression.

Mehrabian recorded that 38% can be accounted for by the tone, this is very important to remember for both face to face and telephone conversations.

Finally his research identified that the final part, 55% the physiology makes up the most of the way in which we as humans get our messages across. Physiology includes using the eyes, how we hold our stance during discussions, for example where our hands are.

Copying body language or “matching/mirroring” is a conscious act by you that will build rapport and understanding.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| When you have rapport how do you feel? | When you don’t have rapport how do you feel? |
|  |  |

In order to build rapport we need to be able to match, then control through pacing and finally, leading. The following pages explains this further.

# Listening Skills

It may sound a peculiar statement to make but there are two types of listening, hearing and active listening. Consider a time when you have been having a conversation with someone but also noticed that someone else has joined your queue, or that the telephone has started to ring or that you have begun to think about your lunch or tea. How have you responded to the individual, have you actively listened to everything they have been saying or have you just heard what you wanted to take out of the discussion? This is hearing.

Active listening is different and is an important part of any customer service role.

We actually spend 40 per cent of our conscious time just listening. We tend to give little attention to the listening part of the communication process, which is amazing considering the facts stated here.

On average, people retain only 25 per cent of what they hear. There are many reasons why this is the case:

* We perceive listening as a passive activity and find the prolonged concentration required difficult to maintain
* The average person speaks at about 130 words per minute, whereas our thinking speed is about 500 words per minute. Consequently, we are continually jumping ahead of what is actually being said. We often, therefore, go on "mental walk-about", thinking of other things
* We don't clear our minds beforehand so the "noise in our system" shuts out or distorts what is being said
* The listener is tense with emotion so that his or her ability to listen is seriously impaired
* We are concerned with our reply so that the concentration is on this rather than what is being said to us
* The perception of the listener may so differ from the perception of the talker that a totally different interpretation of the information may occur

Active listening involves:

* Showing attention, using body language and eye contact
* Listening to content and making notes if necessary
* Reflecting and summarising, asking questions to determine the facts.

Active listening takes practice and a clear mind, when a customer needs your attention all other interruptions should be put to one side, be prepared to **listen, record** and **reflect**.

As a good listener you will also need to develop an empathy with your customer, the ability to put yourself where they are standing and what would be going through your own mind if you were in the same situation. Remember back to the very first exercise on what you identified as excellent customer service, in your eyes what happened in that scenario met your needs, think what you need to do to meet the needs of the person stood in front of you.

You need to keep an open mind, no-one is a mind reader, and the skills to read someone quickly can be learned but it is through observation, listening to facts, and not making any assumptions.

A good listener can do this as well as take notes throughout, giving the customer time to speak, whilst building a picture of what has happened to bring your customer in today.

As mentioned previously, to ensure you have all the facts down correct remember to listen, record and reflect.

# Assertive Communications

Being assertive is not just about what you say, but also about the way in which you say it. Here we offer some advice on how you can use your verbal and non-verbal communication skills to display assertiveness.

## What you say

**Be direct.**[[1]](#footnote-1) If you are to get a message across effectively, you must be direct. If people have to identify the important information from a long dialogue, they will eventually give up and your message will be lost.

Avoid preambles such as: ‘I know you’re busy, but …’, as these give people the opportunity to think of a defensive response. Also, don’t give excessive explanations, as this may confuse the situation. Being direct and accurate secures you from further debate.

**Be appropriate.** Consider the person you are addressing and the time and place, and show sensitivity to these. For example, you wouldn’t use a team meeting to speak to an individual about their poor performance.

**Take responsibility.**[[2]](#footnote-2) Taking ownership of your message shows assertiveness, e.g. stating: ‘in my opinion …’ as opposed to:

‘it is …’. This is also less confrontational, as you are offering an opinion rather than stating fact. People are less likely to respond defensively or aggressively to your opinion and are more likely to take your view into consideration.

If you don’t take responsibility, you can risk patronising the other person. Consider the following: ‘I think it needs a little more work’ and ‘Don’t you think it needs a little more work?’ The latter will probably be seen as patronising and condescending.

**Tackle the problem.** A way to avoid confrontation is to tackle the problem and not the person. For example, ‘Why can you never get anywhere on time?’ is a personal attack, while ‘Please make sure you are here on time’ is a solution to a problem.

‘Why can you never get anywhere on time?’ is also a sweeping generalisation. These are bound to cause offence. Avoid this by being more direct, e.g. ‘Why were you late this morning?’

**Vocabulary.** Work on usingclear, concise and constructive language in order to get your message across effectively. Choose words you are comfortable with – you don’t want someone to ask you what something means if you don’t know yourself.

It is also important to match your vocabulary to that of the receiver. If you use words they won’t understand such as technical words and acronyms, you will just distance yourself from the person with whom you are trying to communicate.

**Stay on track.** During communication, things may happen to knock you off track. For example, someone might disagree with you. In this case, you will need some time to reconsider your views and prepare an assertive response. You can gain valuable seconds by:

* using starter words, e.g. ‘Well …’ or ‘I see …’
* seeking clarification or testing your understanding, e.g. ‘So what you mean is …’
* asking directly, e.g. ‘I’d like a moment to think about that’

## The way you say it

**Confident delivery.** Use your voice tofull effect. This doesn’t mean shouting, but just adding quality to your voice. To do this, you can apply a breathing technique used by singers:

You probably normally breathe from your chest (noticeable by your rib cage moving up and down), but you can also breathe from your diaphragm (evident by your stomach moving in and out). Put your hand on your stomach and breathe deeply so that your hand moves in and out. This is abdominal breathing and it allows you to access the lower/richer end of your voice range. If you use abdominal breathing while speaking, you can also take in more air and thus talk for longer without pausing (useful for presentations).

**Inflection.** A monotone delivery is monotonous. An assertive delivery is smooth flowing and has inflection. Take into account the emphasis you give to words to add meaning to your message. Make sure you don’t, however, inadvertently give the wrong meaning. For example, ‘I can’t go out with *you* tonight’ may be seen as offensive, whereas ‘I can’t go out with you *tonight*’ is more reasonable.

**Body language.** Your posture can communicate confidence, energy and personal control. To do this when standing, for example, keep your head up and maintain an open stance, arms hanging loosely, hands open and relaxed. This demonstrates control over yourself and the situation.

Hunching your shoulders and drawing your body in on itself displays passive behaviour. Crossing your arms can be a defensive gesture, and angling away from a person expresses that you want to be somewhere else.

**Facial expression.** Your facial expression should be appropriate to the message you are giving. For example, a smile can be disarming, but is inappropriate if you are giving bad news.

**Eye contact.** Good eye contact demonstrates respect and openness. Avoiding eye contact, on the other hand, can be a sign of nervousness or dishonesty.

If you find eye contact difficult, try focusing on the bridge of the person’s nose. After a while you will get used to this and eye contact will seem easier. Remember to break eye contact every now and again, as people find staring unnerving.

**Proximity.** Respect another person’s personal space. Stepping into their space will make them feel uncomfortable and can be seen as threatening. Be aware that different cultures have different ideas of personal space. European cultures generally accept a distance of just under an arm’s length when standing.

**Pay attention.** People who listen distractedly (allowing other things either in their head or around them to interfere), or listen dismissively (filtering the information they take in) are not acting assertively. This is because assertiveness includes taking on board the opinions and rights (here the right to be heard) of others.

You should try to read the messages others give out. For example, if they seem distracted, you may offer to arrange another time to talk.

**Be organised.** Assertive people look organised and confident. Make sure anything that the receiver can see – be it your desk, bag, papers or presentation – is in order. This will not only give you the appearance of assertiveness, but you will also be more prepared.

**Remain calm.** Assertive people generally don’t look nervous. If you get nervous easily, then you might like to try some relaxation techniques before entering a situation in which you need to be assertive.

## The 3-stage model

1. Listen actively, reflect back what you’ve heard and understood
2. Say what you think and/or feel
3. Say what you want to happen, offer a solution

Examples of 3-stage model statements

**1. Active listening**

I appreciate that…..

I understand what you want me to do is…

I can see that…… is important to you

I can see that you are feeling…..

**2. Say what you think/feel**

However (not but) I think/feel…….

**3. Offer a solution**

So, I suggest/recommend……

What I think we should do is……..

# Telephone Skills

**The great telephone challenge**

Your goal when using the telephone for internal or external customers should be to:

* Make that caller believe that you are pleased to hear from them
* Sound awake, alert and ready
* Make the caller feel special
* Have patience with those who perhaps deserve it the least
* Direct your personality and enthusiasm down the telephone
* Make a good first impression
* Make a good last impression
* Keep in control, without interrupting or bullying
* Inspire confidence
* Make the customer feel they are dealing with a person and not being processed
* Not use any negative words or phrases
* Be believed
* Use the customer’s name
* Conduct the call efficiently and quickly without rushing the caller… That’s all!

**Reduced feedback**

Perhaps the most significant difference about being on the telephone is that you are cut off from your normal sources of feedback or communication. In a face-to-face situation, you can rely on a number of visual clues – facial expressions, body postures, gestures – to gauge the other person’s reaction to your message, but these are not available to over the telephone.

This means that when you are communicating over the telephone, all you have to go on are those clues provided by other person’s voice, for example:

* Tone of voice
* Volume
* Speech rate
* The actual words

**Limitations due to reduced feedback**

The fact is that without visual clues, you are more likely to misinterpret statements.

* Being limited to voice clues, you will need a high degree of concentration
* Conversations may become too impersonal and business-like
* Time tends to become exaggerated (i.e. 20 seconds waiting on the telephone can seem much longer)
* Not knowing what the customer may be doing, you may interrupt them at an inopportune moment.

## Quick solutions to common difficulties

**Misinterpretation**

Use of ‘active’ listening skills can help you avoid misinterpreting customer statements.

**Disembodied Voice**

Get to know the speaker as a person – when they engage in personal conversation, let them do it – you’ll learn more about them that way.

**Desk-Tied**

Organise your desk so that everything you need is within reach and you have no need to leave your telephone to gather information or support material.

**Exaggerate Time**

Exaggerated time is primarily a matter of not leaving the other person on ‘hold’ for excessive amounts of time. Also, be reasonably direct and to the point.

**Interrupting Customers**

If you interrupt a customer who is very busy and doesn’t want to talk when you ring, it’s best to re-schedule the call. You can also try to establish a convenient time to call.

## Master the Basics

**People like people who sound….**

People like to deal with people who have a certain ‘attitude’ or charisma about them. This is true whether you are dealing face-to-face or on the telephone. If we don’t have any face-to-face or visual communication, we have to use our voice to create the right impression. Most people would agree that they would like to be described by their customers as:

* Friendly
* Helpful
* Cheerful
* Knowledgeable
* Confident
* In control
* Professional
* Enthusiastic
* Organised
* Awake
* In charge.

Tick two words from the list above that would fit your approach, or add those you would rather use.

These are all words that we would like to create in the mind of our customer, or the person we are dealing with on the other end of the telephone. There is no great difficulty in doing this, so long as we are to take control of our own physiology and verbal behaviours. The most important thing to understand is that we only have our voice to do this with, and it is voice tone that people interpret and use to judge us.

## How to create a positive physiology

**Smile while you dial**

It is true that you can hear a smile down the telephone. And it is this smile that creates a positive, friendly, cheerful and helpful impression at the other end. We have all experienced the caller, or the person on the other end of the telephone, who sound fed up, and this leaves us with a very negative image.

The truth is that it is impossible to feel depressed while you are smiling. It is also true that if we met somebody face-to-face, nine times out of ten we would want to smile, or at least have a smile at us. The telephone is no different. So make sure that you put a smile on your face whenever you are on the telephone.

**Posture**

The next thing that will help you create a good impression is to sit up straight; in some cases it may even help to stand up. Not only will this help you feel more confident, you will also find that your voice will sound different. Whilst the customer or the caller may not know that you are standing up, they will intuitively sense the difference in your voice and approach. This is because our diaphragm is actually larger and more open when we are standing or sitting up straight. We will also act, and therefore sound, more alert and confident.

**Stay Focused**

One of the most common mistakes that people make on the telephone is to allow themselves to be distracted by other people around them. The reason this is so easy to do is because we are distracted by the lack of visual communication on the telephone.

In particular, making eye contact with somebody else in the office splits our attention and makes it very difficult for us to concentrate on listening to somebody on the telephone. Therefore be careful to avoid secondary eye contact with people around you. Making notes obviously helps this, but also position yourself and your desk away from the normal sight line of people passing by or coming into your office.

Remember

* Smile while you dial
* Keep an upright posture
* Avoid distractions – stay focused.

## How to change your voice

When we use the telephone there are several voice techniques that we need to adopt in order to be more effective in our communication. These techniques are partly to do with the mechanics of the telephone, in that it is not a particularly high technology piece of audio equipment, and therefore our voice can get distorted or reduced.

It is also to do with the fact that because of the dynamics of the telephone (i.e. less visual communication), many people translate words into images, and look behind the meaning, which we would normally gain from visual, facial, or body language.

Following are some of the keys to changing your voice and making it more effective over the telephone.

**Speech Rate**

The most common mistake on the telephone today is people talking too quickly.

By speaking slower, we make it easier for people to understand us. We also give our words more impact and allow ourselves slightly more time to think. The best way to change your voice is to slow it down by at least 20 per cent, although this will depend on how you speak normally of course.

**Volume**

Match the customer’s speech volume or speak slightly louder than normal face-to-face conversation.

The telephone sometimes reduces the volume of our voice; therefore it is very useful to slightly increase the speaking volume when we talk. This once again aids comprehension and ensures that our words are heard correctly. Be careful not to shout though, and be sensitive to quiet speakers.

**Pronunciation**

How we pronounce a word becomes much more important over the telephone. This partly is because people will read into our voice tone the meaning of the word.

For example, if someone was to say on the telephone that they are very angry, you would have to assess how angry they were by the way they said it. So be very careful, and also deliberate on how you pronounce certain words, particularly if you are trying to persuade people.

**Speak clearly – and, if necessary, spell anything that may be unclear.**

**Emphasis**

We will normally use our eyes, facial expression and body gestures to emphasise words and meanings. As the telephone doesn’t allow us this visual communication, the emphasis comes through a combination of the above three factors and also our emphasis on certain words and phrases. Either by repeating them, or by leaving significant pauses, can we add greater emphasis to what we say.

Try saying the following sentence, putting greater tonal emphasis on the words in bold. Notice how the meaning changes each time.

* Leave this with **me** and I will get back to you this afternoon.
* Leave this with me and **I** will get back to you this afternoon
* Leave this with me and I will get back to **you** this afternoon
* Leave this with me and I will get back to you **this afternoon**

## Telephone Voice

Your telephone voice will have an effect on the outcome of your call, so remember the following:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Pitch** | More amplification and modulation, almost sing-song or melodic |
| **Volume** | Increased by 15 per cent or match the customers |
| **Speed** | Slow down by 50 per cent or adjust to match the caller’s speed |
| **Pace** | Mirror or match the mood and speaking style of the caller |
| **Words** | Use short words, pronounce words carefully, spell names and figures |
| **Sentence** | Speak in ‘chunks’ of 10-14 words at a time, listening for the caller’s acknowledgement of understanding |
| **Emphasis** | Mark out words that are important with a change of voice tone, speed or  volume (louder) |
| **Pronunciation** | Beware of mispronouncing words and people’s names |
| **Mood** | Match the mood of the caller and don’t be overly cheerful if the situation or topics does not merit it. |
| **Facial expression** | SMILE! |

# 20 Tips to effective telephone techniques

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | Be prompt, answer the call within 3 rings, four at the most |
| 2 | If you can’t get to your phone, ask someone to answer it for you, or use an answering machine / voicemail |
| 3 | Smile when you answer the phone, it will make you sound friendly and positive. |
| 4 | Answer the phone with a set statement, let people know they have rung the right office and person, announce yourself. |
| 5 | When making a call, don’t be surprised if the other person wants to re-arrange a more convenient time, if they are busy, respect this. |
| 6 | Build a rapport, listen and get into a relationship with the caller |
| 7 | Find out what they want as soon as you can, this will help with your understanding of their needs |
| 8 | Use a range of questioning techniques to gain information and clarification |
| 9 | If you can help let them, if you can’t help, let them know, but tell them what you will do to find out for them, or let them know who may be able to help |
| 10 | Use verbal agreements throughout, use words such “I see”, “yes”, “uh-huh”, “ok!” |
| 11 | When making a call, tell them who you are before explaining why you are ringing. |
| 12 | If you are speaking to an answering machine, leave your name, company and number at the beginning and repeat at the end of the call. |
| 13 | Make notes if you need to recall important parts to a conversation and refer back to these regularly |
| 14 | Instead of transferring callers who may have been transferred between various departments, take their number and a suitable time for a call back, then make sure someone can ring them back |
| 15 | Ignore those interruptions around you, give 100% commitment to the caller |
| 16 | Focus on the subject, don’t stray from the point |
| 17 | Avoid trivialities, bring the caller back to the point if they stray |
| 18 | Agree and clarify any points each party should take away from the call |
| 19 | Finish in a positive manner, check all questions have been asked and all information has been given |
| 20 | Close the call properly, depending on circumstances thank them for calling, confirm what has taken place and what other actions might need to happen |

1. Jan Ferguson, *Perfect Assertiveness* (Random House Business Books, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sue Bishop, *Develop Your Assertiveness,* Second Edition (Kogan Page, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)