

Listen for Small-business Success

Small-business success often comes quietly. It rarely announces itself with drums and a parade. Instead, it comes from the voices of clients, customers, mentors and employees.

But it can be reached only if you, the owner, are ready to listen to these voices and capture the ideas and thoughts they offer.

“In general, we are poor listeners,” says Glenn Muske, the North Dakota State University Extension Service’s rural and agribusiness enterprise development specialist. “We remember only 25 to 50 percent of what we hear.”

Yet the words that fill our days are full of information and knowledge. Those words offer thoughts on future trends and new products and ideas. It brings awareness of competitors and the areas of weakness in our business.

Small-business owners need to work on tuning their listening skills. Doing so can have a great payoff in building relationships and maintaining a business that sits on the leading edge of the market.

“Listening is a skill that can be honed with practice,” says (Insert name and title) of (Insert county). “And a good place to begin is to verify the message you believe the person you are speaking with is giving you.”

Other tips for good listening include:

- Commit yourself - Tune out others and listen only to the person with whom you are having a conversation.
- Avoid distractions - Keep your mind focused on what is being said. Don’t let yourself fill in blanks, rush to judgment or begin preparing your response.
- Remember the unspoken - A conversation includes not only words but nonverbal cues and unspoken words. What’s not being said that you might have expected? Ask yourself if the nonverbal and verbal messages you are getting are in sync.
- Give time - Meaningful conversation does not happen in a few minutes. If you are looking to learn, then be prepared to spend time so the person can talk and you can probe for understanding and to get to the heart of the message.
- Engage - Good listening means probing, questioning, clarifying and summarizing. Don’t leave the conversation if both of you have not agreed that the message has been transmitted successfully.

Listening can bring benefits to your business. Customers feel valued and appreciate the attention, even if you are not always able to provide them with the response they seek. Employees also feel engaged and that their opinions are valued. This will increase their willingness to share in the future.

Listening provides you with a competitive advantage, an important element of success in any business.

For help, contact your local Extension Service office at [insert phone number and email address]. Also visit NDSU's small-business support website at www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness and sign up for the monthly newsletter. Or check out Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/NDSUextsmallbiz> or Twitter at @gmuske.

Other resources include <http://powerofbusiness.net> and www.eXtension.org/entrepreneurship. The Small Business Administration and its related organizations, such as the Small Business Development Centers and SCORE, also can be valuable resources.

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For more information, contact glenn.muske@ndsu.edu or call (701) 328-9718. You also can visit our website, www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness.