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ChangeAbility
The Newsletter of Redpoint Business Coaching
Volume 2, No. 6, December 2003
www.redpointcoaching.com
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Welcome!

You are reading ChangeAbility, a newsletter published by Redpoint Business Coaching run by Urs Koenig PhD, MBA.

ChangeAbility is a bimonthly newsletter bringing you hands-on tips and cool resources for starting or building your business.

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I Build Lasting Business Relationships by Listening Well

One of the greatest challenges business owners face is to learn to listen well. Whether it is listening to an employee, a business partner or to a customer, we all can improve our listening skills.

Robin Naughton, co-founder and director of client relations for the Seattle-based interactive agency Engine Interactive, shares her insights on the art of listening for building enduring business relationships. Engine's success proves that Robin walks her talk. During 2003 for example,

Engine Interactive won several international and national web design and web marketing awards. For more details go to: www.enginei.com. Robin is a Redpoint coaching client.

Reviving The Ancient Art of Listening
By Robin Naughton

“It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes

For those of us in creative professions, the ability to communicate is the lifeblood of our existence. Our clients rely on our expertise to craft words and images that speak on their behalf. We are the storytellers of their ideas.

But communication is a two-way street, and one in which listening all too often gets swept to the curb. Be honest now, how many times have you caught yourself half-listening to a client while you try to answer email, organize your desktop and plan for your next meeting?

As with much of technology, the temptation to multi-task is great. Listening requires us to slow down and pay close attention, and that is just antithetical to our do-ten-things-at-once lifestyles. Who has time to listen? We're all too busy getting work done.

Many corporate communication experts advocate so called “active” listening techniques, whereby the listener repeats back to the speaker what they just said. To be fair, it takes a subtle approach to pull this off, but if you can find a natural way to do it, active listening is an invaluable skill to develop. Not only will your questions be smarter when it comes time to ask them, but you'll reinforce to the client that you're really trying to understand what they're saying.

Despite all the whiz-bang communication gadgetry available to us, practicing the ancient art of listening still happens to be the best way to learn what a client actually wants from you. Between what they say and what they mean is a minefield of nuance and innuendo. Is this person truly comfortable with your proposal? Why do they keep pausing before they talk about the ad strategy? Finding the right words to convey thoughts about design can be excruciatingly difficult for anyone, and especially so when their business depends on it.

In my experience, the best way to be certain that quality listening happens is to build it into the creative process itself. I think of it as 'structured listening,' and from the first conversation I have with a client, I'm documenting it every step of the way.

Using a simple set of tools – meeting notes, questionnaires, discovery documents and creative briefs – can go a long way toward ensuring every layer of a project is documented. Adding structure to the listening process also helps form a detailed road map of where you've been and where you're headed creatively, which is especially reassuring to non-creative clients. When they want to know how you arrived at a certain concept, you'll have the notes to back it up.

Effective listening, like every other aspect of the creative process, is a skill that requires practice and determination to get it right. Counter-intuitive as it may seem, taking time to really listen to your clients will definitely save you time in the end. Nothing builds trust quicker than knowing someone is genuinely listening to you.

And, as Calvin Coolidge wisely once said, "no man ever listened himself out of a job."

Robin Naughton can be contacted at robin@enginei.com or (206) 709-1955.

This article has previously been published in Media Inc.

II Your Strong Start into 2004!

"If you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, stride down there and light the damn thing yourself."

Anonymous

2004 is all about you making smart, bold and prosperous choices and taking charge once again of your business.

The end of the year is a great time to re-assess your business: What has worked in 2003 and what needs to change in 2004? Use the following three pointers to get 2004 off to strong start

1) Set Yourself New Goals

Make them specific, measurable and realistic. Be sure to also add a time line (i.e. by when do you want to achieve them?)

Most importantly though make sure that the goals inspire you and that they are truly your goals.

One of the most common reasons why people don't achieve their goals is because of lack of emotional buy-in. Ask yourself:

+Is this really truly my goal or am I trying to please someone else?

+How will my life look once I achieve this goal? Does this thought truly excite me?

+Is there a bigger goal 'hiding' behind this goal? What is it? Does the bigger goal truly inspire me?

+On a scale of 1-10 how committed am I to achieving this goal?

2) Focus On the Really Important People

Go through your Rolodex and identify those most valuable people who have supported you and your business over the last year. These wonderful people may have sent you referrals, gotten you in touch with other valuable people, they might have invited you to give a talk at their networking meeting or have otherwise gone out of their way on your behalf.

Take advantage of the slower weeks in January and make a point of calling each and every one of these people and arrange for coffee or lunch.

At the get together, share your plans and goals and update the person about your business. Most importantly though, ask how you can support the other person and follow through on that.

3) Clean Out the 2003 Clutter

Imagine coming back to your office in January: Your whole office is clean, welcoming and you only have useful and important documents on file. Your desk is nice and clean and your inbox is empty.

How to achieve that? Clean out the 2003 clutter NOW!

Getting rid of things we no longer need should be an ongoing process but, alas, for most of us it is not: we get busy and more 'important things' than filing and throwing out clutter demand our attention.

Let's take the start of 2004 as a motivator to clean out the 2003 clutter.

Much like a hard-drive, our new projects are being slowed down if there are too many old projects open. In order to move ahead and make time and space for new things, we need to get rid of what is holding us back.

Look around your office and go over and through your desks, book cases, filing cabinets, computer, Palm, briefcase: bin and bag the clutter. Do it now! If in doubt: toss it. Remember: in order to move forward we need to get rid of what is holding us back.

III Client Success Story Last Minute Present Idea

A former client of mine has written a very funny and clever book about shoes:

Bootism: A Shoe Religion

Bootism: A Shoe Religion by Michael Duranko will make the perfect little holiday gift for your shoe loving friends. The book is available for \$8.76 and all orders over \$25 will receive free shipping from Amazon.com.

Please visit www.bootism.com to learn more about this fun little book, or click here www.amazon.com to order the book

IV Resources for You

If you want to learn more about improving your listening skills, I highly recommend these two classics:

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People By Stephen Covey. One of Covey's 7 habits is: 'Seek first to understand before to be understood.' The excellent chapter covering this habit uses insightful examples to illustrate the importance of active listening.

You Just Don't Understand By Deborah Tannen.

This book focuses on cross gender communication. With a combination of scientific insight and humorous writing, Tannen shows why men and women can walk away after a conversation with completely different impressions on what has been said. Tannen is a Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington D. C.

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ChangeAbility is published by Redpoint Business Coaching which is run by Urs Koenig MBA, PhD.
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