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## Listen Generously

BY JOAN CAPELIN, FSMPS, HON. AIA

In the early 1990s the American Institute of Architects commissioned the Roper Organization to research how clients select architects. Roper's response was enlightening: Clients look first for professionals who listen and respond well to their needs and goals. (No. 2 was the ability to deal with public agencies. "Money" was much farther down the list.)

Listening is the basis of trust and negotiation, and the lack of listening is blamed as one of the reasons mergers fail.

So, given the obvious importance of listening, why do some people tune out and let their mind wander? Or argue, fake attention, and react strongly to emotional words? Or consider the subject uninteresting and concentrate instead on the speaker's delivery? Or interrupt the speaker, finish his or her thoughts, avoid eye contact, and change the topic? Or anticipate what's going to be said and formulate a response even before the other person has finished speaking?

Research indicates that the average listener hears, understands, evaluates properly, and retains only about half of what was said during a brief presentation within a few hours. Within 48 hours, retention drops to a quarter. If you find this hard to believe, ask your consultants or staff members to repeat the instructions you have just given them. See how close they come.

Early in my experience as a consultant, when my listening skills were not quite yet in place, we got a firm of mechanical/electrical/plumbing consulting engineers as a new client. I was impatient to get to work and dismayed that, week after week, all we seemed to do was meet with all seven partners. There was no marketing plan and certainly no business plan from which to start, so we gamely inquired about how they operated and what was important to them.

These sessions would start at 5:30, after their client work was put aside. The office manager would unlock the cabinet in the conference room where she kept the Milano cookies, and these principals—all but the lead partner, legendarily non-verbal—would amazingly talk on (and on) until their commuter trains were on post-rush hour schedules.

Editor's note: Joan Capelin has long been a pioneering voice in our industry. Recognized as much for her eloquence as for the hats she wears, Joan is a renowned expert in "compelling communications." With this issue, we welcome her to *Marketer* as a contributing editor, from whom we can expect many more memorable pieces like this one, excerpted from her recent book, *Communication by Design*.

We had been hired to create a new approach, new vocabulary, and new materials, but we seemed to be adrift. Finally, convinced that it was a better idea to resign the account than be fired for non-performance, I invited the partner in charge of marketing to join me for breakfast.

Clearly, it was a mismatch, I told him, regretfully; everything seemed to have stalled. He was genuinely stunned at my declaration, and I was in turn surprised by his response: "This is the first time in the history of the practice that all the partners have come into one room at one time to discuss the future of the firm. We really appreciate how you are bringing us into focus."

What I thought was a failure was actually, to these engineers, the best-ever start of something truly important—I just hadn't heard what was really happening. Everybody had a good laugh. The work that resulted was very useful, and the collaboration all by itself was a source of pride.

Listen generously. Listen with an open mind for what's really being said, and for what isn't said. Mozart believed that "the silences between the notes are as important as the notes themselves." Ask a question and listen to learn whether the question you asked is really being answered—and if it's some other question that is being answered, why is that? What's more important to the conversation: the answer you sought or what



the speaker is saying? Do the speaker's words have purpose, so they can be acted on? What is the speaker's central theme?

Ears aren't the only listening mechanism you possess. Your eyes also notice body language, which is harder to control than language. Mannerisms are particularly revealing. For that reason, if we have to conduct a particularly sensitive interview of a client or a client's conduct, we prefer to do it face to face.

**"Listen for what's really being said, and for what isn't said. Mozart believed that 'the silences between the notes are as important as the notes themselves.'"**

Jean-Pierre LaCroix, an environmental graphic designer from Toronto, works from the principle of "listen and you will be heard." Known for being very persuasive, J.P. says that listening is "all about clearly understanding the client's needs and being sympathetic to what he's asking you to do. That entails both understanding the challenges that the client faces—beyond what he thinks is the problem—and getting to know his business."

**Q: Well then, J.P., how do you convince your client that what he's asked for is wrong, particularly if he's already defined the solution in his mind?**

**A:** "You have to present back to him his perceived solution, to show how well you listened. Then, you show him the big picture and how the original solution limits opportunities. Finally, once you've convinced him that you care about his business, that it's not just another assignment, you can present your solution."

People listen from their own perspective. All the filters were in place when I recently led a client's marketing team meeting. I asked that the people around the table share their notes with me, since I was certain I would be too engaged in the dynamics of the meeting to make a reliable record for myself.

What I observed when four very different sets of minutes came to me, with one person abstaining, was that each of them was in the room, alert and engaged, but each had attended a different meeting.

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#### About the Author



**Contributing Editor Joan Capelin, FSMPS, Hon. AIA—strategist, public relations consultant, speaker, and SMPS Fellow—is the founder of Capelin Communications ([www.capelin.com](http://www.capelin.com)), which specializes in professional services firms in the design and building industry. *Communication***

**by Design**, from which "Listen Generously" has been excerpted, is available through the SMPS Bookstore. Joan is the proud recipient of the SMPS Marketing Achievement Award and can be reached at [JCapelin@capelin.com](mailto:JCapelin@capelin.com)