

## **Communication – a necessity and a success factor in the optometric practice**

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### **Abstract**

Before, during and after a customer contact, for example during a contact lens fitting, we do communicate with our customers, consciously or unconsciously, direct or indirect. This communication takes place on several, different levels and in many different forms. If these forms and levels form a unit, the communication will be very effective and efficient, its goal(s) can be achieved easier (positive interference). Such goals can be: teaching, passing on knowledge, information or changing behavior. The result will be sub optimal, if form and levels do not form such a unit (negative interference). In case that form and levels contradict each other, the communication loses its credibility and consequently most, if not all of its effectiveness.

All that counts is the perceived content and the achieved result of the communication, not our intended ones.

Less is often more, quality goes before quantity. It is important to adjust oneself in the choice of the tools (language, speed, supporting elements like graphics ...) to the recipient. Targeted, reproducible, and verifiable, i.e. honest communication needs less time and yields higher customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, which is worth gold in the competitive environment. Today's customers want to have a positive, entertaining experience and not just be served with the usual. They want to be questioned and listened to, not just receive "a communication shower". Those that do not look forward to each customer contact with joy and are not able to show this, miss a great opportunity.

### **Key words**

Communication, communication levels, verbal communication, non verbal communication, emotional intelligence, factual content, call to action, relationship, self revelation, face-to-face communication, behavior, open questions, closed questions, perception

### **Introduction**

An efficient and effective communication between the customer (also known as the patient) and the eye care specialist (ophthalmologist, optometrist or optician) is an important success factor in a practice. Success can be defined in very different ways, depending on the point of view of the person interested in doing so. For a customer, this can mean to not have spend more time than necessary and being satisfied with the service and product experience (have the feeling of being well served, well consulted, been listened to and having received what she or he wanted). It would actually be even better, if the actual experience passed the expectations, if the customer is delighted, not only satisfied. This does not necessarily mean, that the eye care specialist was able to provide an even better visual acuity, it could mean such simple things as friendliness, being on time, attentiveness in the conversation, easy to understand and follow explanations etc. Taking the view of the specialist, one may find economical considerations fairly high on the list. The measurement of the latter should however not be limited to the achieved sales volume or gross profit from this one customer. There are other aspects to look at, too.

These can be the personal, professional satisfaction one has gained out this work, the expressed customer satisfaction (may be even a praise from them). Communication plays an important role in this, in the daily business and life.

The following article first describes general theories, experiences and mechanism in the area of communication. After this, it addresses specific situations, customer behavior in the daily eye care practice and proposals for the conscious use, application of certain communication tools and the personal conditioning the eye care specialist can use to achieve better results for both, him and the customer.

### **How to benefit from good communication?**

The ability to better communicate can become a deceive advantage in times of increasing competition. Contrary to very visible efforts in product portfolio or pricing policy communication skill can not be mimicked easily and therefore can make a major and unique business differentiation point – and this in a quite sustainable way.

A communication that is perceived as good or very good by the customers increases their satisfaction score and not only makes them more loyal customers (regulars), but also turns them into advertisers. It is no secret, that really satisfied customers do mouth-to-mouth advertising for your shop! Their recommendations also brig you new customers, sometimes even make once lost customers come back. On the contrary, dissatisfied customers damage your business with their negative comments to others.

A good “communication culture” within a company can even be sensed and felt by externals, like customer. How is that possible? They recognize this for example on the smile, the friendliness and politeness in the language, the professional self confidence (posture, firmness when talking), the behavior among the employees themselves and towards the customers. Good communication can have very positively influence the efficiency of the processes within a company and thus contribute considerably to growth, productivity and profit.

Figure 1: Advantages of Good Communication

### **When do we communicate?**

Paul Watzlawick once said:

“One can not not communicate.”

In reverse, this means that one always and all the time communicate. We do this not only when we speak, but each behavior and posture is at the same time communication.

Figure 2: Communication takes place always and all the time

The science of communication differentiates among several forms of communication:

- Mass communication
- Group communication
- Individual communication
- Interpersonal communication

This work limits itself to the last two categories, as they are most relevant for the daily work in an optometric practice.

The interpersonal communication includes:

- The nonverbal communication
- Vocal communication
- Visual communication
- Spoken language
- Supporting communication
- Gesture supported communication
- Supported communication

The nonverbal communication is responsible for 80% of the reaction (figure 3). Interesting and important to note that mimic, gesture and body posture do not only have an influence on others, but also on oneself. A known example for this is the smile, which one should put on before one lifts the receiver for a phone call. The voice will then actually sound friendlier, softer, more gentle. Other important points are: How we listen to others, show empathy, integrate our (and their) personal emotional situations and speak about them, the attitude towards other party in the communication. Daniel Goleman described this excellently in his book "Emotional Intelligence, EQ".

Figure 3: Nonverbal communication is very important

### **Face-to-Face Communication**

Face-to-Face communication is defined as a system of interactions on the basis of behavior related to people present, who have the possibility to observe each other. In such circumstances, one can not avoid that the own behavior is understood as a communication from the other party, who gains additional information out of the conscious and unconscious observation of one's behavior. Even more of a concern is the fact, that the observer assigns this information a high degree of truth, often trusts them even more than the spoken (heard) words!

Die Face-to-Face communication uses these possible communication channels:

- Audio (speaking and hearing)
- Visual (seeing, pictures, graphics, tables ...)
- Tactile (sense of touch and feel)
- Olfactory (Sense of smell)
- Thermal (Temperature)
- Sense of taste (appeals to me, is of interest for me, liking ...)

The following rule applies: The more channels are used and served, the more the precision of the degree of reflexivity and the overall communication.

### **The four-layers-model**

The four layers model of communication describes the multi levels characteristics in the human message. These four layers are:

- Factual or objective layer
- Appeals layer
- Relationship layer
- Self-Revelation layer

This model helps to explain 'misunderstandings'. They are defined as a 'disturbance', because the receiver relates the message to a different layer than the sender intended to utilize. In case such a disturbance exists, one can question the cause, the emotions, take a break, bring in help from a third party or just sleep over one night over it, while reflecting about it. The following part includes a closer characterization of the four layers.

### **The Factual Layer**

Communication on this layer only uses objective content and does not address the person, gestures or other elements alike. The information includes purely objective, factual messages. The sender is asking himself: "What do I inform about, what are the facts?" The communication itself is factual, comprehensible, neutral and clear (figure 4).

Figure 4: Characteristics of the factual layer

### **The Appeal Layer**

The appeal layer includes the intention to stimulate a specific action on the receiver's side, a call for action from the receiver. The sender asks himself: „What action do I want to take place, what action do I want you to do?“ “ The sender tries to influence and does it more or less open or hidden. The hidden case is called manipulation (figure 5).

Figure 5: Characteristics of the appeal layer

### **The Relationship Layer**

This layer takes up the relationship between the sender and the receiver, better how it is perceived by them. This layer becomes visible in the 'you' and 'we' within the messages. The sender expresses what he thinks about the sender and how they relate to, value each other (from the sender's point of view). The question is: „How do I treat my the people around me with my way of communication?“ (figure 6)

Figure 6: Characteristics of the relationship layer

### **The Self-Revelation**

The sender reveals, consciously or unconsciously, always some information about her- / himself, her/his motives, values, emotions, etc. It is here, where one can find the 'I-messages'. Each message thus becomes a small "sample of the sender's personality'. The question is: „What do I tell (reveal) about myself?“ (figure 7)

Figure 7: Characteristics of the self revelation layer

Schulz von Thun once said: The hidden layers within the purely semantic meaning of words are equally relevant as the purely cognitive content of a sentence and sometimes transmits a stronger emotional and relationship messages than the directly and factually understood elements. Figure 8 shows an example, in which all four layers become visible within even a short message. The male / female roles within the example could of course be reversed. The example is also a nice proof of von Thun's theory. One can almost see the scene's image, where and how the disturbances can – and very likely do happen.

Figure 8: Example of the four layers in a communication

For the sender, this means that the verbal, factual messages can be clouded more or less by other layers and – in the worst cast – get totally lost. At the same time, the knowledge about this is an opportunity. Dealing with this consciously, we can address, include all layers in advance and thus considerably increase the effectiveness of our message(s).

### **Reception and Relevance**

We receive the majority of the information unconsciously and thus select heavily in doing so. This protects us from information (stimulation) overload, overflow. While receiving, we abstract and extract the momentarily relevant properties of a sign from the irrelevant ones (e.g. the one lighted color from a traffic light). In a concrete situation, we also amend a sign with features that are important for us (red light = stop). This is called apperceptive (= consciously aware) supplementation.

### **Non-verbal Communication**

The non-verbal communication is responsible for 80% of the reaction! (according to Malcho). Many do however not realize the importance of the body language - and the consequent need of controlling it. An important aspect of this is the internal attitude towards the other party (empathy) and the dealing with, handling of one's own emotions. Daniel Coleman describes this as the Emotional Intelligence (EQ).

Autonomous body functions, like the sweating, the pupil size or the heart rate can not be consciously controlled, but are clearly visible, observable for the other party and oneself. Two people, who like each other, have an interest in each other start to align their behavior (tonality, gesture, mimic, head and body posture) over time, e.g. during a dinner. In communication science, this is called 'pacing'. Expert communicators can thus 'read' a lot of information from a face, from gestures and behavior.

One can learn (and practice) to utilize body language consciously. Explicit and targeted use of gesture and mimic (here most of all around the eyes and mouth parts) can have a considerable impact on the other party. Think about the smile when greeting somebody. It is an expression of joy, facilitates making contact and can help to relax critical situations (lower the tension). Add to this the effects of self-conditioning. Also our own attitude is affected by our own gestures and mimic, therefore: smile before you pick up the receiver to accept a call. Other examples are: the self confident hand shake during the greeting, the upright posture versus a bended, tilted one, the poker face and the smell one sends out. It is not without reason, that we say: I am not able to stand ... !

If you have international customers (e.g. from the United Nations (New York, Geneva) or the embassies (in your country's capital)): Watch out for some potential cultural communication pitfalls! What is good, even expected in one culture may be seen as an harassment in another (direct eye contact in Islamic countries or nodding with the head in Greece, see also figure 9).

Figure 9: Cultural differences in nonverbal communication

The importance of the non-verbal communication is underlined by the following words from Nietzsche: 'One may lie with the mouth, but by how one behaves in doing so, one still tells the truth.'

Figure 10 shows the well known terms for the different distances between communicating people. This is of some importance for every eye care professional, but certainly for a contact lens fitter. Be aware of them and their consequences during skiaskopie, ophthalmoscopy, slit-lamp exam, and the placing of lenses. Even a small sideways turn (e.g. when placing a lens) reduces the perception of a frontal approach and can tremendously increase the acceptance of being so close.

Figure 10: Distances and spheres

Communication is

- Sharing of knowledge
- Passing on of information
- Invites participation
- Means to do something together, merge ideas ...
- A reciprocal exchange of thoughts in language, gesture, mimic, signs and pictures
- Able to free release power, bring zest to life, but can also be a burden.

A conscious approach to communication is very helpful. Being aware about ones own inner attitudes and the ability to control, steer those makes one's communication more effective. Similar to self conditioning, like:

In case you want to have a good day, then expect to have a good day!

It is of course also important to be convinced to have something to be communicated. Conscious communication needs content, has to make sense. In the end, we want to have an intended effect on or provoke an action from the other party. Best, the reaction should be optimal as well. In order to achieve this, it is very helpful to have a positive attitude towards the other.

### **Establishing a communication relationship**

At the start of a communication, it often pays to invest some in establishing a relationship between the parties. In some cultures, like the Asian and the Arabian, this is even more important. In this process each one gets a feeling for the communication behavior and style of the other. If you want to communicate effectively and efficiently with your customers, adapt your behavior and style to match theirs. Speak, for example, at a similar speed (needs a lot of practice). During this time, forget your preferences and most of all: Listen **actively!** (figure 11). Ask questions, in order to understand the other's interest(s), what you have to communicate and what not, but also: How! Be aware of the rule: The one who asks the questions is leading the communication.

Figure 11: Building customer relationships

### **Active Listening**

Active listening starts with remembering the name(s). One trick to achieve this is: use the name(s) in the beginning several times. In case you have to write the name into a record or a form and doubt the spelling, ask! (similar sounding names with different possible spellings exist in all languages). But do not make the mistake and give an inappropriate comment, like: Ah, you are the one with the funny (weird) name!

In case you are busy, acknowledge the customer's presence and welcome her / him with an eye contact and a welcoming nod of the head, combined with a smile! If possible, without angering the 'current' customer, let the newcomer know an approximate time it will take for you to be available.

Keep eye contact, while listening (attention: cultural differences!) Let the customer always finish their sentence. Do not interrupt unnecessarily, do so only if it is obvious that the other party delivers a monologue and does not contribute to the subject any more. Demonstrate that your listening and attention by giving short comments, as appropriate: aha, is that so, ach?, so?, oh!, mhh ...

Take a short break before you answer, if you answer at all. You may want to go right to the next question. Another option is, that you show that you listened and what you heard, understood. You can do this by summing up what was said in your own words, by using much less words, may be taking out the emotional elements and sticking to the facts. In some cases, it is a good idea to get an approval for your summary: Is my summary correct? In the case of an angry or complaining customer, get many little yes in between. This allows you to come back on already agreed upon facts later. "As you confirmed before, the lenses were ...", "You told me, that ... is important for you." Using some of the customer's own words is a very good idea, too. It shows, that you really listened well.

### **Dealing with customer**

Take into consideration that each of your customers has her/his own attitude to the health care system, the eyes, the vision. This attitude has an influence on the willingness to seek and accept help, follow instructions, but also on what they expect from you. A car driving, presbopic micro surgeon and leisure time rifleman has very different exigencies versus a man without specifically high visual demands. Are you ready to treat both differently when it comes to the fitting of contact lenses? Do you really do it? Is our goal to always achieve the maximum always the best? Is it sometimes not ok to deviate from the optimal target, as long as it is done consciously and with reason? Such a deviation needs to be explained to the customer, she/he has to agree to it, has to be satisfied with it and the solution still has to satisfy the customer's needs (may be a specific one better than others).

Other examples are:

Symptomatic emmetropes, who absolutely want to have a pair of spectacles, contact lenses, but do not really need one, just because the sister, girl friend or brother has one. They suddenly complain about blurred vision, asthenopic symptoms, while nothing can be found optically and ophthalmologically (!). This should not be brushed away though. Other physical and psychological causes have to be followed up and excluded, too (internist, dentist, orthopedic ...) The relatively new field of functional optometry may be of help, too.

Another possible group are the asymptomatic ametropes, who actually need a vision correction, but refuse, oppose to wear one. Here, one can ask oneself, if it always has to be the perfect, best possible correction (still staying within the legal limits of a driver's license etc., of course.). Such a deviation will be accompanied by an education, and explanations.

It may also be a good idea to write down what was said, may even get a confirming signature.

Never argue with your customer!

This does, on the other hand not mean, that one has to fully agree, all the time. Let them have their (false) opinions. Proceed and let them experience the results. The customer may then change her/his point without you forcing it. 'People are usually more convinced by reasons they discovered themselves than by those found by others.' (according to Blaise Pascal)

Not to argue with customers is very difficult in the case of complaints. In such a case, it is easier if one does not take things personally, talk on the factual layer and about objective facts. At the same time, do not lose the empathy in doing so. The complaint management is the highest school of emotional intelligence (EQ).

Decision making process

Take into consideration that some customers have difficulties to make a decision. Therefore, do not offer too many alternatives. When making an appointment: First ask about the morning or the afternoon preference, then offer one available time, not two, do not ask about the desired time, unless all times are open.

Make a recommendation, based on the benefits this one offers for the customer's specific needs. Have an alternative at hand, in case you are asked for one. Then tell where this one differs from the best, and to what degree (this is why it is not the best, yet an acceptable, good one).

### **First encounter, history and symptoms**

Avoid prejudices based on stereotypes. Do not condition yourself in a negative way.

Remember your smile!

Active listening is especially helpful when taking the history and the symptoms. Be attentive and remember details. Look for the nuances in the tonality, the non verbal communication signs.

### **Measurements, questioning technique, communicating the results, ending the exam**

A basic principle: The quality of the answers is directly proportional to the quality of the questions. So, never blame the customer for giving bad answers. Reflect on your question first. Also think about preparing the customer better (e.g. tell them that the vision may initially be a bit less with the next glass, but that the purpose is to compare two positions of the glass, before placing the Jackson Cross Cylinder in front).

One of the difficulties we face is, that the customers actually want to help us (and them) and therefore want to give an answer, want to see a difference.

Break the exam's results in smaller, easy to understand pieces. Explain that the results actually mean for the customer, how you can help to improve the situation and what she/he can do. Dr. Gerber (USA) once said: "You really need to be able to tailor your specific recommendations to each patient." and "For any recommendation that we make to have value and validity to our patients, we have to be able to tie back into what their needs are." While this was in reference to the fitting of presbyopic contact lenses, it applies to the customer communication in general as well. (see figure 12)

Figure 12: The examination – communication of the results

Utilize all communication channels and layers. Use pictures, graphs, let them touch samples. Good to know that many people will only remember what has been said at the end. Therefore sum up the most important pieces, the actions and next steps, as well as dates again.

When saying good-bye, address the customer again by the name. Hand over one of your business cards, tell them they can call you if they still have a question. This passing on of your card is a like your signature under the sale, the exam. It makes the whole process more engaging, binds you to what you said and promised before. It also makes it easier to know who dealt with the customer and therefore avoids finger pointing and trying to hide from consequences. (see figure 13)

Figure 13: The examination – closing remarks and behavior

### **Some customer personalities**

In the next part, we will look at some specific customer personalities:

- The „problem“ customer
- The „quiet/calm“ customer
- The „talkative“ customer
- The „nervous“ customer
- The „aggressive / angry“ customer
- The „know it all“ customer
- The „aged“ customer
- Customers with a handicap

Not mentioned are these other, possible customers:

- *The „ill willing“ customer*
- *The „low vision“ customer*
- *The „Drug / Alcohol“ customer*
- *The „psychic“ customer*

### **The „problem“ customer**

The Americans call this customer also a „PITN“ (pain in the neck). This customer asks many unnecessary questions, always has something to complain about, is never really satisfied, and is the type of customer we would rather refer to our competition. Should one make a note in the patient record, file? While this makes the colleagues aware of potential behavior, it also conditions them. Also, data protection laws in some countries may force you to hand over the records and tell about the meaning of acronyms. So, you better not do this. The following can happen as well: The well known and “beloved” customer enters the shop. All ‘old timers’ flee the scene, leaving the new kid in the shop to handle the story. And – guess what? He has no problem! Both get along well, the PITN is out fast and happy! How could that happen? Well, it did happen, because the new kid was not informed, was open in the attitude, put on a smile and kept smiling while serving, listened, was not on the defense all the time ... Think about it, it does happen.

It may be a good idea to question the motives, the causes for such behavior. Is it may be insecurity, need for recognition ... . It is important that one does not take such behavior personal. Stay factual, look for a solution. Ask closed rather than open questions. (closed ones can be answered by yes and no. Open ones start with or include words like: What, when, where, how and invite for more words.) In doing so, you take control of the communication, lead the direction, take out the emotions. Never give the customer the win by arguing with him/her. Be firm in your no to an unjustified request, tell what you are willing to do instead. Keep the smile! Do not mix this customer with the "know it all" or the "aggressive/angry" customer.

### **The "quiet/calm" customer**

A strong contrast to the "problem" customer are the quiet, calm customers. Here one has the problem to get any information. One has to try hard to receive piece by piece. The reluctance, inability to express her-/himself can be due:

- Nervousness (does not feel well in the clinical environment, the small/narrow room, the close distances)
- Shyness, Tiredness
- Hostility, refusal, rejection (Is the quiet customer just a still 'silent' aggressive, angry customer. Is the volcano just about to erupt?)

Try to identify the cause. Utilize the appropriate communication strategy. First thing is the warm, friendly demeanor and behavior. When dealing with children aim to be perceived less clinical, more human. Create a relaxed atmosphere, keep distance (approach from the side). Prepare the entrance into the intimate distance verbally: I will now place the fitting lens on the eye. First on the right eye and then on the left eye. In order to do this, my fingers will pull your eye lids apart and I ask you to do some eye movements. Is that ok for you, are you ready?"

In the beginning work with some closed questions, to gain the customer's trust and confidence, then slowly switch over to open ones. Offer answer alternatives: The dryness you just mentioned, do you experience it: all the time, sometimes or very infrequently? Is the discomfort in the morning, all day, at the end of the day, at irregular times?

You may explain the reason for a question. Medications you currently take can have an influence on the tear production, quantity and quality, which in turn can influence the comfort of the lens. Those medications includes contraceptives (a delicate topic to speak about for male fitters!). Now, please tell me which medications you currently take.

Pay attention to the body language. Arms crossed over the breast or tilted back upper body are signals for rejection. In such a case, it may be a good idea to take a pause. Try to think about the possible reasons for the behavior. You may even address the situation directly: I can not avoid to realize (I have the impression) that you are not satisfied, happy with what we are doing here. Do you want to tell me what the problem is and how we could get the issue out of the way?

### **The "talking" customer**

By definition, this is the pure contrary to the quiet/calm customer. Much friendlier than the problem customer, he is tiring. It is very difficult to have one's say. What could be the cause?

Is the customer nervous, dubbing this by talking? Try to keep the customer close to the subject, the topic. If necessary, interrupt, gently. Example: "I may come back to this comment, question ... later, if you don't mind. I would now like to proceed by ... ." Almost exclusively place closed questions. Sum up and reflect what you heard in your own words, reduced to the important facts, in 1/10 the time. Thus give an example on how you like information to be given to you. "May I sum up what you just said in my own words, as we otherwise may lose the overview?" Get many small yes, which allows you to check off one item after the other. Stick to your line.

### **The "nervous" customer**

The body gives away this customer (sweat, pupil size, movement, posture etc.). Also look for inadequate fluctuations in tonality and volume. Try to identify the causes (similar to the quiet and talking customer). The cause can be deeply rooted anxieties, bad experiences in the past, claustrophobia ... Do not underestimate the influence the environment has, like a very small narrow room, being close to each other.

Relax the atmosphere, offer something to drink (water, coffee, tea ...). Radiate calmness, in competent and speak slow, yourself. Frequently ask: "Was this comprehensible for you, do you have a question about what I just said? Would you like me to tell you more or repeat some of it in other words?"

Here, active listening is very important. Also, let the customer always finish, make the pause, do not interrupt, otherwise she/he will not talk again for several minutes. This requires a lot of discipline. Speak in a warm, friendly voice. Avoid professional terminology, use more colloquial words. Explain professional terms and how they relate to the daily life, what they mean. Briefly explain what you are doing and why, what for. This is especially true before entering the intimate zone.

### **The "aggressive/angry" customer**

Why is the customer behaving like that? Whenever possible, do not take the aggression personal! Remain factual, objective and professional. Is it possible, that the aggression is based on a misunderstanding? Does the customer feel insulted, did something offend his feelings? Do not defend mistakes made in the past, things that went wrong, especially not when it is obvious what went wrong and even more so, was wrong from your point of view, too. You can say that there was no intention at all and that you feel sorry for the inconveniences this has caused (=> empathy!). Assure the customer that it is also in your best interest to find an acceptable solution for the issue at hand, that you are willing to do, but first need some more information, facts, in order to better understand the full picture, find the best possible solution.

Does the customer not feel valued? Maybe you are just the valve for her/him having a bad day, having trouble ... Maybe she / he has had bad experiences in the past, now wants to make sure that this will not happen again. May she/he had a long wait (and is of course in a hurry), the files were not found, wanted to see somebody else, is not happy with the results of the exam, the past work. The aggression may cover strong feelings of anxiety, insecurity. If things don't improve within a short time and the aggression is hindering the work (too much aggressive talk, too little, yet aggressive talk, strong negative body language), you may say: "I can not avoid to feel a certain level of unrest, almost aggression. Does something bother you, would you like to tell me what is causing this tension? Is there something I can do, so that we can better work together, that you enjoy your time here?"

With such a customer, your communication should always be factual. Avoid the emotions, certainly the negative ones. You may use a good number of positive words though. Praise moments of good behavior: "That was very good of you, to make an effort and be able to read that last line (after you first thought this is not possible)." Listen actively, let the customer finish. Make the pause, wait until she/he has really finished. You may extend your pause until the customer says: "Did you listen at all, why are you not responding? Do you have nothing to say about this?" Then you can say: "I did listen, of course. I just wanted to make sure you could tell me all you wanted to at this time. May I start my response by first of all saying that I am sorry for the inconveniences you experienced. Then, let me tell you that it is also in our interest to find a solution for the issue at hand. Next, I would like to tell you what I heard you saying and in doing so, concentrate on the things that I think are important for me to understand what happened and that are needed for a solution. Is that ok for you (closed question!)? Get the many little yes in the rephrasing, use 1/10 of the time, remain factual. You may add: "This made you angry. ... This was not an easy moment for you." If they interrupt you, stop, listen, make the pause, start where they interrupted you again. Phrase what you see as the problem to be solved (which may vary to some degree to what the customer stated as the problem). Ask further, clarifying questions, then sketch first possible solution alternatives, observe the reaction (body language!), end with your recommended solution and ask: "Is it ok for you if we proceed with what I just said?" and wait.

Hint: Customers are often aggressive, because they are not satisfied with the work performed and it is about money, a replacement, a repair. Be firm, in your policies, but also generous within them. Offer a correction, a replacement first, only when these fail too, consider a refund.

### **The "know-it-all" customer**

Who does not know them? Very often they are engineers, teachers, professors. They measure the spectacles with the mm paper, the micrometer. They come with a stack of print outs from the internet ... . Does the customer only cover up uncertainty? Does she/he have an honest interest in the subject? Would be good to know, right? In today's information world, these customers have access to a lot of information, some of it may even not be correct (anymore) (see figure 14).

Figure 14: The "Know-it-all" customer

The customer is basically saying: TAKE ME SERIOUS!

Acknowledge the knowledge! Recognize the efforts the customer made: "I see, you understand already a lot about optics, the eye, the vision, contact lenses, spectacles ... you have prepared yourself very well for today ... .

In such a case, it is not bad to use some professional terminology. "This is, as you probably already know, called ... . The state of the art method to deal with this is ... , which is much better than the previous method when it comes to ... , but still has a weakness in ... ." Avoid becoming a teacher though, stay close to the reason for the communication, the sale, the eye exam ... . If there is an genuine interest and it continues to be there, you may give a short explanation about an instrument (what it measures, why this is needed) before you apply, use it.

Integrate the customer in the decision process. Let them carry sum of the responsibility for the decision. „Alternative A) has the following advantages ... and disadvantages relative to (your needs and wants) .... Alternative B) has less of the advantage of A in regards to, more of an advantage in ..., but this is not so important relative to your needs and wants of ... . Which alternative, A) or B) would you like to have?“.

### **The „aged“ customer**

Aged customers often do not hear or understand you well. A clear pronunciation, using shorter sentences with little pauses in between can help. You may have to raise the volume of your voice. Do not only use the language, use pictures, too. Pay attention to the body language (yours and that of the customer). Avoid pointing out the age, unless necessary. Keep in mind, that the attention span is often shorter. Proceed with the exam at a steady pace, only do the necessary, but appropriate for the age, tests. Use the Amsler grid and do not use the stereo test when no heterophoria was detected in the last 30 years either. The myopes among these customers have seen tests for 50 years or so, you may want to tell them what a new instrument does and which old one it replaces.

Do not forget, that many of the aged customers are often lonely, have a lot of time and may look for more than a vision correction (somebody listening to them!). They tend to be talkative customers (see above). Watch out, don't fall for the stereotype! Take them as they are. Book them in otherwise quiet hours, there is no need for them to come at 17:00, in the late afternoon.

Some of them have really big problems with their eyes, but won't tell you right away (new customer for you). They want to believe that may be you are the one who can help them. In such a case it may be ok to say: "Do you already know that the best achievable vision in the left eye is lower than normal. Do you know since when this is the case and why it is so? What has your (previous) optometrist, ophthalmologist, optician told you about it? Do you take medication for treating the condition? What are they? How has it developed since the last test? What prognosis were you given last time?". Then take it from there.

### **Customers with a handicap**

Among these are deaf, mute, deaf-mute, people with Dow syndrome, sufferers from Polio, traumatized, heavily over weight (cannot find enough space behind the slit-lamp table), but also those who do not master the local language or any other one you speak as well (tourists, immigrants ...).

Be creative! Most important: treat them as you do others, 'ordinary' people. Take the handicap into consideration, but avoid talking about it all the time (see also aged customers). If there is a problem: show, explain what you want to, need to do and why. Ask them how they think they can help to get this done, to achieve the goal. They do more often than not handle their handicap with great, sometimes surprising success, you just have to give them the chance.

### **Summary**

Communication can contribute big time to the success of your business. Directly with gains in efficiency and effectiveness, but also by better differentiation against competitors. Indirectly by increasing your customers' satisfaction, your confidence to deal with all kinds

of customers (and employees, colleagues) in the best possible way, according to the current situation (see figure 15).

Figure 15: Final thoughts on communicating with customers

Awareness and a conscious approach towards communication, a good understanding and handling of one's own styles and behaviors, preferences is the best start. To understand the general mechanisms and rules of communication is certainly helpful. Retrospective analysis creates learning and knowledge. Going back in the one or other case can rescue some. With knowledge comes prospective utilization. Enjoy to communicate! Do it often, review good and ones, and you will become better and better.

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