

Zen And The Art Of Constructive Conversations

Whether it's on the tennis court or the sales floor, applying principles from Yoga and meditation can help you keep your composure and work towards the result you want. Remember: breathe!

I was scheduled to play one of the area's top players in a local tennis tournament. My opponent, Scott M., was the former captain of an NCAA Division 1 college tennis program and someone I had never come close to beating. My goal was just to keep the match competitive.

About an hour before the match I met with my friend Karen McPhillips, Marketing VP with Plumchoice, an innovative technical support solutions provider. Karen is also a Yoga devotee. We discussed how the teachings of Yoga and meditation can help improve performance during stressful situations. Some of the key ideas are:

- Use controlled, deep breathing to stay relaxed and focused.
- Remain in the present.
- React to events in a detached, non-judgmental manner.
- Practice and prepare to perform at your best.

Without thinking about it too much, applying these principles enabled me to play one of the best matches of my life. I narrowed my focus to make the best possible shot. Rather than berating myself after a missed shot, I calmly analyzed what was going on and made the right adjustments. I was aware of the score, but didn't feel tense. Using deep breathing enabled me to stay relaxed between points.

I was so completely focused on what I was doing, it took me a minute at the end to realize I'd won.

So what does winning a tennis match have to do with customer conversations?

After discussing this with Karen and also with Bruce McCarthy, a former Oracle and D&B executive and also a Yoga devotee, it turns there are a lot of similarities.

Almost every company I work with and every executive I meet wants to sell value and not push product features. Selling value starts with understanding customers' needs. One of the best ways to uncover customer needs is through in-depth interviews.

Unfortunately, inexperienced or poorly trained product or marketing people often find these customer conversations to be extremely stressful. And when people are in what they perceive to be stressful or dangerous situations, their fight-or-flight instincts kick in.

I was observing a customer interview session with a product manager who had not much experience in these situations. Like many of these sessions, it took a long time to set up and the sales manager wasn't crazy about someone from "corporate" talking to his customer. Not surprisingly, the product manager was visibly nervous. And I watched helplessly as his fight-or-flight response kicked in.

The customer made a relatively innocuous comment about the product. The product manager lost his composure. He began arguing with the customer and criticizing the sales person.

Needless to say, the session did not go well. And the sales team had more ammunition to not let product managers talk with their customers.

The four key principles from Yoga and meditation that helped me win a tennis match can help overcome the fight-or-flight response, which gets in the way of conducting effective customer-needs assessment sessions.

1. The power of the breath

Under stress, we take shorter breaths. Research has proven that taking longer, deeper, slower breaths has a calming effect. Product or marketing managers should do some slow, deep breathing prior to a customer conversation. Karen recommends inhaling for two seconds and exhaling for six seconds for as long as required to get your emotions under control. It may be helpful to practice breath control when you are doing something mundane, such as brushing your teeth.

2. Be in the moment.

The best customer interviews can never be fully scripted. So it is vital to pay attention to what the customer is saying and be able to ask appropriate follow-up questions. A good way to start is by minimizing distractions. Turn off your phone. Minimize excess motion such as wiggling your leg or clicking a pen.

Consciously maintain eye contact and watch their mouth move. Before you respond, take a moment to absorb what they are saying and then ask a follow-up question. Writing the purpose of your visit at the top of your pad can help you stay in the moment.

3. Not being judgmental

To ensure our survival, we have hyper-developed our ability to identify and flee from danger. While this helped people avoid becoming a saber-toothed tiger's meal, it is counterproductive when we want to have a learning conversation with a customer.

We tend to overreact to customer comments (our modern version of danger), take them personally, and potentially misinterpret them.

If a customer makes a comment about a product or your company, recognize it for what it is. Instead of focusing on the implications of the customer's comments on you, your product, or your company, focus on understanding the customer and his or her goals and challenges.

Bruce McCarthy refers to this as not letting your ego get in the way.

As Bruce points out, customer's expressed concern may not be the real issue. Instead of reacting, focus on asking some probing questions, listening sympathetically, and seeing it from the customer's point of view.

4. Practice and prepare to perform at your best.

Yoga and meditation are known as practices. As we do them repeatedly, we get better at them. Denise Desautels is the vice president of brokerage sales at one of my clients, First American Insurance Underwriters, and a former U.S. Olympian. Whether she's working to meet the needs of her customers or competing in the sports arena, she knows that practice and preparation are key. Confidence gained through repeated practice can help you keep focused on your goals for the call and get the most out of it.

Some of the things to practice and prepare prior to a customer conversation include:

- A statement of the purpose of the conversation, including how the customer will benefit
- A list of hypotheses you want to test
- A conversation guide to keep things on track
- A process to ensure that action items don't get dropped

Just like yoga or meditation, working with an external coach can make a huge difference in your performance. Practice sessions or role plays with experienced professionals can increase your level of confidence and effectiveness.

These four principles of yoga and meditation--breath control, remaining in the moment, avoiding judgment, practice and preparation--can help you relax and perform at your best in customer conversations as well as in sports.

--Author [Neil Baron](#) can be reached at nbaron@baronstrategic.com