

# Leadership Talking Points

## NEWSLETTER



## The amateur sales person sells products;

*the professional sells solutions to needs and problems. It's a totally different approach. The professional learns how to diagnose, how to understand.*

*-Stephen R. Covey*

Conductor André Rieu had a big goal: To make classical music once again as popular as popular music. A tall order, as classical music represents a tiny fraction of the global market in music. And Rieu had little to work with; he started his Johann Strauss Orchestra in the Netherlands in 1987 with only 12 members.

Instead of trying to tell his audience what to listen to, as most orchestras do, Rieu decided to approach his goal from the other direction—he asked *them* what they wanted to hear.

They wanted light stuff, waltzes, beautiful melodies, pieces they could dance to or just tap their feet to. They wanted a spectacle too—a show with beautiful dancers, décor, and maybe a few fireworks. How about some drinks and refreshments?

He also asked them what was keeping them from coming to classical music concerts. Most people said they were intimidated by the stuffy dress codes, the formality, and the expense.

Rieu listened. He heard it all. He empathized with the masses of ordinary people whom would like to go to concerts but worry about dressing up and sitting through things that just don't appeal to them.

Today Rieu runs a business that pulls in nearly \$100 million in its best years. The orchestra, now at about 100 members, makes the Billboard Top 10 again and again. He has his own music channel and his own cruise operation. His New Year concerts are staples of public broadcasting worldwide. He is credited with creating a renaissance in classical music as he draws to his orchestra, literally, millions of listeners.

How did Rieu make such an incredible impact?

By actually listening to the hopes and desires of his customers. At Rieu's concerts you don't have to dress up, you can dance in the aisles if you want, you can clap and sing along. And the foundation of it all is the most tuneful, most beautiful music ever written anywhere. Rieu has made a science of removing all the obstacles for people who just want to have a great time with great music.

INSEAD Professors W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne have studied Rieu's operation. They concluded that his unparalleled success came because he turned his attention "to the ocean of noncustomers." Rieu's research "revealed a host of factors that discouraged them from ever attending an orchestra performance. . . . [He] created a nonintimidating orchestra experience enjoyed in stadiums, not traditional venues, with dancing in aisles, a focus on a highly accessible, enjoyable repertoire of waltzes, and laughter."<sup>1</sup>

Every sales team talks about the need for empathy. The idea of listening to the customer is not exactly new. What salesperson hasn't been trained in "listening skills." But how many of us really do it? What assumptions do we have about customer needs that must be reexamined? Do we really know what they want?

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1 W. Chan Kim, Renée Mauborgne, "Want to Create a Blue Ocean?" *INSEAD Knowledge*, June 8, 2015. <http://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/want-to-create-a-blue-ocean-avoid-these-six-red-ocean-traps>

Empathy is more than just a skill. It's more than just hearing what people have to say. It's a character issue. If you want to know if you're really a good listener, ask yourself not so much about your skills but about *who you are*. Are you the kind of person who takes an authentic interest in your clients as people, as human beings who have real needs and wishes and dreams? Or do your clients represent merely steps for you to walk on as you climb up the ladder toward fulfilling a quota or getting a promotion?

André Rieu's music has been criticized for being a "salesman," for pandering to his audience and "cheapening" the classical music experience. But more thoughtful critics look around and see ordinary people really enjoying themselves; people who would never otherwise go to a symphony concert. And they discover that Rieu is far more than a salesman—he's an artist who knows what people love and loves to give it to them.

### Questions to Ponder

Do you consider yourself an excellent listener? Are you an empathic person? What evidence do you have that you are authentically in touch with your customers? Would other people say that about you? What are the consequences for a sales team that doesn't have an empathic culture?