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The Crucial Question For These Noisy Times May Just Be: 'Huh?'

**From Talk Shows to Offices,
Everybody Is Jabbering
But Few Are Listening
Why Pauses Have Vanished**

By CYNTHIA CROSSEN

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

America has become a nation of blabbermouths. Too bad nobody's listening.

From television talk shows to on-line chat, call-in radio to support groups, hot lines to electronic mail, Americans today have more outlets for expressing themselves than ever before. Ordinary people can publicly opine on every conceivable topic from the heartbreak of eczema to whether the squad car on "The Andy Griffith Show" was a Ford Galaxie (it was). Americans have something to say about everything — and plenty of places to say it.

Unfortunately, human physiology notwithstanding, many more mouths are operating today than ears.

Overwhelmed by the incessant, intrusive babble of the modern world, the skill of listening has fallen on hard times. People say they are constantly repeating orders, directions and questions. The word "What?" rings through the halls of commerce. In fact, studies show that people recall only about 25% of what they have heard in the past few days.

Hurried Living

Why have Americans become so hard of hearing? "It's because of our fast-paced world," says Kathy Thompson, who teaches courses on conversation at Alverno College in Milwaukee. "We're always in a hurry. Mentally we're saying, get to the point, we don't have time to hear the whole story. We're busy running from house to job to store to church. Good listening takes time."

That's part of it, agrees Wicke Chambers, a partner in Speechworks, an Atlanta communications-training firm. "But also, people think listening is boring; it's more fun to talk," she says. In late 20th-century America, talking is seen as active and dominant, listening as passive and deferential. "There's the old joke, the opposite of talking isn't listening, it's waiting to talk," Ms. Chambers says. "That's what a lot of people do, they just wait to talk."

Still others blame TV and radio, which allow people to combine listening with so many other activities that simply listening to music seems like a waste of time. Television also encourages passive, rather than active, listening. "When you watch television, you're listening in a way that doesn't require you to retain anything and doesn't object if you leave the room," says Shella Bentley, a Memphis, Tenn., communications consultant who does listening training. "And because it's interrupted by commercials, you don't have to develop sustained attending skills. With people spending six hours a day doing that kind of listening, it's no wonder there's concern that we're becoming a nation of poor listeners."

Word Game

If all this weren't bad enough, biology also works against attentive listening. Most people speak at a rate of 120 to 150 words a minute, but the human brain can easily process more than 500 words a minute, leaving plenty of time for mental fidgeting. If the speaker also happens to be slow, monotonal and wordy, it requires a heroic effort to stay tuned instead of simply faking it.

Poor listening can cause disasters, as it did in the 1977 runway collision at Tenerife Airport in the Canary Islands, when misunderstood instructions caused 583 deaths. But more often, poor listening results in millions of little time-wasting mistakes a day—the wrong coffee order, credit card or telephone number or fact in a newspaper story. Ms. Bentley does seminars with medical managers because of the massive liability awards doctors and hospitals can pay because of poor listening. "People are realizing that a lot of mistakes we attributed to other things are actually listening problems," she says.

Coffee Formula

At Starbucks Coffee Co. stores, where a customer can order a "double-shot decaf grande iced half-skim vanilla dry cappuccino," employees are taught a procedure for hearing and calling orders developed by the company four years ago. It systematizes the sequence of words describing the drink — size, flavoring, milk, decaf — with automatic defaults. Then the person making the drink echoes the order aloud.

"We expect our employees to listen," says Alan Gulick, a Starbucks spokesman. "It's an important component of customer service."

In today's service economy, it also makes financial sense. If every worker in America makes one \$10 mistake a year because of poor listening, "that adds up to more than a billion dollars a year," says Lyman Stell, president of a St. Paul, Minn., consulting firm, Communication Development, which specializes in listening. Mr. Stell was also a founder of the International Listening Association in 1979, an eclectic group that promotes better listening. "We're drowning in a sea of noise," Mr. Stell says. "The listener of today has to make more careful choices about who, what and when they listen."

Yesteryear's listeners were drowning in a sea of quiet, and they did the opposite

Please Turn to Page A6, Column 4