

The Stanford “Tappers” and “Listeners” Experiment reveals why you may be failing to connect with prospects 97% of the time



In 1990, Elizabeth Newton earned a PhD in Psychology at Stanford University by studying a simple game in which she assigned people to one of two roles: "Tappers" or "Listeners".

During her experiment, Newton gave the tappers a list of 25 well-known songs, such as "Happy Birthday to You" and "The Star-Spangled Banner". Each tapper was then asked to pick one song and tap out the rhythm (by tapping on a table) to a listener. The listener's job was to guess the song, based on the rhythm being tapped.

Before the game started, Newton asked the tappers to predict the odds that the listeners would be able to guess correctly the songs being tapped. Full of confidence, the tappers boldly predicted the listeners would be able to guess the songs being “tapped” 50% of the time. But the tappers were overly confident!

In fact, over the course of Newton's experiment, 120 songs were tapped out. Drumroll. **Listeners were unable to identify 117 of the songs! They only guessed 3 songs correctly!** Listeners were able to guess only three songs out of 120!!

97.5% of the time there was a failure to communicate.

Again, full of confidence, the tappers boldly predicted the listeners would be able to guess the song being tapped 50% of the time. But the Stanford Experiment demonstrated they could discern songs one out of 40 times (**or 2.5% of the time**).

In this experiment, tappers were dumbstruck at how hard listeners needed to work to try and decipher the tune. Over and over again, the tappers got frustrated thinking “this song is so obvious, why can’t they get it?” The tappers' expressions, when a listener guessed wrong were priceless. Many tappers got frustrated thinking “how could this person (listener) be so stupid?” The problem was that the tappers have been given knowledge (the song title) that made it impossible for them to imagine what it's like to lack that knowledge. When they tapped, they couldn't imagine what it was like for the listeners to hear isolated taps rather than a song.

Why do we think we are better communicators than we actually are?

Most of us in business or the non-profit world, think we are much better communicators than we are. We think our company name is perfect, our tagline is great, our website is outstanding, our sales pitch is money etc. Why? Because as in the above example, when a tapper taps, they hear the song in their own head and it makes sense to them. When you are in control of the tapping it is impossible to avoid hearing the tune in your own head. But, that does not mean that your listener will hear that tune if you try to communicate it outwardly. Most times all your listeners hear is a bunch of disconnected taps, kind of like a bizarre Morse code.

So what? Why should I care about the Stanford experiment?

The Stanford Tappers and Listeners Experiment is reenacted every hour of every day in the business world. The "tappers" are CEO's, CMO's, marketing and sales people who "tap" all day, every day about the features and benefits of their organization using disconnected taps like a bizarre Morse code. But, what so many fail to realize is that their listeners, their would-be customers, don't know what they know and they can't hear what they are saying.