



Customer Service Notes for Getting Participants to “Open Up”

Communication is a critical component of providing stellar service to WIC participants. We know, however, that it can be challenging to get some participants to “open up.” This may be because the participant is introverted, unhappy, or simply unfamiliar with WIC.

“Small talk” is one way to get a WIC participant to open up. By starting with small talk, the person may become more comfortable, which can then lead you into your discussion. Topics such as the weather, local sports teams, or current events can be the basis for small talk. You could initially say to a participant, “That was some rainstorm we had last night, wasn’t it?” After the small talk, you can then bridge to your WIC counseling by saying, “So how are things going for you and your son?”

A technique to engage participants involves the use of open-ended questions, as opposed to closed ended-questions. For example, instead of asking Anna, a WIC participant, “Is Maria eating more vegetables,?” it is better to ask, “How are you doing in getting Maria to eat more vegetables?” This may encourage Anna to expand her response. For instance, in response to the first question, you might just get a “Yes” or “No” response. Phrasing it as an open-ended question might instead get you a response such as, “Pretty good-she likes peas and corn, although she doesn’t care for carrots.” This now provides you with additional information on Maria. You might now offer suggestions on different ways to cook peas and corn.

Another component in communication that can engage participants is what we call “recap” or “clarify and confirm.” Whenever you are engaged in a conversation with a participant, it is important to not only listen to what they are saying, but to summarize their thoughts at the end. Phrases such as “So what you are saying is” and “If I heard you correctly, you said ...” After that you repeat, “Is that right?” or “Is that correct?” These kinds of statements help validate that you were listening and can result in a meaningful dialogue with the participants.

Also remember that when wrapping up a session with a quiet participant, it is better to phrase a closing question as, “What questions do you have for me,?” as opposed to, “Do you have any other questions?”

Although getting some participants to open up is challenging, with practice, your effective communications techniques can help create a positive participant experience.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What topics can you use for small talk with quiet participants?
2. Do you ask open-ended questions to get participants more engaged?
3. How can you ensure you have learned what you should before wrapping up a session with a participant?

