

Got a gripe? Salesman sitting in front of Nara station is all ears

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Hironori Okada listens to a visitor's complaint in front of the statue of Gyoki in Nara. (Jiro Tsutsui)

approached him one recent Sunday afternoon asked a fairly standard question: "Hey, why are you doing this?"

For Okada, hearing people's complaints, calm or angry, has taught him so many lessons that he could never buy with money. He believes he is receiving feedback from his "listening" experiences that helps in his job as a company salesman.

"When you are talking to somebody for the first time, the first thing you should do is to listen to the desires of your interlocutor so you can come up with a product that matches them," said Okada. "Doing so is more important than just promoting the products of your company."

He has listened to hundreds of people's lamentations in this ancient capital.

As a multitude of tourists passed by, the female senior high school student sat down on a folding chair and explained her grievance: "My boyfriend canceled a date with me at the last minute."

According to the student's account, her boyfriend found out that he had failed an examination earlier that day. "On second thought, I'll stay at home," he told her on the phone.

"That got on my nerves," the student told Okada.

Okada listened to her story that lasted for 20 minutes.

"I have 'absorbed' her grumbles," he said. "Talking to people who are not quite like me in their

NARA--A salesman is offering his ears to strangers who want to get something off their chests.

Sitting in front of the statue of eighth-century Buddhist monk Gyoki outside Kintetsu Nara Station here, Hironori Okada, 33, listens to gripes about jobs, families, romantic relationships, the economy, the government and life in general.

His paper signboard says: "I will listen to your grumbles for free."

A female senior high school student who

positions or age gives me training in conversation skills.”

He started to listen to people’s complaints in autumn 2011, after learning that a friend from his senior high school days was doing the same thing in the busy Umeda district of Osaka.

Okada set up his “complaint stand” near Kyoto Tower. In summer 2014, he moved to the current venue in front of Gyoki’s statue, which is not far from his family home.

To break the ice with those uneasy about unloading their feelings to a stranger, Okada asks questions that can be answered by a simple “yes” or “no.”

When he is addressing a talkative type, he lets the other side take the lead, and then asks questions to narrow the focus to the point of the discussion.

Okada said he has mastered the art of conversation. He has listened to about 500 people in front of Gyoki’s statue, ranging in age from senior high school students to elderly people.

A particularly large number are women in their teens and 20s, who are disgruntled with their parents and teachers or deplore their husbands for failing to understand the rigors of child care.

Elderly visitors often bring up social issues, such as consumption tax hikes, education and the controversy over constitutional amendments.

“I am never told the same story twice,” Okada said. “What I am doing is like live sessions, where you can never know what will happen next. It never really makes me bored.”

When asked if “absorbing” so many complaints has affected his job and family life, the father of four said: “I make it a habit to remember, once a visitor is gone, that all this stuff is none of my business. Unless you did so, you couldn’t keep up with all this.”

Okada listens to complaints when he can afford the time on Saturdays or Sundays.