

Writing about Unpleasant

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Session Objectives:

- Writing for the reader
- Saying "No" to an adjustment request
- Saying "No" to a credit request
- Saying "No" to order for merchandize
- Saying "No" to a request for a favor
- Special problems in writing about the unpleasant

Writing for the reader

It is very difficult to convey an unpleasant message to the audience unless the writer shares an empathy with the audience and understands the emotional impact that the message will have on the audience. Communicating an unpleasant message is easier if the writer identifies himself with the receiver while composing the message.

Sequence of ideas:

Supporting statements are necessary while conveying bad news because readers are usually reluctant to accept bad news. It is essential that the reasons for the disappointing news be conveyed early in the message rather than toward the end of the message because supporting details that are conveyed after conveying the message are not likely to be understood by the receivers and more likely to be rejected.

The writer must follow the following outline while organizing unpleasant messages:

- **Introductory paragraph:** This must contain a neutral idea that would lead to the reasons for refusal. Good news can be conveyed in the introductory paragraph of a letter. However, while conveying bad news, the introductory paragraph of the letter serves a different function. Without revealing the bad news or allowing the reader to expect good news, the introductory paragraph must only hint to the reader about what to expect.
- **Facts, analysis, and reasons:** The explanations for the refusal must be provided in a fair and realistic manner and must precede the bad news itself. By doing so, it is easier to persuade the reader to accept them as valid and make them more receptive to the refusal.
- **Refusal statement:** If the reasons for refusal are communicated in a fair, tactful and realistic manner, the reader considers them as valid and doesn't resent the bad news when it is communicated to him.

Further, care should be taken that the statement of refusal is not given too much emphasis in the letter. It should neither be placed in the last paragraph of the letter nor should it form the last paragraph itself.

- **Closing paragraph:** The letter must close with a topic that is not related to the bad news. This helps to de-emphasize the unpleasantness of the message, displays positive attitude of the writer and gives a unifying quality to the message.

Style of Expression

There are three styles of expressing bad news, namely emphasizing/de-emphasizing, positive language and implication. While conveying messages containing bad news, it is important to emphasize the positive

aspects while de-emphasizing the bad news. This can be done by giving the bad news a subordinate position by placing it in the dependent clause, using passive voice, and using general terms of expression wherever possible.

Positive language lays stress on the the good rather than the bad. Even negative ideas can be expressed in a positive manner. Positive thinking helps improve the ability to write in positive language.

Further, instead of directly conveying an unpleasant message, it can be indirectly implied.

Example for implied technique of communicating – "Will you come with me to the theater tonight?"

Instead of saying "No, I won't," one could say, "I wish I could join you, but the submission of my analysis report is due tomorrow."

Saying "No" to an adjustment request

Replying in the negative to a request for adjustment is more or less similar to wording an unpleasant message. The refusal should be worded in a polite way and the unpleasant part of the message should be de-emphasized. A general sequence of ideas needs to be followed while declining to oblige an adjustment request.

A reply to an adjustment reports must necessarily start with a neutral statement, then move on by providing reasons in a positive language and conclude the letter with an off-the subject thought.

Saying "No" to credit requests

It is important to be tactful while writing a letter of refusal for a credit request so that the customer is retained as well as a relationship developed with him on a cash basis. The major portion of the message in a letter of credit refusal must consist of the explanation. This benefits both the writer of the message as well as the reader of the message. It reflects the fair-mindedness of the writer and shows that the decision for refusing credit was not arbitrarily taken. To the reader, the explanation has a guidance value and helps him adjust or improve his credit habits so as to become eligible for credit purchases later.

A letter indicating a credit refusal may also include a resale aspect or statements in favor of the product. This helps the credit applicant to build preference towards the brand and encourages him to buy it on a cash basis. It also helps to de-emphasize the negative aspect of the message.

Saying "No" to an order for merchandize

Many times, bad news concerning orders have to be conveyed by businesses. Three important points have to be remembered, while conveying bad news relating to orders:

- The business has to eventually succeed in making a sale along the lines of the original order.
- The instructions and additional information pertaining to the order have to be clear.
- The letter must maintain an optimistic and confident tone, so that the reader doesn't become disinterested.

Unclear Orders It may so happen that sometimes the orders that a business receives are incomplete and/or unclear. At such times, further clarification needs to be obtained from the client either by writing a letter or by telephoning the client. The ideal format to be followed in such letters would be to begin with a confirmation of the order, state reasons for the confusion if any, seek clarifications in a polite manner, and finally close on a friendly and positive note.

Example: If a customer orders for tables and chairs and gives the number as 4 items, it is unclear whether the request is for 4 pairs of tables and chairs or 4 different pieces of either

tables or chairs, or both.

Back orders

A back order is an order that has not been filled due to two reasons:

- inability to fulfill a part of the order
- inability to fulfill the complete order itself

In either case, an indirect approach would work in communicating the same to the client. The outline of a letter pertaining to a back order includes a buffer, reasons for not meeting the order, and a close. In case of partial fulfillment of the order, the buffer would convey the good news that the shipment is on its way. This would be followed by the reasons for the delay in shipping the rest of the order, and then conclude on a positive and confident note. Even when the supply of the entire order is delayed, the letter could start with a confirmation of the order, followed by mentioning the reasons for the delay, and finally ending on a positive note.

Example: You have received an order for 200 air coolers, but at present you only have 150 air coolers available for supply. In such a situation, a letter must be written to the client to convince him to accept the 150 air coolers that are readily available. The letter must state the reasons for failure to deliver the entire order in one lot and apologize for the delay. It must also state when the remaining air coolers will be delivered.

Substitutions

Sometimes, a company may receive an order for a product/s that it no longer sells. In such a situation, the company can offer a substitute product. But while informing the same to the client, the letter should specifically avoid using the word 'substitute', because it has a negative connotation. Instead, the letter can be worded by using other terms such as: another product, second product etc. When the substitute product that is being offered is costlier than the actual product, the letter should highlight the additional benefits that arise from the use of the alternate product.

Offering a more suitable product

Sometimes, a customer may order a product that does not completely meet his requirements. The company, on the other hand, may have a more appropriate product than the one ordered by the customer. It would not be right on the part of the company to fill the order as submitted since this would lead to customer dissatisfaction later.

The letter refusing to fulfill the order should be well written and based on sound decision. This would help retain the customer's confidence in the company.

Saying "No" to a request for a favor

While declining requests for favors, care should be taken to maintain the existing relationship with the person who has made the request. To ensure continuance of a positive relationship, a counterproposal can be offered as an alternative to the requested favor.

Special problems in writing about the unpleasant

Two questions that often arise while writing letters conveying bad news are:

- Is an inductive style appropriate for all letters that convey bad news?
- Is the reader likely to become impatient while reading a letter that is inductive?

An inductive approach of writing may be adopted for almost all letters that convey bad news. However,

there are certain situations like the ones mentioned below, where a deductive style is more appropriate:

- Letter is the second response to repeated requests by the customer.
- A small or insignificant matter is involved
- The request made is ridiculous, unethical, illegal or dangerous.
- The writer and the reader have a long standing relationship that is not likely to be affected by expressing the facts in a frank manner.
- The writer wants to demonstrate his authority.

Further, by presenting the explanations prior to conveying the bad news has its advantage in that the reader is likely to be less annoyed than what he would be on encountering bad news in the very first sentence of the letter.

Certain steps should be taken to avoid the pitfalls associated with conveying unpleasant messages.

First paragraph

The introductory paragraph must give the reader an idea about the topic of the letter but must neither reveal the bad news nor must it make the reader expect good news. The first paragraph must be relevant and neutral in wording.

While writing the letter, it should be kept in mind that the unpleasant news is not conveyed at the very beginning of the letter. The introductory paragraph must be worded in such a way that the response of the audience to the letter is positive. The paragraph must not contain wordy and irrelevant phrases and sentences. It must not be too long and the writer must avoid apologizing for the refusal decision.

Bad-news sentence

The introductory paragraph provides the reasoning or explanation for the refusal and makes it easier for the bad news to be presented in one sentence. This sentence, however, should convey the unpleasant news tactfully by using positive language, emphasis and implication.

Last paragraph

The last paragraph of the letter must convey useful information and must close or end the message on an offbeat note. While wording the last paragraph, care must be taken that it doesn't refer to or repeat the bad news and must not apologize for the refusal decision. It must not invite additional communication unless there is a willingness to have further discussions over the refusal decision. The last paragraph of the letter must not be worded as if the writer anticipates problems to arise. It should not include clichés that do not sound sincere. Also, the last paragraph must not reveal any doubt of retaining the customer.

Summary

Writing letters that convey unpleasant news requires the writer to understand the audience's sensibilities. Keeping the audience's sensibilities in mind, the writer should accordingly design the sentence structure, tone, content and organization of the letter.

Diplomacy is crucial in effectively conveying bad news. Use of tact and diplomacy while conveying unpleasant news enables the writer to build lasting relationships.