

Customer Service: Business Letters and Email

Introduction

In the last two lessons we've been talking about specific methods of customer service and problems that arise with them. In this lesson, we'll continue that discussion by focusing on a third and final customer service method: written communication.

This type of customer service doesn't just include responding to customer complaints. It also covers all types of correspondence, including sales and marketing materials. For this lesson, we're most concerned with business letters and email and the problems you're likely to face with them.

Business Letters & Customer Service

While business letters may not be the most efficient way of getting things done when it comes to customer service, there are still two excellent reasons for choosing this format for communication. First, it gives you more of an opportunity to think through what you want to say. You can carefully consider how to word your response, which is something you can't always do in person or over the phone. Second, it provides you with a permanent record of the communication.

When it comes to providing customer service via business letters, there are a couple of points you should always remember.

1. Be concise – No one has time to read through pages and pages of content nor should they have to wind their way through gigantic sentences or lengthy paragraphs. Concise writing requires you to say what you mean in as few words as possible. It may take some practice, but it is a good step toward clearer and better writing.
2. Focus on customer – In academic writing, you are usually warned about the dangers of using “you” in your writing. When it comes to business letters, however, you SHOULD use “you” as often as possible. The difference is that academic writing isn't aimed at a specific audience. Business letter writing on the other hand is always directed towards a target audience, so it should be written accordingly.
3. Avoid negativity – People respond better to bad news that is expressed without negative words like “not” or “never.” They also prefer negative messages to be written in a passive voice, not an active one. Here's the difference.

Example 1: You cannot receive a refund of your purchase price.

Name _____



Date _____

Example: Because of company policy, refunds are given only in specific and rare instances.

In the first example, the bad news was delivered in active voice and included “not.” It sounds harsher and less compassionate, which is not how most businesses want to be perceived.

The second example presents the bad news without any negative words and in passive voice. Although it isn't as direct as the first example, it sends the same message in a less cold tone.

Remembering these three points will help you write more effective business letters to your customers.

Email & Customer Service

With the Internet continuing to grow in popularity, email has become one of the most popular methods of providing customer service. Most businesses today have an email address, or more than one, set up to answer customer questions and deal with complaints. Unfortunately, they aren't always effective.

When people are swamped with emails or any type of communication for that matter, they have a tendency to jump to conclusions without really looking into a problem. For example, one woman wrote to an online business about a problem she was having paying a fee through her account. The response she received clearly indicated that the customer service representative had not researched her problem. Instead, he or she used the most common answer: there's not enough money in the account even though that wasn't the case.

If you respond to customer emails, you should read them carefully and thoroughly before responding. Otherwise, you'll just be hearing back from the customer the next day again with the same problem but a less friendly attitude.

Since your job may also include doing more than answering email, you should set aside specific times during your work day for replying to customer emails. That way you don't feel compelled to devote most of your day to checking and answering email, but you can also ensure that each customer does receive a timely response.

Lesson 5 – Worksheet

Directions: Below are some questions related to what you just read. Read through them and think about how you would answer them. It may help you to write down your ideas so that you can come back to them later.

1. Read the following true scenario and explain specifically how the written correspondence should have been handled differently.

A long-time customer of a specific cigarette company wrote to the business to complain about misadvertising. The company's promotional signs listed his brand as being \$29.99 and did not list any exceptions. When he bought his favorite variety of that brand, however, he was charged \$41.99 instead and was told by the store manager that the sales price didn't apply to that variety. His letter about the incident to the company received the following response: "Thank you for your interest in (Brand Name) cigarettes. Please enjoy the coupons we've provided."

2. Many customers complain that the email responses they receive to their questions or problems seem formulaic and cold. This creates a perception that the company doesn't really care about them. What should businesses do to combat this problem? Should customers expect more from the customer service departments of these companies?
3. Find a letter that you or someone you know has received from a business. The letter can be a response, sales letters, even junk mail. Review the letter carefully and evaluate it based on the three points we covered in this lesson. How would you improve the letter?
4. Few companies today seem to want customers to use "snail mail" for correspondence. They prefer the telephone or email. Why do you think this is the case? Which method of dealing with customer service do you think is the most effective? Why?