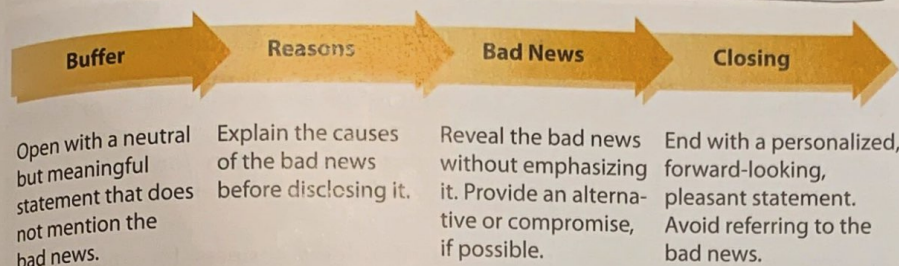


FIGURE 7.3 Four Parts of an Indirect-Strategy Negative Message



Indirect Strategy

- **Bad news.** Provide a clear but understated announcement of the bad news that might include an alternative or a compromise.
- **Closing.** End with a warm, forward-looking statement that might mention good wishes, gifts, or a sales promotion.

Analyzing the Parts of an Indirect-Strategy Negative Message

Even though it may be impossible to make the receiver happy when delivering negative news, you can reduce bad feelings and resentment by structuring your message sensitively. As you have just learned, most negative messages contain some or all of these parts: buffer, reasons, bad news, and closing. Figure 7.4 presents these four parts of the indirect strategy in greater detail, with suggested elements you can include in each part. This section also discusses apologies and how to convey empathy in delivering bad news.

To reduce negative feelings, use a buffer to open sensitive bad-news messages.

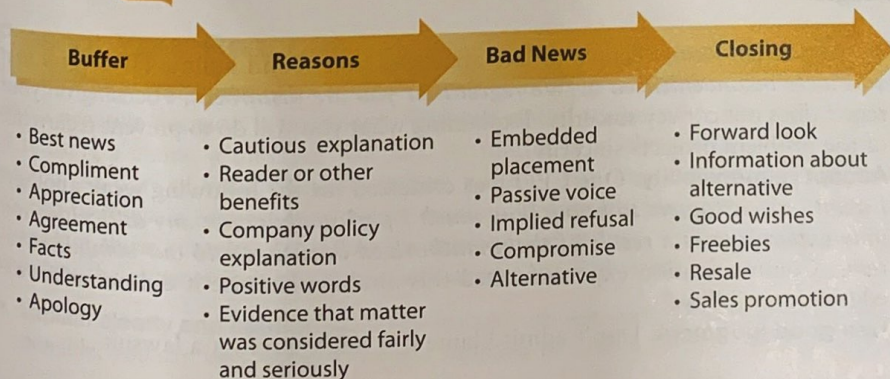
Buffer the Opening

A buffer is a device that reduces shock or pain. To buffer the pain of bad news, begin your message with a neutral but meaningful statement that makes the reader continue reading. The buffer should be relevant and concise. Although it should avoid revealing the bad news immediately, it should not convey a false impression that good news follows. It should provide a natural transition to the explanation that follows. The individual situation, of course, will help determine what you should put in the buffer. Here are some possibilities for opening indirect negative messages.

A buffer opens an indirect negative message with a neutral, concise, relevant, and upbeat statement.

A good buffer may include the best news, a compliment, appreciation, facts regarding the problem, a statement indicating understanding, or an apology.

FIGURE 7.4 Elements of an Indirect-Strategy Negative Message



- **Best news.** Start with the part of the message that represents the best news. For example, in a Web site announcement plus in-branch signage that discloses reduced operating hours but increased staffing, you might say *Beginning July 1, we're adding extra staff in our branch locations and we'll be open to serve you between 9:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.*
- **Compliment.** Praise the receiver's accomplishments, organization, or efforts, but do so with honesty and sincerity. For instance, in a letter declining an invitation to speak, you could write *I admire the United Way for its fundraising projects in our community. I am honoured that you asked me to speak Friday, November 5.*
- **Appreciation.** Convey thanks to the reader for doing business, for sending something, for a service or job well done, for showing confidence in your organization, for expressing feelings, or simply for providing feedback. In a letter terminating an employee's contract, you might say *Thank you for your work on the past two seasons of Riley's Cove. Your efforts contributed to a wonderful television program enjoyed across Canada.* Avoid thanking the reader, however, for something you are about to refuse.
- **Agreement.** Make a relevant statement with which both sender and receiver can agree. A letter that rejects an application for a credit card might be phrased *Having access to a credit card is an important part of your financial well-being. While we thank you for your recent application for a GoldPlus Visa Card, your application did not meet our criteria for approval. However, we're happy to offer you a Classic Visa Card . . .*
- **Facts.** Provide objective information that introduces the bad news. For example, in a memo announcing cutbacks in the hours of the employees' cafeteria, you might say *During the past five years the number of employees eating breakfast in our cafeteria has dropped from 32 percent to 12 percent.*
- **Understanding.** Show that you care about the reader. In announcing a product defect, the writer can still manage to express concern for the customer: *We know you expect superior performance from all the products you purchase from OfficeCity. That's why we're writing personally about the Excell printer cartridges you recently ordered.*

Apologizing in the Buffer

You learned about apologies in adjustment situations in Chapter 5. We expand that discussion here because apologies are often part of negative situations. The truth is that sincere apologies work. A study of letters responding to customer complaints revealed that 67 percent carried an apology of some sort.⁴ An apology is defined as an "admission of blameworthiness and regret for an undesirable event."⁵ Apologies to customers are especially important if you or your company erred. They cost nothing, and they go a long way in soothing hard feelings. Here are some tips on how to apologize effectively in business messages:

- **Apologize sincerely.** People dislike apologies that sound hollow (*We regret that you were inconvenienced* or *We regret that you are disturbed*). Focusing on your regret does not convey sincerity. Explaining what you will do to prevent recurrence of the problem projects sincerity.
- **Accept responsibility.** One CEO was criticized for the following weak apology: *I want our customers to know how much I personally regret any difficulties you may experience as a result of the unauthorized intrusion into our computer systems.* Communication experts faulted this apology because it did not acknowledge responsibility.⁶
- **Use good judgment.** Don't admit blame if it might prompt a lawsuit.

OFFICE INSIDER

When leaders accept blame or apologize, it is "one of the most powerful and resonant gestures in the human arsenal—almost as powerful as a declaration of love. If love means, 'I care about you, and I'm happy about it,' then an apology means, 'I hurt you, and I'm sorry about it.'"

Consider these poor and improved apologies:

Poor Apology	Improved Apology
We regret that you are unhappy with the price of frozen yogurt purchased at one of our self-serve scoop shops.	We are genuinely sorry that you were disappointed in the price of frozen yogurt recently purchased at one of our self-serve scoop shops. Your opinion is important to us, and we appreciate your giving us the opportunity to look into the problem you describe.
We apologize if anyone was affected.	I apologize for the frustration our delay caused you. As soon as I received your message, I began looking into the cause of the delay and realized that our delivery tracking system must be improved.

Conveying Empathy in the Buffer

One of the hardest things to do in apologies is to convey sympathy and empathy. As discussed in Chapter 2, *empathy* is the ability to understand and enter into the feelings of another. When ice storms trapped JetBlue Airways passengers on hot planes for hours, CEO Neeleman wrote a letter of apology that sounded as if it came from his heart. He said, "Dear JetBlue Customers: We are sorry and embarrassed. But most of all, we are deeply sorry." Later in his letter he said, "Words cannot express how truly sorry we are for the anxiety, frustration, and inconvenience that you, your family, friends, and colleagues experienced."⁷ Neeleman put himself into the shoes of his customers and tried to experience their pain.

Here are other examples of ways to express empathy in written messages:

- **In writing to an unhappy customer:** *We did not intentionally delay the shipment, and we sincerely regret the disappointment and frustration you must have suffered.*
- **In terminating employees:** *It is with great regret that we must take this step. Rest assured that I will be more than happy to write letters of recommendation for anyone who asks.*
- **In responding to a complaint:** *I am deeply saddened that our service failure disrupted your sale, and we will do everything in our power to . . .*
- **In showing genuine feelings:** *You have every right to be disappointed. I am truly sorry that . . .*



"Dear Valued Customer: We're sorry, but company policy forbids apologies. Sincerely yours."

Empathy involves understanding and entering into the feelings of someone else.

Bad-news messages should explain reasons before stating the negative news.

Present Your Reasons

The most important part of an indirect negative message is the section that explains why a negative decision is necessary. Without sound reasons for denying a request or refusing a claim, a message will fail, no matter how cleverly it is organized or written. As part of your planning before writing, you analyzed the problem and decided to refuse a request for specific reasons. Before disclosing the bad news, try to explain those reasons. Providing an explanation reduces feelings of ill will and improves the chances that the reader will accept the bad news.

- **Explain clearly and cautiously.** If the reasons are not confidential or legally questionable, you can be specific: *Growers supplied us with a limited number of patio*

WORKPLACE IN FOCUS

Société Générale, pictured here among the skyscrapers of Paris, suffered the worst loss in banking history when a junior employee liquidated more than \$7 billion in a fraudulent trading scheme. In a letter to the bank's customers, CEO Daniel Bouton opened immediately with the bad news: "It is my duty to inform you that Société Générale has been a victim of a serious internal fraud committed by an imprudent employee in the Corporate and Investment Banking Division." Bouton went on to reveal a disaster-response plan and assured customers that lost funds would be replaced with emergency funding from the international banking community. Should the bank have buffered this bad news by revealing it more gradually in the letter?



Readers accept bad news more readily if they see that someone benefits.

roses, and our demand this year was twice that of last year. In responding to a billing error, explain what happened: *After you informed us of an error on your January bill, we investigated the matter and admit the mistake was ours. Until our new automated system is fully online, we are still subject to human error. Rest assured that your account has been credited as you will see on your next bill.* In refusing a favour request, explain why the request can't be fulfilled: *On January 17 we have a board of directors meeting that I must attend. However, in an effort to be the "good guy," don't make dangerous or unrealistic promises: Although we can't contribute now, we expect increased revenues next year and promise a generous gift then.*

- **Cite plausible reader benefits.** Readers are more open to bad news if in some way, even indirectly, it may help them. In refusing a customer's request for free hemming of skirts and slacks, a clothing company wrote: "We tested our ability to hem skirts a few years ago. This process proved to be very time-consuming. We have decided not to offer this service because the additional cost would have increased the selling price of our skirts substantially, and we did not want to impose that cost on all our customers."⁸ Readers also accept bad news more readily if they recognize that someone or something else benefits, such as other workers or the environment: *Although we would like to consider your application, we prefer to fill managerial positions from within.* Avoid trying to show reader benefits, though, if they appear insincere: *To improve our service to you, we're increasing our brokerage fees.*
- **Explain company policy.** Readers don't like blanket policy statements prohibiting something: *Company policy prevents us from making cash refunds or Proposals may be accepted from local companies only or Company policy requires us to promote from within.* Instead of hiding behind company policy, gently explain why the policy makes sense: *We prefer to promote from within because it rewards the loyalty of our employees. In addition, we've found that people familiar with our organization make the quickest contribution to our team effort.* By offering explanations, you demonstrate that you care about your readers and are treating them as important individuals.
- **Choose positive words.** Because the words you use can affect a reader's response, choose carefully. Remember that the objective of the indirect pattern is to hold the reader's attention until you've had a chance to explain the reasons

justifying the bad news. To keep the reader in a receptive mood, avoid expressions that might cause the reader to tune out. Be sensitive to negative words such as *claim, error, failure, fault, impossible, mistaken, misunderstand, never, regret, unwilling, unfortunately, and violate.*

- **Demonstrate fairness.** In explaining reasons, demonstrate to the reader that you take the matter seriously, have investigated carefully, and are making an unbiased decision. Customers are more accepting of disappointing news when they feel that their requests have been heard and that they have been treated fairly. Avoid deflecting responsibility, known as "passing the buck," or blaming others within your organization. Such unprofessional behaviour makes the reader lose faith in you and your company.

Cushion the Bad News

Although you can't prevent the disappointment that bad news brings, you can reduce the pain somewhat by breaking the news sensitively. Be especially considerate when the reader will suffer personally from the bad news. A number of thoughtful techniques can lessen the impact.

Techniques for cushioning bad news include positioning it strategically, using the passive voice, emphasizing the positive, implying the refusal, and suggesting alternatives or compromises.

- **Position the bad news strategically.** Instead of spotlighting it, enclose the bad news between other sentences, perhaps among your reasons. Try not to let the refusal begin or end a paragraph—the reader's eye will linger on these high-visibility spots. Another technique that reduces shock is putting a painful idea in a subordinate clause: *Although the board did not award you a bonus this year, we are thankful for your enthusiasm and loyalty and highly encourage you to apply once again next year.* Subordinate clauses often begin with words such as *although, as, because, if, and since.*
- **Use the passive voice.** Passive-voice verbs enable you to describe an action without connecting the action to a specific person. Whereas the active voice focuses attention on a person (*We don't accept unsolicited proposals*), the passive voice highlights the action (*Unsolicited proposals are not accepted because . . .*). Use the passive voice for the bad news. In some instances you can combine passive-voice verbs and a subordinate clause: *Although unsolicited proposals are not currently being accepted, we encourage you to try again beginning March 30, after which time our policy may have changed.*
- **Accentuate the positive.** As you learned earlier, messages are far more effective when you describe what you can do instead of what you can't do. Rather than *We will no longer accept requests for product changes after June 1*, try a more positive appeal: *We are accepting requests for product changes until June 1.*
- **Imply the refusal.** It's sometimes possible to avoid a direct statement of refusal. Often, your reasons and explanations leave no doubt that a request has been denied. Explicit refusals may be unnecessary and at times cruel. In this refusal to contribute to a charity, for example, the writer never actually says no: *Because we will soon be moving into new offices, all our funds are earmarked for moving and furnishings. We hope that next year we'll be able to support your worthwhile charity.* This implied refusal is effective even though the bad news is not stated. The danger of an implied refusal, of course, is that it can be so subtle that the reader misses it. Be certain that you make the bad news clear, thus preventing the need for further correspondence.
- **Suggest a compromise or an alternative.** A refusal is not so harsh—for the sender or the receiver—if a suitable compromise, substitute, or alternative is available. In denying permission to a class to visit a research facility, for instance, this writer softens the bad news by proposing an alternative: *Although class tours of the entire research facility are not given due to safety and security reasons, we do offer tours of parts of the facility during our open house in the fall.* You can further reduce the impact of the bad news by refusing to dwell on it. Present it briefly (or imply it), and move on to your closing.

Closings to bad-news messages might include a forward look, an alternative, good wishes, special offers, and resale or sales promotional information.

Close Pleasantly

After explaining the bad news sensitively, close the message with a pleasant statement that promotes goodwill. The closing should be personalized and may include a forward look, an alternative, good wishes, special offers, resale information, or an off-the-subject remark.

- **Forward look.** Anticipate future relations or business. A letter that refuses a contract proposal might read: *Thank you for your bid. We look forward to working with your talented staff when future projects demand your special expertise.*
- **Alternative follow-up.** If an alternative exists, end your letter with follow-through advice. For example, in a letter rejecting a customer's demand for replacement of landscaping plants, you might say *We will be happy to give you a free inspection and consultation. Please call 746-8112 to arrange a date for a visit.* In a message to a prospective home buyer: *Although the lot you saw last week is now sold, we do have two excellent view lots available at a slightly higher price.* In reacting to an Internet misprint: *Please note that our Web site contained an unfortunate misprint offering \$850-per-night Banff luxury chalets at \$85. Although we cannot honour that rate, we are offering a special half-price rate of \$425 to those who responded.*
- **Good wishes.** A conversation in which someone is fired or downsized might read: *We want you to know your contribution here has been highly valued, and we wish you all the best as you look for rewarding work in a different setting. Please be in touch with your manager about securing a reference.*
- **Special offers.** When customers complain—primarily about food products or small consumer items—companies often send coupons, samples, or gifts to restore confidence and to promote future business. In response to a customer's complaint about a frozen dinner, you could write *Thank you for your loyalty and for sharing in our efforts to make Green Valley frozen entrées the best they can be. We appreciate your input so much that we'd like to buy you dinner. We've enclosed a coupon to cover the cost of your next entrée.*
- **Resale or sales promotion.** When the bad news is not devastating or personal, references to resale information or promotion may be appropriate: *The laptops you ordered are unusually popular because they have more plug-ins for peripheral devices than any other laptop in their price range. To help you locate additional accessories for these computers, we invite you to visit our Web site at . . . , where our online catalogue provides a huge selection of peripheral devices such as stereo speakers, printers, personal digital assistants, and digital pagers.*

Avoid endings that sound superficial, insincere, inappropriate, or self-serving. Don't invite further correspondence (*If you have any questions, do not hesitate . . .*), and don't refer again to the bad news. Take another look at the elements in Figure 7.4 whenever you need to review writing sensitive negative messages.

Negative Situation: Refusing Requests and Claims

As you move forward in your career and become a professional or a representative of an organization, you may receive requests for favours or contributions. When you must refuse these requests, you will first think about how well you know the receiver and how he or she will react to your refusal and decide whether to use the direct or the indirect strategy. You may also have to say *no* to customer claims, deny credit, and deal with disappointment and even anger. At the same time, your goal is to resolve the situation in a prompt, fair, and

The indirect strategy is appropriate when refusing requests for time, money, information, or action.

tactful manner. If you have any doubt, use the indirect strategy and the following writing plan:

WRITING PLAN FOR REFUSING REQUESTS OR CLAIMS

- **Buffer:** Start with a neutral statement on which both reader and writer can agree, such as a compliment, an appreciative comment, a quick review of the facts, or an apology. Add a key idea or word that acts as a transition to the reasons.
- **Reasons:** Present valid reasons for the refusal, avoiding words that create a negative tone. Include resale or sales promotion material if appropriate.
- **Bad news:** Soften the blow by de-emphasizing the bad news, using the passive voice, accentuating the positive, or implying a refusal. Suggest a compromise, alternative, or substitute if possible. The alternative can be part of the bad news or part of the closing.
- **Closing:** Renew good feelings with a positive statement. Avoid referring to the bad news. Include resale or promotion information, if appropriate. Look forward to continued business.

Refusing Favour Requests

Requests for favours, money, information, and action may come from charities, friends, or business partners. Many are from people representing commendable causes, and you may wish you could comply. However, resources are usually limited.

Two versions of a request refusal are shown in Figure 7.5 on the next page. A magazine writer requested salary information for an article, but this information could not be released. The ineffective version begins with needless information that could be implied. The second paragraph creates a harsh tone with such negative words as *sorry*, *must refuse*, *violate*, and *liable*. Since the refusal precedes the explanation, the reader probably will not be in a receptive frame of mind to accept the reasons for refusing. Notice, too, that the bad news is emphasized by its placement in a short sentence at the beginning of a paragraph. It stands out and adds more weight to the rejection already felt by the reader.

Moreover, the refusal explanation is overly graphic, containing references to possible litigation. The tone at this point is threatening and unduly harsh. Then, suddenly, the author throws in a self-serving comment about the high salary and commissions of his salespeople. Instead of offering constructive alternatives, the ineffective version reveals only tiny bits of the desired data. Finally, the closing sounds too insincere and doesn't build goodwill.

In the more effective version of this refusal, the opening reflects the writer's genuine interest in the request. But it does not indicate compliance. The second sentence acts as a transition by introducing the words *salespeople* and *salaries*, repeated in the following paragraph. Reasons for refusing this request are objectively presented in an explanation that precedes the refusal. Notice that the refusal (*Although specific salaries and commission rates cannot be released*) is a subordinate clause in a long sentence in the middle of a paragraph. To further soften the blow, the letter offers an alternative. The cordial closing refers to the alternative, avoids mention of the refusal, and looks to the future.

It's always easier to write refusals when alternatives can be offered to soften the bad news. But often no alternatives are possible. The refusal shown in Figure 7.6 involves a delicate situation in which a manager has been asked by his superiors to violate a contract. Several of the engineers for whom he works have privately asked

In refusing requests, avoid a harsh tone or being too explicit; offer constructive alternatives whenever possible.

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The indirect strategy is appropriate when refusing requests for time, money, information, or action.

FIGURE 7.5 Refusing an External Favour Request

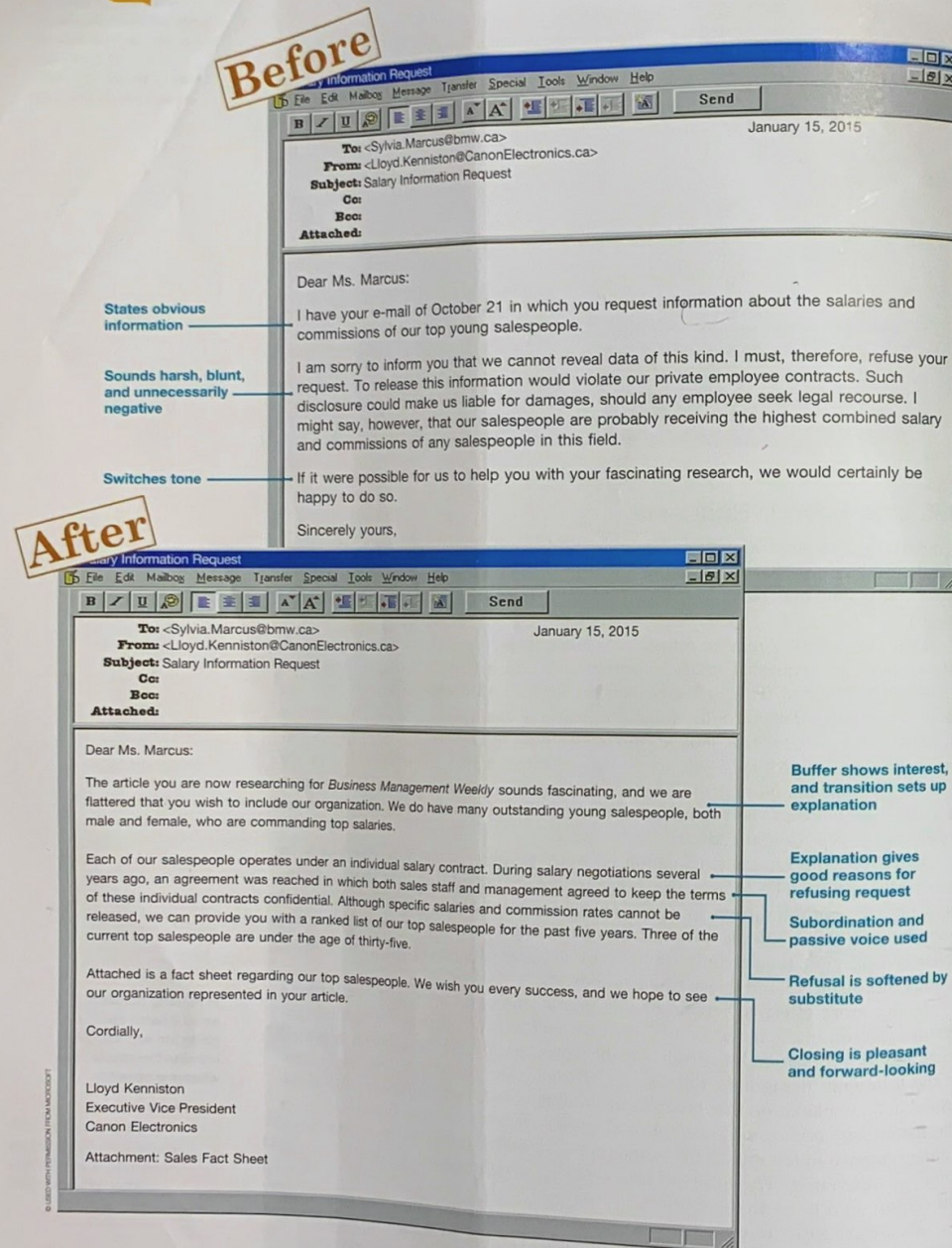
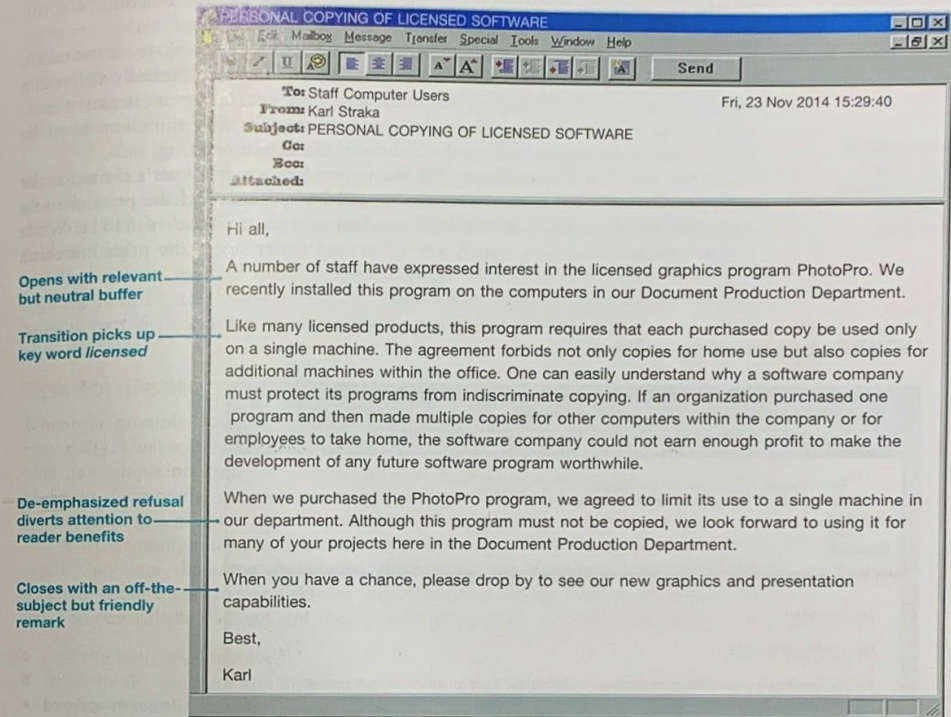


FIGURE 7.6 Refusing an Internal Favour Request



him to make copies of a licensed software program for them. They apparently want this program for their personal computers. Making copies is forbidden by the terms of the software licensing agreement, and the manager refuses to do this. Rather than saying no to each engineer who asks him, he sends all affected staff the e-mail shown in Figure 7.6.

The opening tactfully avoids suggesting that any engineer has actually asked to copy the software program. These professionals may prefer not to have their private requests made known. A transition takes the reader to the logical reasons against copying. Notice that the tone is objective, neither preaching nor condemning. The refusal is softened by being linked with a positive statement (*Although this program must not be copied, we look forward to using it for many of your projects here . . .*). To divert attention from the refusal, the memo ends with a friendly, off-the-subject remark.

Refusing Claims

Customers occasionally want something they are not entitled to or something you can't grant. They may misunderstand warranties or make unreasonable demands. Because these customers are often unhappy with a product or service, they are emotionally involved. Writing or saying *no* to emotionally involved receivers will probably be your most challenging communication task. As publisher Malcolm Forbes observed, "To be agreeable while disagreeing—that's an art."⁹

Fortunately, the reasons-before-refusal plan helps you be empathic and artful in breaking bad news. Obviously, in denial letters you will need to adopt the proper tone. Don't blame customers, even if they are at fault. Avoid "you" statements that

In denying claims, writers use the reasons-before-refusal strategy to set an empathic tone and buffer the bad news.

Although customer claims are often granted, occasionally some must be refused.

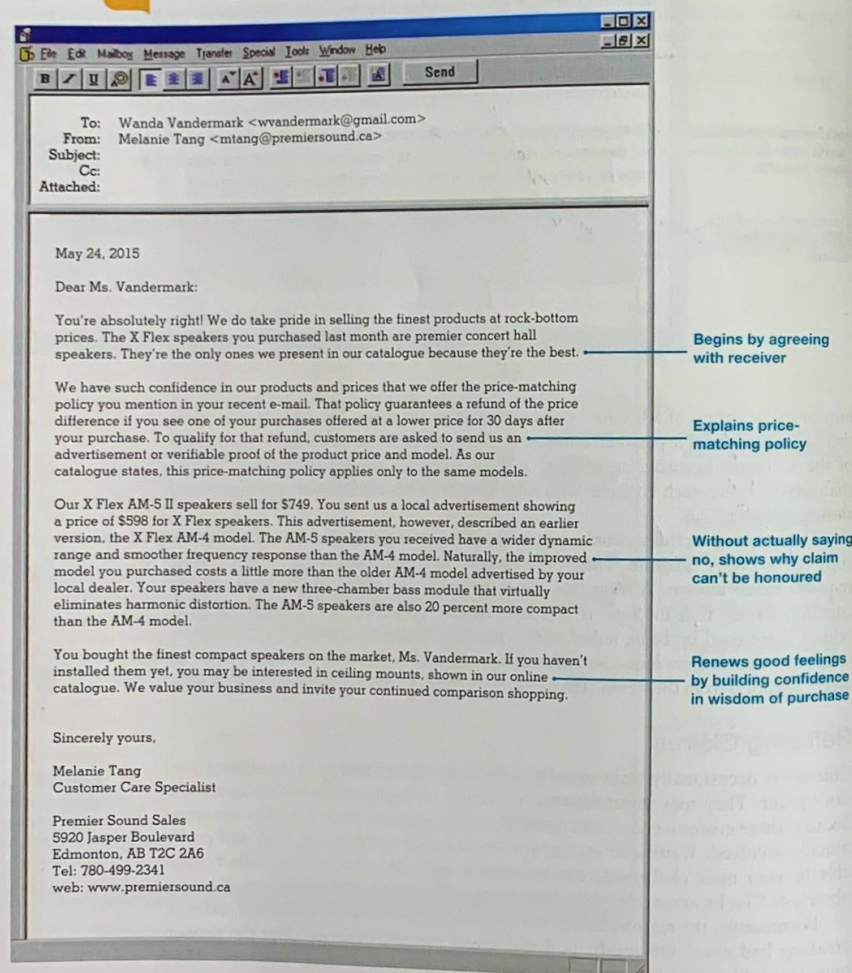
When refusing customer claims, explain objectively and do not assume that the customer is foolish or dishonest.

sound preachy (*You would have known that cash refunds are impossible if you had read your contract*). Use neutral, objective language to explain why the claim must be refused. Consider offering resale information to rebuild the customer's confidence in your products or organization.

Claims that cannot be approved because the customer or employee is mistaken, misinformed, unreasonable, or possibly even dishonest, are essentially delivering negative news. As you've learned, the indirect strategy communicates negative news with the least pain. It also allows the sender to explain why the claim must be refused before the reader realizes the bad news and begins resisting.

In the e-mail shown in Figure 7.7, the writer denies a customer's claim for the difference between the price the customer paid for speakers and the price she saw advertised locally (which would have resulted in a cash refund of \$151). While Premier Sound Sales does match any advertised lower price, the price-matching

FIGURE 7.7 Refusing a Claim



policy applies only to exact models. This claim must be rejected because the advertisement the customer submitted shows a different, older speaker model.

The e-mail to Wanda Vandermark opens with a buffer that agrees with a statement in the customer's letter. It repeats the key idea of product confidence as a transition to the second paragraph. Next comes an explanation of the price-matching policy. The writer does not assume that the customer is trying to pull a fast one. Nor does the writer suggest that the customer is a dummy who didn't read or understand the price-matching policy.

The safest path is a neutral explanation of the policy along with precise distinctions between the customer's speakers and the older ones. The writer also gets a chance to re-sell the customer's speakers and demonstrate what a quality product they are. By the end of the third paragraph, it's evident to the reader that her claim is unjustified.

Notice how most of the components in an effective claim refusal are woven together in this letter: buffer, transition, explanation, and pleasant closing. The only missing part is an alternative, which was impossible in this situation.

Tips for Dealing with Disappointed Customers

Whenever possible, disappointed customers should be dealt with immediately and personally. Customer complaints about products and services now appear on sites such as Complaints.com and iRipoff.com, as well as on Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. Companies are responding by joining social media and telling their own stories, putting a positive spin on potentially damaging, viral word of mouth.

Whether companies deal with unhappy customers online or up close and personal, they face the same challenges. Maintaining market share and preserving goodwill require sensitive and skillful communication. Many business professionals strive to control the damage and resolve such problems in the following manner:¹⁰

- Call the individual involved.
- Describe the problem and apologize.
- Explain why the problem occurred, what your company is doing to resolve it, and how it will ensure that the problem will not happen again.
- Follow up with a message that documents the phone call and promotes goodwill.

Dealing with problems immediately is very important in resolving conflict and retaining goodwill. Hard-copy correspondence has become too slow for problems that demand immediate attention. But written electronic messages are good substitutes when personal contact is impossible, to establish a record of the incident, to formally confirm follow-up procedures, and to promote good relations.

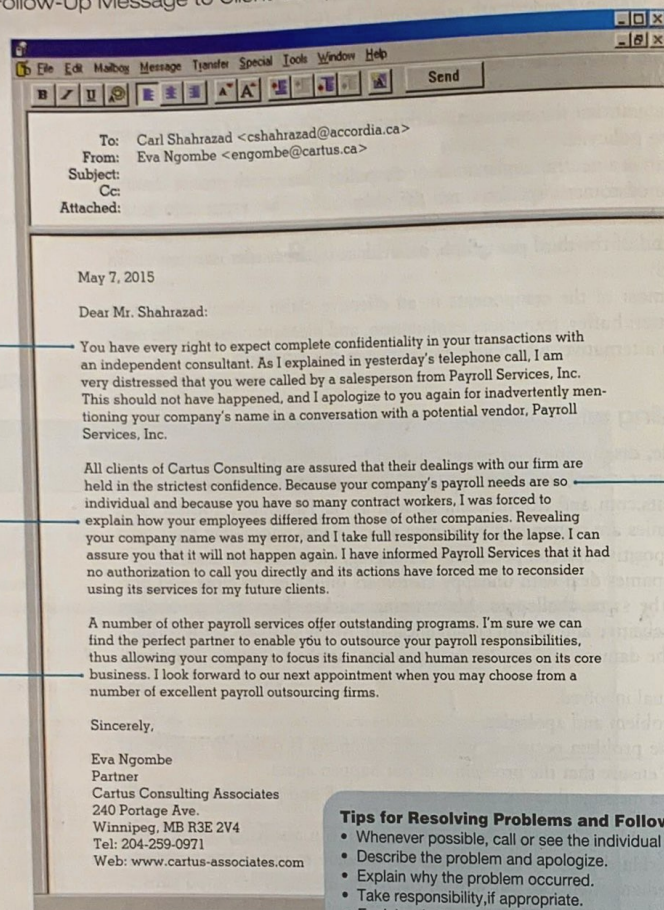
A follow-up e-mail to a client complaint is shown in Figure 7.8. Consultant Eva Ngombe found herself in the embarrassing position of explaining why she had given out the name of her client to a salesperson. The client, Accordia Resources International, had hired her firm, Cartus Consulting Associates, to help find an appropriate service for outsourcing its payroll functions. Without realizing it, Eva had mentioned to a potential vendor (Payroll Services, Inc.) that her client was considering hiring an outside service to handle its payroll. An overeager salesperson from Payroll Services immediately called on Accordia, thus angering the client. The client had hired the consultant to avoid this very kind of intrusion. Accordia did not want to be hounded by vendors selling their payroll services.

When she learned of the problem, the first thing consultant Eva Ngombe did was call her client to explain and apologize. She was careful to control her voice and rate of speaking. A low-pitched, deliberate pace gives the impression that you are thinking clearly, logically, and reasonably—not emotionally and certainly not irrationally. However, she also followed up with the e-mail shown in Figure 7.8. The e-mail not only confirms the telephone conversation but also adds some formality. It sends the nonverbal message that the writer takes the matter seriously and that it is important enough to warrant a written message.

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"As soon as you realize there is a problem, let your client know by phone or, if possible, in person. It's better to let them hear bad news from you than to discover it on their own because it establishes your candour."

FIGURE 7.8 Follow-Up Message to Client Complaint



Tips for Resolving Problems and Following Up

- Whenever possible, call or see the individual involved.
- Describe the problem and apologize.
- Explain why the problem occurred.
- Take responsibility, if appropriate.
- Explain what you are doing to resolve the problem.
- Explain what you are doing to prevent recurrence.
- Follow up with a message that documents the personal contact.
- Look forward to positive future relations.

Many consumer problems are handled with letters, either written by consumers as complaints or by companies in response. However, e-mail and social media sites on the Internet are increasingly emerging as channels for delivering and responding to complaints and negative messages.

Negative Situation: Sharing Negative News with Employees

A tactful tone and a reasons-first approach help preserve friendly relations with customers. These same techniques are useful when delivering bad news within organizations. Interpersonal bad news might involve telling the boss that something went wrong or confronting an employee about poor performance. Organizational

bad news might involve declining profits, lost contracts, harmful lawsuits, public relations controversies, and changes in policy. Whether you use a direct or an indirect strategy in delivering that news depends primarily on the anticipated reaction of the audience. Generally, bad news is better received when reasons are given first. Within organizations, you may find yourself giving bad news in person or in writing.

Delivering Bad News Personally

Whether you are an employee or a supervisor, you may have the unhappy responsibility of delivering bad news. First, decide whether the negative information is newsworthy. For example, trivial, non-criminal mistakes or one-time bad behaviours are best left alone. However, fraudulent travel claims, consistent hostile behaviour, or failing projects must be reported.¹¹ For example, you might have to tell the boss that the team's computer crashed losing all its important files. As a team leader or supervisor, you might be required to confront an underperforming employee. If you know that the news will upset the receiver, the reasons-first strategy is most effective. When the bad news involves one person or a small group nearby, you should generally deliver that news in person. Here are pointers on how to do so tactfully, professionally, and safely:¹²

- **Gather all the information.** Cool down and have all the facts before marching in on the boss or confronting someone. Remember that every story has two sides.
- **Prepare and rehearse.** Outline what you plan to say so that you are confident, coherent, and dispassionate.
- **Explain: past, present, future.** If you are telling the boss about a problem such as the computer crash, explain what caused the crash, the current situation, and how and when you plan to fix it.
- **Consider taking a partner.** If you fear a "shoot the messenger" reaction, especially from your boss, bring a colleague with you. Each person should have a consistent and credible part in the presentation. If possible, take advantage of your organization's internal resources. To lend credibility to your view, call on auditors, inspectors, or human resources experts.
- **Think about timing.** Don't deliver bad news when someone is already stressed or grumpy. Experts also advise against giving bad news on Friday afternoon when people have the weekend to dwell on it.
- **Be patient with the reaction.** Give the receiver time to vent, think, recover, and act wisely.

WRITING PLAN FOR SHARING NEGATIVE NEWS WITH EMPLOYEES

- **Buffer:** Start with a neutral or positive statement that transitions to the reasons for the bad news. Consider opening with the best news, a compliment, appreciation, agreement, or solid facts. Show understanding.
- **Reasons:** Explain the logic behind the bad news. Provide a rational explanation using positive words and displaying empathy. If possible, mention reader benefits.
- **Bad News:** Position the bad news so that it does not stand out. Be positive, but don't sugarcoat the bad news. Use objective language.
- **Closing:** Provide information about an alternative, if one exists. If appropriate, describe what will happen next. Look forward positively.

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"E-mail and blogging have become such a part of our DNA that people take for granted that it's an okay way to communicate. But actually it's depersonalizing. It chops us off from who we thought we were."

When you must deliver bad news in person, be sure to gather all the information, prepare, and rehearse.

Bad news, whether delivered in person or in writing, is usually better received when reasons are given first.

Internal request refusals focus on explanations and praise, maintaining a positive tone, and offering alternatives.

Refusing Workplace Requests

Occasionally, managers must refuse requests from employees. In Figure 7.9 you see the first draft and revision of a message responding to a request from a key specialist, Melvin Arroyo. He wants permission to attend a conference. However, he can't attend the conference because the timing is bad; he must be present at budget planning meetings scheduled for the same two weeks. Normally, this matter would be discussed in person. However, Melvin has been travelling among branch offices, and he just hasn't been in the office recently.

The vice president's first inclination was to send a quickie e-mail, as shown in the Figure 7.9 draft, and "tell it like it is." However, the vice president realized that this message was going to hurt and that it had possible danger areas. Moreover, the message misses a chance to give Melvin positive feedback. An improved version of the e-mail starts with a buffer that delivers honest praise (*pleased with the exceptional leadership you have provided and your genuine professional commitment*). By the way, don't be stingy with compliments; they cost you nothing. The buffer

FIGURE 7.9 Refusing an Internal Request

