

CHAPTER EIGHT

Maintaining Goodwill in Bad-News Messages

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this chapter, you will be able to write indirect messages to convey bad news. To reach this goal, you should be able to

- 1 Determine which situations require using the indirect order for the most effective response.
- 2 Write indirect-order messages following the general plan.
- 3 Use tact and courtesy in refusals of requests.
- 4 Compose tactful, yet clear, claim messages using an indirect approach.
- 5 Write adjustment refusals that minimize the negative and overcome bad impressions.
- 6 Write negative announcements that maintain goodwill.

LO1 Determine which situations require using the indirect order for the most effective response.

APPROACHES TO WRITING BAD-NEWS MESSAGES

As explained in Chapter 7, the indirect order is especially effective when you must say “no” or convey other disappointing news. Several research studies indicate that negative news is received more positively when an explanation precedes it.¹ An explanation can convince the reader that the writer’s position is correct or at least that the writer is taking a logical and reasonable position, even if the news is bad for the reader. In addition, an explanation cushions the shock of bad news. Not cushioning the shock makes the message unnecessarily harsh, and harshness destroys goodwill.

However, research also indicates that the direct approach is warranted for communicating negative news in some contexts.² In one study of “data breach notification letters” (letters a company uses to alert readers when the security of their personal information has been compromised), the researcher concluded that when “writers must convince readers that a potential problem exists and encourage them to act,” a direct approach may be more appropriate.³ In addition, if you think that your negative news will be accepted routinely, you might choose directness. For example, in many buyer–seller relationships in business, both parties expect back orders and order errors to occur now and then. Thus, messages reporting this negative information would not really require indirectness. You also might choose directness if you know your reader well and feel that he or she will appreciate frankness. Although such instances are less common than those in which indirectness is the preferable strategy, you should always analyze your audience and business goals to choose the most appropriate organizational approach to delivering negative news.

As in the preceding chapter, we first describe a general plan. Then we adapt this plan to specific business situations—four in this case. First is the refusal of a request, a common task in business. Next we cover two related types of negative messages: indirect claims and adjustment refusals. Finally, we cover negative announcements, which are bad-news messages with unique characteristics.

LO2 Write indirect-order messages following the general plan.

THE GENERAL INDIRECT PLAN

The following plan will be helpful for most negative-news situations.

Using a Strategic Buffer

Indirect messages presenting bad news often begin with a strategic buffer. By **buffer** we mean an opening that identifies the subject of the message but does not indicate that negative news is coming. That is, the buffer is relevant to the topic of the message but does not state what the rest of the message will say about it.

A buffer can be neutral or positive. A neutral buffer might simply acknowledge your receipt of the reader’s earlier message and indicate your awareness of what it said. A positive buffer might thank the reader for bringing a situation to your attention or for being a valued customer or employee. You do need to use care when opening on a positive note. You do not in any way want to raise the reader’s hopes that you are about to deliver the news that he or she may be hoping for. That would only make your task of maintaining good relations more difficult.

Some may argue that not starting with the good news is, for savvy readers, a clear tip-off that bad news is coming. If this is the case, then why not just start with the bad

¹ Valerie Creelman, “The Case for ‘Living’ Models,” *Business Communication Quarterly* 75:2 (2012): 176–191, print.

² Jennifer R. Veltsos, “An Analysis of Data Breach Notifications as Negative News,” *Business Communication Quarterly* 75:2 (2012): 203, print; Creelman.

³ Veltsos.

news? The answer is that most readers appreciate a more gradual introduction to the message's main negative point even when they know it is coming. A buffer gives them a chance to prepare for the news—and even if they suspect that it will be negative, the use of a buffer indicates consideration for their feelings.

Setting Up the Negative News

For each case, you will have thought through the facts involved and decided that you will have to say “no” or present some other kind of negative news. You then have to figure out how you will present your reasons in such a way that your reader will accept the news as positively as possible. Your strategy might be to explain the fairness of a certain action. It might be to present facts that clearly make the decision necessary. Or you might cite the expert opinion of authorities whom both you and your reader respect. It might even be possible to show that your reasons for the negative decision will benefit the reader in the long run.

Whatever explanatory strategy you choose, these reasons should follow your buffer and precede the negative news itself. In other words, the paragraph after the buffer should start explaining the situation in such a way that by the time the negative news comes, the reader is prepared to receive it in the most favorable light possible.

Presenting the Bad News Positively

Next, you present the bad news. If you have developed your reasoning convincingly, this bad news should appear as a logical outcome. You should present it as positively as the situation will permit. In doing so, you must make certain that the negative message is clear—that your approach has not given the wrong impression.

One useful technique is to present your reasoning in first and third person, avoiding second person. To illustrate, in a message refusing a request for a refund for a returned product, you could write these negative words: “Since you have broken the seal, state law prohibits us from returning the product to stock.” Or you could write these words emphasizing first and third person: “State law prohibits us from returning to stock all products with broken seals.”

It is sometimes possible to take the sting out of negative news by linking it to a reader benefit. For example, if you preface a company policy with “in the interest of fairness” or “for the safety of our guests,” you are indicating that all of your patrons, including the reader, get an important benefit from your policy.

Your efforts to present this part of the message positively should employ the positive word emphasis described in Chapter 5. In using positive words, however, you must make certain your words truthfully and accurately convey your message. Your goal is to present the facts in a positive way, not to confuse or mislead.

Offering an Alternative Solution

For almost any negative-news situation that you can think of, there is something you can do to help the reader with his or her problem.

If someone seeks to hold an event on your company grounds and you must say “no,” you may be able to suggest other sites. If someone wants information that you do not have, you might know of another way that he or she could get similar information. If you cannot volunteer your time and services, perhaps you know someone who might, or perhaps you could invite the reader to make the request again at a later, better time. If you have to announce a cutback on an employee benefit, you might be able to suggest ways that employees can supplement this benefit on their own. Taking the time to help the readers in this way is a sincere show of concern for their situation. For this reason, it is one of your most powerful strategies for maintaining goodwill.

Ending on a Positive Note

Since even a skillfully handled bad-news message can be disappointing to the reader, you should end the message on a *forward-looking note*. Your goal here is to shift the reader's thoughts to happier things—perhaps what you would say if you were in face-to-face conversation with the person. Preferably your comments should fit the topic of your message, and they should not recall the negative message. They should make clear that you value your relationship with the reader and still regard it as a positive one.

Apologizing

Many times when a writer must deliver bad news, the first thought is to apologize. After all, if a customer or co-worker is unhappy—for any reason—somehow apologizing seems a good strategy for making a situation better. Sometimes an apology can make a bad situation better, but other times it can make a bad situation worse. For example, if a customer incurs finance charges because you forgot to credit a payment to the customer's account, an apology, along with a credit to the account and removal of the finance charge, may help restore goodwill. On the other hand, if the bad news is something you had no control over (e.g., a customer didn't follow instructions for using a product and the item broke), apologizing can make you appear in the wrong even when you're not. A reader may also wonder why, if you're so sorry, you cannot do what the reader wants you to do. Apologies may even have legal implications if they can be construed as admissions of guilt.

If you do apologize in a bad-news message, do so early in the message as you explain the reasons and deliver the bad news. Then move beyond the apology just as you move beyond the bad news and toward your forward-looking conclusion. If you think your apology may have legal implications, you can have your message reviewed by a supervisor or your company's legal department before sending it.

Following are adaptations of this general plan to four of the more common negative business message situations. From these applications you should be able to see how to adapt this general plan to almost any other situation requiring you to convey bad news.

REFUSED REQUESTS

Denying a Request for a Donation

As in Chapter 7, assume the role of assistant to the White Label Industries (WLI) vice president. Today your boss assigned you the task of responding to a request from the local chapter of the National Association of Peace Officers. This worthy organization has asked WLI to contribute to a scholarship fund for certain needy children.

The request is persuasive. It points out that the scholarship fund is terribly short. As a result, the association is not able to take care of all the needy children. Many of them are the children of officers who were killed in the line of duty. You have been moved by the persuasion and would like to comply, but you cannot.

You cannot contribute now because WLI policy does not permit it. Even though you do not like the effects of the

policy in this case, you think the policy is good. Each year WLI earmarks a fixed amount—all it can afford—for contributions. Then it donates this amount to the causes that a committee of its executives considers the most worthy. Unfortunately, all the money earmarked for this year has already been given away. You will have to say no to the request, at least for now. You can offer to consider the association's cause next year.

Your response must report the bad news, though it can hold out hope for the future. Because you like the association and because you want it to like WLI, you will try to handle the situation delicately. The task will require your best strategy and your best writing skills.

The **refusal of a request** is definitely bad news. Your reader has asked for something, and you must say no. Your **primary goal**, of course, is to present this bad news. You could do this easily with a direct refusal; however, opening with the bad news that you are refusing the reader's request could make you and your company appear insensitive. As a courteous and caring businessperson, you have the **secondary goal** of maintaining goodwill. To achieve this second goal, you must convince your reader that the refusal is fair and reasonable before you break the bad news.

LO3 Use tact and courtesy in refusals of requests.

Developing the Strategy

Finding a fair and reasonable explanation involves carefully thinking through the facts of the situation. First, consider why you are refusing. Then, assuming that your reasons are just, try to find the best way of explaining them to your reader. To do so, you might well place yourself in your reader's shoes. Try to imagine how the explanation will be received. What comes out of this thinking is the strategy you should use in your message.

One often-used explanation is that company policy forbids compliance. This explanation may work but only if the company policy is defensible and clearly explained. Often you must refuse simply because the facts of the case justify a refusal—that is, you are right and the reader is wrong. In such cases, your best course is to review the facts and to appeal to the reader's sense of fair play.

In any situation, you may have multiple ways to offer a fair and reasonable explanation. Your job is to analyze your audience and communication goals and select the one that best fits your case.

Setting Up the Explanation in the Opening

Having determined the explanation, you begin the message with a buffer that sets up the discussion. For example, in the case of WLI's refusal to donate to the National Association of Peace Officers' worthy cause, the following opening meets this case's requirements well:

Your organization is doing a commendable job of educating needy children. Like many other worthy efforts, it well deserves the support of our community.

This beginning, on-subject comment clearly marks the message as a response to the inquiry. It implies neither a yes nor a no answer. The second statement sets up the explanation, which will point out that the company has already given its allotted donation money to other worthy organizations. This buffer puts the reader in an agreeable or open frame of mind—ready to accept the explanation that follows.

Presenting the Explanation Convincingly

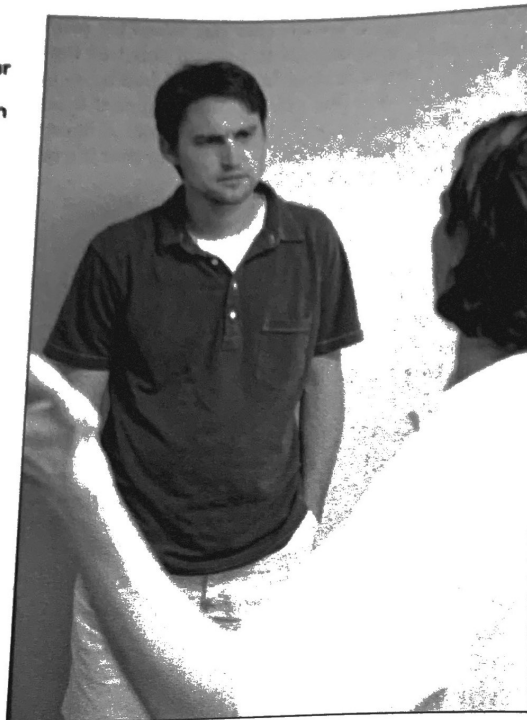
As with the general plan, you next present your reasoning. To do this you use your best persuasion techniques: positive wording, proper emphasis, sound logic, and supporting detail to convince your reader.

Handling the Refusal Positively

Your handling of *the refusal follows logically* from your reasoning. If you have built the groundwork of explanation and fact convincingly, the refusal comes as a logical conclusion and as no surprise. If you have done your job well, your reader may even support the refusal. Even so, because the refusal is the most negative part of your message, you should not give it much emphasis. You should state it quickly, clearly, and positively; and you should keep it away from positions of emphasis, such as paragraph endings.

You might even be able to make the message clear without stating the negative news explicitly. For example, if you are refusing a community member's request to use your company's retreat facility for a fundraiser, you will convey "no" clearly if you say that

Telling people news they don't want to hear requires your most careful communication effort.



you must restrict the use of the facility to employees only and then go on to offer alternative locations. You must be sure, though, that your message leaves no doubt about your answer. Being unclear the first time will leave you in the position of writing an even more difficult, more negative message later.

To state the refusal positively, you should carefully study the effects of your words. Such harsh words as *I refuse*, *will not*, and *cannot* stand out. So do such apologies as "I deeply regret to inform you . . ." and "I am sorry to say. . . ." You can usually phrase your refusal in terms of a positive statement of policy. For example, instead of writing "your insurance does not cover damage to buildings not connected to the house," write "your insurance covers damage to the house only." Or instead of writing "We must refuse," a wholesaler could deny a discount by writing "We can grant discounts only when. . ." In some cases, your job may be to educate the reader. Not only will this be your explanation for the refusal, but it will also build goodwill.

Using a Compromise When Practical

If the situation justifies a **compromise**, you can use it in making the refusal positive. More specifically, by saying what you can do (the compromise), you can clearly imply what you cannot do. For example, if you write "What we can do is to (the compromise), . . ." you clearly imply that you cannot do what the reader requested. Such statements contain no negative words and usually are as positive as the situation will permit.

Closing with Goodwill

Even a skillfully handled refusal is the most negative part of your message. Because the news is disappointing, it is likely to put your reader in an unhappy frame of mind. That frame of mind works against your goodwill goal. To leave your reader with a feeling of goodwill, you must shift his or her thoughts to more pleasant matters.

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The best closing subject matter depends on the facts of the case, but it should be positive talk that fits the one situation. For example, if your refusal involves a counterproposal, you could say more about the counterproposal. Or you could make some friendly remark about the subject of the request as long as it does not remind the reader of the bad news. In fact, your closing subject matter could be almost any friendly remark that would be appropriate if you were handling the case face to face. The major requirement is that your ending words have a goodwill effect.

Ruled out are negative apologies, such as "Again, may I say that I regret that we must refuse." Also ruled out are the equally timeworn appeals for understanding, such as "I sincerely hope that you understand why we must make this decision." Such words sound selfish and emphasize the bad news.

Fitting the General Plan to Refused Requests

Adapting the preceding analysis to the general plan, we arrive at the following outline for the refused request:

- Begin with words that indicate a response to the request, are neutral about the answer, and set up the strategy.
- Present your justification or explanation, using positive language and you-viewpoint.
- Refuse clearly and positively.
- Include a counterproposal or compromise when appropriate.
- End with an adapted goodwill comment.

Contrasting Refusals

The advantage of the indirect order in refusal messages is illustrated by the following contrasting examples of WLI's possible response to the request from the National Association of Peace Officers. Both refuse clearly. But only the one that uses the indirect order is likely to regain the reader's goodwill.

Harshness in the Direct Refusal. The first example states the bad news right away. This blunt treatment puts the reader in an unreceptive frame of mind. The result is that the reader is less likely to accept the explanation that follows. The explanation is clear, but note the unnecessary use of negative words (*exhausted*, *regret*, *cannot consider*). Note also how the closing words leave the reader with a strong reminder of the bad news.

Subject: Your request for a donation

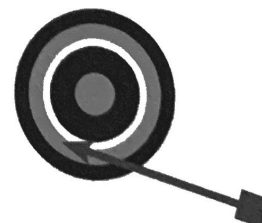
Ms. Cangelosi:

We regret to inform you that we cannot grant your request for a donation to the association's scholarship fund.

So many requests for contributions are made of us that we have found it necessary to budget a definite amount each year for this purpose. Unfortunately, our budgeted funds for this year have been exhausted, so we simply cannot consider additional requests. We won't be able to consider your request until next year.

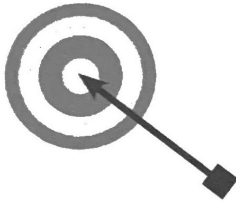
We deeply regret our inability to help you now and trust that you understand our position.

Mark Stephens



This bad email is harsh because of its directness and negative language.

Tact and Courtesy in an Indirect Refusal. The second example skillfully handles the negative message. Its opening words are on subject and neutral. They set up the explanation that follows. The clear and logical explanation ties in with the opening. Using no negative words, the explanation leads smoothly to the refusal. Note that the refusal is also handled without negative words and yet is clear. The friendly close fits the one case.



This email using the indirect approach is better.

Subject: Your Scholarship Fund Request

Ms. Cangelosi:

Your efforts to build the scholarship fund for the association's needy children are commendable.

White Label Industries assists worthy causes whenever we can. That is why every January we budget in the upcoming year the maximum amount we believe we are able to contribute to such causes. Then we distribute that amount among the various deserving groups as far as it will go. Since our budgeted contributions for this year have already been made, we are placing your organization on our list for consideration next year.

We wish you success in your efforts to improve the lives of the children in our city.

Mark Stephens

INDIRECT CLAIMS

Seeking an Adjustment for a Subpar Experience

Play the role of Jeff Sutton, owner and president of Sutton Creative Services. You've just received a bill from Regal Banquet Center for the winter-holiday party that your company held there last week. It's for \$1,410, which you had agreed to pay for an elegant three-course meal, plus drinks, for your 27 employees.

The food was as good as its reputation, but there were two problems. First, the room for the party was much too warm. You complained to the servers but to no avail. You would have opened windows to correct the problem yourself, but the room you were given did not have any windows (something you weren't happy about either). Second, there was apparently a shortage of servers on the night of your event. Some of your

employees had to wait a long time for their food, while those who had their food first either had to start eating before the others or let their food get cold while waiting for all to be served. This ragged timing ruined the dinner, and it also threw off the timing of the program you had planned.

You were embarrassed by these problems. They reflected poorly on you and your efforts to thank your employees for their work. While you understand that unexpected problems can arise, you just don't think you should have to pay the full amount for a subpar experience. You'll need to write a claim message asking for an adjustment to your bill.

When something goes wrong between a business and its customers, usually someone begins an effort to correct the situation. Typically, the offended party calls the matter to the attention of those responsible. This claim can be made in person, by phone, or by written message (email or letter).

Our concern here is how to make it in a written message. You would likely choose a written medium if you wanted a record of the interchange, were not on personal terms with the recipient, or knew that writing to the recipient would be quicker and more efficient than contacting the reader by phone. While some claim messages are written directly (see Chapter 7), many are also written indirectly when the writer anticipates resistance or a strong negative reaction on the part of the reader. In this chapter, we examine an approach for writing **indirect claims**.

LO4 Compose tactful, yet clear, claim messages using an indirect approach.

Choosing the Right Tone

Your goal in a claim message is to convince your recipient that you deserve some kind of compensation or remedy for a situation that has occurred. But even if you are completely in the right, you will not advance your cause with accusatory, one-sided language. When writing this kind of message, project an image of yourself as a reasonable person. Just as importantly, project an image of the reader as a reasonable person. Give him or her a chance to show that, if presented with the facts, he or she will do the right thing. Do not give in to the temptation to blame or whine. Keep your tone as objective as you can while also making sure that the reader understands the problems caused by the situation. Focus as much as possible on facts, not feelings.

Leading into the Problem in the Beginning

A claim message needs to identify the transactions involved. This you can do early in the message as a part of the beginning. One way is to put the identification in the subject head in an email message or in the subject line of a letter, as in this example:

Subject: Fire Extinguishers: Your Invoice C13144

Another way is just to include a neutral but relevant buffer:

Today we received via FedEx Ground the fire extinguishers we ordered on 5 May 2009 (invoice # C13144).

Whether you use a subject line and your first paragraph or the first paragraph alone to *introduce the problem*, choose your words with care. Such negatively charged words as complaint or disappointment can put your readers on the defensive before you've even had a chance to make your case.

Describing the Problem Clearly

In the body of your message, explain what happened. The words describing the problem should be courteous yet firm. They should cover the problem completely, giving enough information to permit the reader to judge the matter. Present your case using facts and logic. If there were consequences to what happened, include them. This beginning sentence illustrates the point:

When we purchased a Quick Time microwave (Serial No. 713129), we were told that because of our light use and the quality of the microwave, we needed only the six-month warranty rather than the three-year extended warranty. We have had the microwave for only seven months, but it suddenly quit working.

Notice that this example uses the passive voice ("were told") to avoid accusing or blaming language. You should follow these statements with any other evidence that supports your eventual request to replace the microwave.

Since unanticipated problems occur in business, writing a clear, complete, and fairminded claim will usually solve them.



Requesting the Correction

The facts you present should prove your claim, so your next step is to follow logically with making the claim. How you handle the claim, however, is a matter for you to decide. You have two choices: You can state what you want (money back, replacement), or you can leave the decision to the reader. You choose which, based on the situation.

Building Goodwill with a Fair-Minded Close

Your final friendly words should leave no doubt that you are trying to maintain a positive relationship. You could express appreciation for what you seek. However, you want to avoid the cliché "Thanking you in advance." Instead, say something like "I would be grateful if you could get the new merchandise to me in time for my Friday sale." Whatever final words you choose, they should clearly show that yours is a firm yet cordial and fair request.

Outlining the Indirect Claim Message

Summarizing the preceding points, we arrive at this outline for the indirect claim message:

- Identify the situation (invoice number, product information, etc.) and lead into the problem.
- Present enough facts to be convincing.

- Seek corrective action.
- End positively—friendly but firm.

Contrasting Examples of Indirect Claim Messages

The following two messages show contrasting ways of handling Jeff Sutton's problem with the Regal Banquet Center. The first is blunt and harsh. The second is courteous, yet clear and firm.

A Blunt and Harsh Message. From the very beginning, the first message—a letter that the reader is returning along with his reduced payment—is insulting. “To whom it may concern” is impersonal, generic, and outdated. The opening paragraph is a further affront, blurring out the writer's stance in angry language. The middle of the message continues in this negative vein, accusing the reader with *you* and *your* and using emotional language. The negative writing continues into the close, leaving a bad final impression. Such wording is more likely to produce resistance than acceptance.

Subject: Bill Adjustment

To Whom It May Concern:

I just received a bill for \$1,410 for the winter party that I held for my employees at the Regal Banquet Center. I absolutely refuse to pay this amount for the subpar job you did of hosting this event.

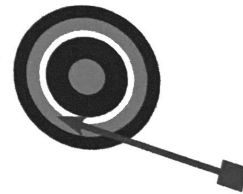
First, you put us in an unpleasant room with no windows even though we had made our reservations weeks in advance. The room was also much too warm. I asked your staff to adjust the temperature, but apparently they never did. Since the room didn't have any windows, we just had to sit there and swelter in our dress clothes. As if this weren't bad enough, it took the servers so long to bring all our food out that some people had finished eating before others were even served. This made a complete mess of the nice dinner and the scheduled program.

I had heard good things about your center but now regret that I chose it for this important company event. The uncomfortable and chaotic experience reflected poorly on me and on my appreciation for my employees. Enclosed is my payment for \$1,000, which I feel is more than fair.

Sincerely,

Jeff Sutton, Owner and President

Sutton Creative Services



This blunt and accusing letter is unlikely to lead to a cooperative reply or further business with the reader.

A Firm Yet Courteous Message. The second message (page 202) follows the plan suggested in preceding paragraphs. A subject line quickly identifies the situation. The first paragraph leads into the problem. Next, in a tone that shows firmness without anger, it tells what went wrong. Then it requests a specific remedy. The ending uses subtle persuasion by implying confidence in the reader. The words used here leave no doubt about the writer's interest in a continued relationship.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Refused Request Message to an External Audience (Denying an Artist's Request). A regional medical facility displays local artists' work at its various satellite locations. Artists submit applications to have their work displayed. The message shows a good strategy for denying a request to an artist who applied to have her work displayed in the Lake Superior Family Medicine Clinic's reception area.

**Lake Superior
Family Medicine Clinic**

Visit us: Web: <https://www.lsfm.org>

Lake Superior Family Medicine Clinic
4546 Burger Lane
North Concord, WI 54746
Web: www.lsfm.org
phone: 715-987-4958
fax: 715-567-7684

June 15, 2012

Ms. Jane Burroughs
2942 County Highway J
North Concord, WI 54746

Dear Jane:

Relevant,
neutral
buffer—
gains the
reader's
favor by
thanking her

Thank you for submitting your artwork for consideration at Lake Superior Family Medicine Clinic. The jury's deliberation process took more time than expected due to the number of submissions. Such a delay is a rare occurrence, so your patience was appreciated.

Provides a
reasonable,
convincing
explanation
supported
by a fact

The Medical Center's art wall and case is a free service open to local artists like you. This exhibit area has been embraced by not only artists but also community members because of the beauty it showcases. In fact, it's so popular that we had 75 requests from local artists last month. Due to the limited wall space available and the large number of art submissions, your artwork was not chosen for display at this time.

Offers an
alternative

The jury enjoyed your pieces and noted that your art "personified light." We encourage you to submit up to 10 pieces from your collection once again in 120 days. As outlined in the initial request letter dated May 22, 2012, artists can submit up to 10 submissions every 120 days.

Provides a
relevant,
forward-
looking
conclusion
that
builds
goodwill

If you have any questions, please contact me. Again, thank you for submitting your artwork. We look forward to your next submission.

Sincerely,

Samantha Kennedy

Director, Marketing/Community Relations
Lake Superior Family Medicine Clinic
Email: sakennedy@lsfmc.org
Phone: 715-456-7890

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Refused Request Message to an Internal Audience (Saying "No" to an Employee). This message shows a good strategy for denying a hard-working employee's vacation request because of CEO Kelsey Riley's directive.

Positive, respectful buffer highlights points the reader and writer can agree upon—presents the writer as a reasonable person.

Logically explains the reasons for rejecting the reader's request.

Provides good news and a positive alternative for the reader.

Offers a goodwill close and moves toward the bad news.

Message (HTML)

Message Insert Options Format Text Add-Ins

Save & Close Send Clipboard Font Basic Text Address Book Names Attach File Business Card Calendar Signature Follow Up Spelling

To: darrylg@wentworth.com

Cc:

Subject: Vacation Request for August 6-17.

Hi, Darryl,

As you mentioned at yesterday's meeting, it's hard to believe that the SAP project we only dreamed about two years ago is just two months from its go-live date. I know how hard you've worked to implement SAP readiness activities and understand how eager you are for a vacation.

While July and August usually represent an excellent time to take vacation because production is slow and client demand is low, this summer represents an exception because of our status as an SAP Power User. As a result, CEO Riley has issued the following directive regarding vacation during the summer months for core and site directors:

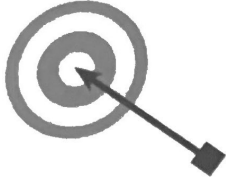
- Only one week of vacation will be approved between July 1–August 11.
- No vacation time will be approved between August 10–September 30.

After September 30, you may request vacation time as usual. Remember that if you are not able to take all of your vacation time between October 1 and the end of the year, you can carry unused vacation time over to 2013. Furthermore, because of the work we've all devoted to SAP implementation, CEO Riley has modified the number of allowed carry-over vacation days from 5 days to 10 days for 2013.

I look forward to working with you in the next two months. Because of your fantastic work, the go-live is certain to run smoothly.

Rex

Rex Adler, Director
Human Resources
Wentworth Office Supplies
Phone: 319-444-1557



This more tactful but honest email invites the reader to do what is fair and retains goodwill.

Subject: Invoice #3712 (for Sutton Party on December 12, 2013)

Dear Ms. Sanchez:

As you know, Sutton Creative Services held its winter-holiday party at Regal Banquet Center on December 12. While the food was exceptional, I have some concerns regarding our experience.

When I booked the party last August, I requested that we have the party in Salon A because of its size and view of the city. The room we were given for the event was Salon C. As you know, the room is small and has no windows. In addition, the location also had the drawback of making the temperature hard to control. The servers were sympathetic but were unable to keep the room from getting too warm for my 27 employees. I know that you book many parties during the holiday season; however, as the attached copy of our contract shows, we agreed that Sutton Creative Services would be in Salon A.

It also appeared that more servers were needed for our party. The fare was elegant, but with only two servers, some guests had finished eating before others had even started. As a result, we had to start the after-dinner program in the middle of the meal, requiring the speaker to talk while people were eating. This made it difficult for people to hear and pay attention to his presentation.

Overall, the event was not the impressive "thank-you" to my hard-working employees I had in mind when we drew up the contract. In light of these circumstances, I am requesting a revised invoice of \$1,000. I believe this is a fair amount for an experience that I am sure did not represent the Regal's typical level of customer service.

I would be grateful for your response by the end of the month so that I can forward the adjusted bill to my accountant for payment.

Sincerely yours,

Jeff Sutton, President and Owner
Sutton Creative Services

ADJUSTMENT REFUSALS

Denying a Customer's Claim

Sometimes your job at White Label Industries (WLI) involves handling a complaint. Today that is one of your tasks because the morning email has brought a strong claim for adjustment on an order for WLI's Do-Craft fabrics. The claim writer, Ms. Arlene Sanderson, explains that a Do-Craft fabric her upholstery company used on some outdoor furniture has faded badly in less than 10 months. She even includes photographs of the fabric to prove her point. She contends that the product is defective, and she wants her money back—all \$2,517 of it.

Inspection of the photographs reveals that the fabric has been subjected to strong sunlight for long periods. Do-Craft fabrics are for indoor use only. Both the WLI brochures on the product and the catalog description stress this point. In fact, you have difficulty understanding how Ms. Sanderson missed it when she ordered from the catalog. Anyway, as you see it, WLI is not responsible and should not refund the money. At the same time, it wants to keep Ms. Sanderson as a repeat customer. Now you must write the message that will do just that. The following discussion tells you how.

Adjustment refusals are a special type of refused request. Your reader has made a claim asking for a remedy. Usually you grant these claims. Most are legitimate, and you want to correct any error for which you are responsible. But such is not the case in Ms. Sanderson's situation. The facts require that you say no. The following section shows you how to handle this type of message.

LO5 Write adjustment refusals that minimize the negative and overcome bad impressions.

Determining the Strategy

The primary difference between this and other refusal messages is that in these situations, as we are defining them, your company will probably have clear, reasonable guidelines for what should and should not be regarded as legitimate requests for adjustment. You will, therefore, not have to spend much time figuring out why you cannot grant the reader's request. You will have good reasons to refuse. The challenge will be to do so while still making possible an ongoing, positive relationship with the reader.

Setting Up Your Reasoning

With your strategy in mind, you begin with words that set it up. Since this message is a response to one the reader has sent, you also acknowledge this message. You can do this by a date reference early in the message. Or you can do it with words that clearly show you are writing about the specific situation.

One good way of setting up your strategy is to begin on a **point of common agreement** and then to explain how the case at hand is an exception. To illustrate, a case involving a claim for adjustment for failure of an air conditioner to perform properly might begin this way:

You are correct in believing that an 18,000 BTU Whirlpool window unit should cool the ordinary three-room apartment.

The explanation that follows this sentence will show that the apartment in question is not an ordinary apartment.

Another strategy is to build the case that the claim for adjustment goes beyond what can reasonably be expected. A beginning such as this one sets it up:

Assisting families to enjoy beautifully decorated homes at budget prices is one of our most satisfying goals. We do all we reasonably can to reach it.

The explanation that follows this sentence will show that the requested adjustment goes beyond what can be reasonably expected.

Making Your Case

In presenting your reasons for refusal, explain your company's relevant policy or practice. Without accusing the reader, call attention to facts that bear on the case—for example,

© 2008 Ted Goff



“Sorry, we believe that the customer is only right some of the time under certain circumstances, and none of them apply to you.”

SOURCE: Copyright © 2008 Ted Goff.

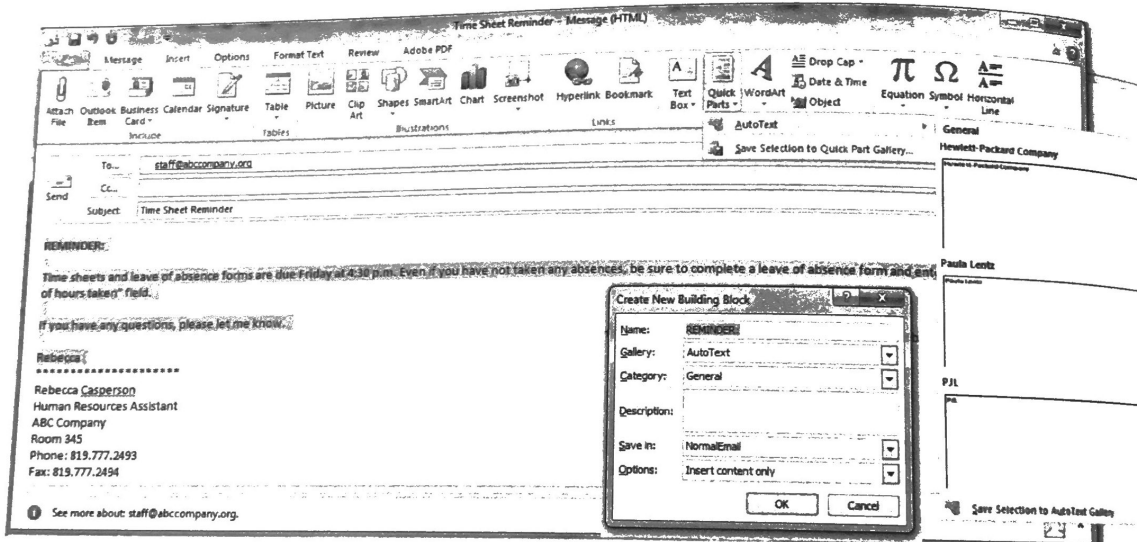
Outlook Quick Parts Tool Allows Writers to Reuse Content

If you use Outlook and have content that frequently appears in your email messages, you may want to consider using the Quick Parts tool.

Let's say, for example, that you send reminders every two weeks to employees regarding their time sheets. After you've created your content and formatted it the way you always want it to appear in your reminder messages, select the text. Once the text is selected, from the Insert ribbon, click the Quick Parts dropdown arrow, click "Auto Text," and then click "Save Selection to AutoText Gallery." From there, you can use the "Create New Building Block"

dialog box to customize your Quick Parts selection. Over time, you can build, categorize, and organize a list of Quick Parts selections.

The next time you need to send your message, you just open a new message, go to the Insert ribbon, click Quick Parts, and choose your text from the list that appears. The content will be inserted into your email just as you originally saved it in Quick Parts. You save time, and you know that your reminders will be consistent in their look and their content.



that the item in question has been submerged in water, that the printed material warned against certain uses, or that the warranty has expired. Putting together the policy and the facts should lead logically to the conclusion that the adjustment cannot be granted.

Refusing Positively and Closing Courteously

As in other refusal messages, your refusal derives from your explanation. It is the logical result. You word it clearly, and you make it as positive as the circumstances permit. For example, this one is clear, and it contains no negative words:

For these reasons, we can pay only when our employees pack the goods.

If a compromise is in order, you might present it in positive language like this:

In view of these facts, we can repair the equipment at cost.

As in all bad-news messages, you should end this one with some appropriate, *positive comment*. You could reinforce the message that you care about the reader's business or the quality of your products. In cases where it would not seem selfish, you could write

about new products or services that the reader might be interested in. Neither negative apologies nor words that recall the problem are appropriate here.

Adapting the General Plan

When we apply these special considerations to the general plan, we come up with the following specific plan for adjustment refusals:

- Begin with words that are on subject, are neutral about the decision, and set up your strategy.
- Present the strategy that explains or justifies, being factual and positive.
- Refuse clearly and positively, perhaps including a counterproposal.
- End with positive, forward-looking, friendly words.

Contrasting Adjustment Refusal Messages

Bad and good treatment of WLI's refusal to refund the money for the faded fabric are illustrated by the following two messages. The bad one, which is blunt and insulting, destroys goodwill. The good one, which uses the techniques described in the preceding paragraphs, stands a fair chance of keeping goodwill.

Bluntness in a Direct Refusal. The bad email begins bluntly with a direct statement of the refusal. The language is negative (*regret, must reject, claim, refuse, damage, inconvenience*). The explanation is equally blunt. In addition, it is insulting ("It is difficult to understand how you failed . . ."). It uses little tact, little you-viewpoint. Because the close is negative, it recalls the bad news.

Subject: Your May 3 claim for damages

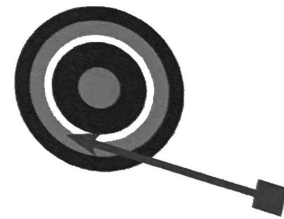
Ms. Sanderson,

I regret to report that we must reject your request for money back on the faded Do-Craft fabric.

We must refuse because Do-Craft fabrics are not made for outside use. It is difficult for me to understand how you failed to notice this limitation. It was clearly stated in the catalog from which you ordered. It was even stamped on the back of every yard of fabric. Since we have been more than reasonable in trying to inform you, we cannot possibly be responsible.

We trust that you will understand our position. We regret very much having to deny your request.

Marilyn Cox, Customer Relations



The bad email shows little concern for the reader's feelings.

Tact and Indirect Order in a Courteous Refusal. The good message (page 207) begins with friendly talk on a point of agreement that also sets up the explanation. Without accusations, anger, or negative words, it reviews the facts of the case, which free the company from blame. The refusal is clear, even though it is implied rather than stated. It is skillfully handled. It uses no negatives, and it does not receive undue emphasis. The close shifts to helpful suggestions that fit the one case—suggestions that may actually result in a future sale.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Adjustment Refusal Letter (Refusing a Refund). An out-of-town customer bought an expensive dress from the store and mailed it back three weeks later asking for a refund. The customer explained that the dress was not a good fit and that she did not like it anymore. But perspiration stains on the dress proved that she had worn it. This letter illustrates the refusal.



103 BREAKER RD. HOUSTON, TX 77015 713-454-6778 Fax: 713-454-6771

On-subject opening

February 19, 2012

Ms. Cherie Ranney
117 Kyle Avenue E
College Station, TX 77840-2415

Dear Ms. Ranney:

We understand your concern about the elegant St. John's dress you returned February 15. As always, we are willing to do as much as we reasonably can to make things right.

Review of the facts supports the writer's position

Negative language minimized in the refusal

Friendly goodwill close

What we can do in each instance is determined by the circumstances. With returned clothing, we generally give refunds. Of course, to meet our obligations to our customers for quality merchandise, all returned clothing must be unquestionably new. As you know, our customers expect only the best from us, and we insist that they get it. Thus, because the perspiration stains on your dress would prevent its resale, we must consider the sale final. We are returning the dress to you. With the proper alterations, it can be an elegant addition to your wardrobe.

Please visit us again when you are in the Houston area. It would be our pleasure to serve you.

Set-up for the explanation

Good restraint—no accusations, no anger

Emphasis on what can be done—helps restore goodwill

Sincerely,

Marie O. Mitchell
Marie O. Mitchell
President

dm

Subject: Your May 3 Message about Do-Craft Fabric

Ms. Sanderson:

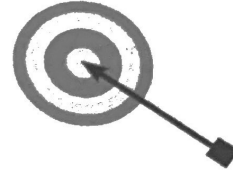
Certainly, you have a right to expect the best possible service from Do-Craft fabrics. Every Do-Craft product is the result of years of experimentation. And we manufacture each yard under the most careful controls. We are determined that our products will do for you what we say they will do.

Because we do want our fabrics to please, we carefully inspected the photos of Do-Craft Fabric 103 that you sent us. It appears that each sample has been subjected to long periods in extreme sunlight. Because Do-Craft fabrics cannot withstand exposure to sunlight, all our advertising, the catalog, and a stamped reminder on the back of every yard of the fabric advise customers that the fabric is meant for indoor use only.

As you can see from our catalog, the fabrics in the 200 series are recommended for outdoor use. You may also be interested in the new Duck Back cotton fabrics listed in our 500 series. These plastic-coated cotton fabrics are economical, and they resist sun and rain remarkably well.

If we can help you further in your selection, please contact us at service@wli.com.

Marilyn Cox, Consumer Relations



This better email is indirect, tactful, and helpful.

NEGATIVE ANNOUNCEMENTS

PRODUCTIVITY CHALLENGE

Announcing a Medical Coverage Cut

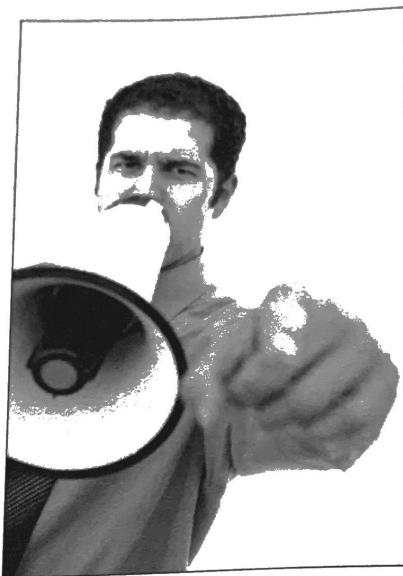
As the assistant to the human resources director at National Window Systems, you have been given the difficult assignment of writing a bad-news message for your boss. She has just returned from a meeting of the company's top executives in which the decision was made to deduct 25 percent of the employees' medical insurance premiums from their paychecks. Until now, National Window Systems has paid it all. But the rising cost of health coverage is forcing the company to cut back

on these benefits, especially since profits have declined for the past several quarters. Something has to give if National Window Systems is to remain competitive while also avoiding lay-offs. The administrators decided on a number of cost-cutting measures including this reduction in the company's payment for medical insurance. The message you will write to National Window Systems employees is a negative announcement.

Occasionally, businesses must announce bad news to their customers or employees. For example, a company might need to announce that prices are going up, that a service or product line is being discontinued, or that a branch of the business is closing. Or a company might need to tell its employees that the company is in some kind of trouble,

LO6 Write negative announcements that maintain goodwill.

When making a negative announcement, remember that an indirect, tactful approach is usually better than a blunt "loud" approach.



that people will need to be laid off, or, as in the Introductory Challenge, that employee benefits must be reduced. Such **negative announcements** generally follow the instructions previously given in this chapter.

Determining the Strategy

When faced with the problem of making a negative announcement, your first step should be to determine your overall strategy. Will you use direct or indirect organization?

In most cases the *indirect arrangement* will be better. This route is especially recommended when it is reasonable to expect that the readers would be surprised, particularly disappointed, or even angered by a direct presentation. When planning an indirect announcement, you will need to think about what kind of buffer opening to use, what kind of explanation to give, how to word the news itself, and how to leave your readers feeling that you have considered their interests.

Setting Up the Bad News

As with the preceding negative message types, you should plan your indirect beginning (buffer) carefully. You should think through the situation and select a strategy that will set up or begin the explanation that justifies the announcement. Perhaps you will begin by presenting justifying information. Or maybe you will start with complimentary or cordial talk focusing on the good relationship that you and your readers have developed. Choose the option that will most likely prepare your reader to accept the coming bad news.

Positively Presenting the Bad News

In most cases, the opening paragraph will enable you to *continue with* background reasons or explanations in the next paragraph, before you present the negative news. Such explaining will help you put the negative news in the middle of the paragraph rather than at the beginning where it would be emphasized.

As in other negative situations, you should use positive words and avoid unnecessary negative comments when presenting the news itself. Since this is an

Balance, Not "Spin," in Negative Announcements

Like all human resources professionals, Joan McCarthy, director of human resources communication for Comcast Cable, sometimes has to deliver negative news to employees, whether it's about healthcare coverage, organizational change, or other issues. Her advice? "Balance, not spin, is the key. Frequent, candid communication that balances the good with the bad will go much further toward restoring and maintaining employee trust than the most creative 'spin.'"

Sometimes McCarthy will state negative news directly, while other times she takes a more gradual approach. Whichever pattern you use, "it's important to communicate openly and honestly," she advises. But you should also balance out the negative by "reinforcing the positive, putting the news in perspective, and showing what the organization is doing to help." In these ways you can "communicate bad news in a way that preserves your company's credibility and keeps employee trust and morale intact."

announcement, however, you must make certain that you cover all the factual details involved. People may not be expecting this news. They will therefore want to know the whys and whats of the situation. And if you want them to believe that you have done all you can to prevent the negative situation, you will need to provide evidence that this is true. If there are actions the readers must take, these should be covered clearly as well. All questions that may come to the readers' minds should be anticipated and covered.

Focusing on Next Steps or Remaining Benefits

In many cases negative news will mean that things have changed. Customers may no longer be able to get a product that they have relied upon, or employees may have to find a way to pay for something that they have been getting for free. For this reason, a skillful handling of a negative announcement will often need to include an effort to help people solve the problem that your news just created for them. In situations where you have no further help to offer—for example, when announcing certain price increases—you can still help people feel better about your news by calling attention to the benefits that they will continue to enjoy. You can focus on the good things that have not changed and perhaps even look ahead to something positive or exciting on the horizon.

Closing on a Positive or Encouraging Note

The ending words should cement your effort to cover the matter positively. They can be whatever is appropriate for this one situation—a positive look forward, a sincere expression of gratitude, or an affirmation of your positive relationship with your readers.

Reviewing the Plan

Applying the preceding instructions to the general plan, we arrive at this specific plan for negative announcements written in indirect order:

- Start with a buffer that begins or sets up justification for the bad news.
- Present the justification material.
- Give the bad news positively but clearly.
- Help solve the problem that the news may have created for the reader.
- End with appropriate goodwill talk.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Negative Announcement (Decreasing Work Hours). Shop employees are told of the effects a slow economy will have on their work hours. The message is friendly and empathetic but clearly conveys the negative news. The goodwill they look forward to better economic times.

The screenshot shows an email client window titled "Message (HTML)". The interface includes a menu bar (Message, Insert, Options, Format Text, Add-Ins) and a toolbar with various icons for text formatting, insertion, and actions like "Save & Close" and "Send".

To... Zip Ready Manufacturing — Machine Shop Employees
From... Victor C. Baez
Subject: Summer Hours/Overtime/Vacation

May 27, 2012, 10:00 AM

Shop Personnel:

We have had a very good year so far: The performance of the department has been exceptional, and the feedback from our business unit customers has also been very positive. It's your careful attention to deadlines and quality that has helped us manage the fluctuations in our workload in the current economy.

As we all heard at our last all-employee quarterly meeting, the economy is still not growing at the pace we had hoped for. While our profits on sales have been above expectations, sales are behind our initial projections. Additionally, we will not be renewing the work orders for the six outside contractors until or unless the workload requires it. This being the case, we will need to temporarily adjust the shop hours. The current booked work should be enough to allow us to maintain a standard 40-hour week through the summer months; however, we will not be able to justify additional overtime. We are also asking that those with over four weeks' vacation take a minimum of two weeks between June 1 and August 31.

On the positive side, we fully believe that this is a short-term situation and expect to be back to full workload conditions by the end of FY2012 (September 30). Based on our sales and profits, we have also been able to set aside the scheduled first half of the employee bonus program.

As we move forward with these new schedules, I am confident in our ability to continue our excellent performance and eventually return to our normal schedules. If you have any questions, please contact your supervisor, human resources, or me.

Vic

Victor C. Baez
 Zip Ready Manufacturing
 Machine Shop Manager
 Phone: 904-567-2694
 Fax: 904-567-4598

A cordial buffer sets up the message

Reasons are objectively presented

Offers positive news related to the announcement

Offers a forward-looking conclusion

Contrasting Negative Announcements

Good and bad techniques in negative announcements are illustrated in the following two messages. The bad one is direct, which in some circumstances may be acceptable but clearly is not in this case. The good one follows the pattern just discussed.

Directness Here Alarms the Readers. This bad example clearly will upset the readers with its abrupt announcement in the beginning. The readers aren't prepared to receive the negative message. They probably don't understand the reasons behind the negative news. The explanation comes later, but the readers are not likely to be in a receptive mood when they see it. The message ends with a repetition of the bad news.

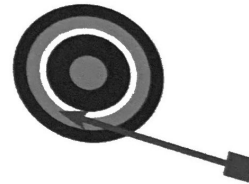
To our employees:

National Window Systems management sincerely regrets that effective February 1 you must begin contributing 25 percent of the cost of your medical insurance. As you know, in the past the company has paid the full amount.

This decision is primarily the result of the rising costs of health insurance, but our profits also have declined the last several quarters. Given this tight financial picture, we needed to find ways to reduce expenses.

We trust that you will understand why we must ask for your help with cutting costs to the company.

Sincerely,



Directness here sends a negative message.

Convincing Explanation Begins a Courteous Message. The better example follows the recommended indirect pattern. Its opening words begin the task of convincing the readers of the appropriateness of the action to be taken. After more convincing explanation, the announcement flows logically. Perhaps it will not be received positively by all recipients, but it represents a reasonable position given the facts presented. After the announcement comes an offer of assistance to help readers deal with their new situation. The last paragraph reminds readers of remaining benefits and reassures them that management understands their interests. It ends on an appreciative, goodwill note.

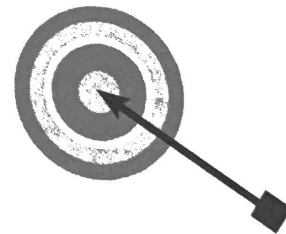
To All Employees:

Companies all across the United States, no matter how large or small, are struggling to keep up with the rising cost of healthcare. Legislators, healthcare providers, and businesspeople everywhere are working to find a solution to the skyrocketing cost of health insurance.

We are feeling this situation here in our own company. The premiums that we pay to cover our health benefits have increased by 34 percent over the last two years, and they now represent a huge percentage of our expenditures. Meanwhile, as you know, our sales have been lower than usual for the past several quarters.

For the short term, we must find a way to cut overall costs. Your management has considered many options and rejected such measures as cutting salaries and reducing personnel. Of the solutions that will be implemented, the only change that affects you directly concerns your medical insurance. On **March 1** we will begin deducting 25 percent of the cost of the premium.

Jim Taylor in the Personnel Office will soon be announcing an informational meeting about your insurance options. Switching to spousal coverage, choosing a less expensive plan with lighter deductibles, or setting up a flexible spending



This indirect example follows the bad-news pattern.

account may be right for you. You can also see Jim after the meeting to arrange a personal consultation. He is well versed in the many solutions available and can give you expert advice for your situation.

Our healthcare benefits are some of the best in our city and in our industry, and those who continue with the current plan will not see any change in their medical coverage or their co-pays. Your management regards a strong benefits program as critical to the company's success, and we will do all we can to maintain these benefits while keeping your company financially viable. We appreciate your cooperation and understanding.

Sincerely,

Using Directness in Some Cases

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in some cases it is likely that the reader will react favorably to a direct presentation of the bad news. If, for example, the negative news is expected (as when the news media have already revealed it), its impact may be viewed as negligible. There is also a good case for directness when the company's announcement will contain a remedy or announce new benefits that are designed to offset the effects of the bad news. As in all announcements with some negative element, this part must be worded as positively as possible. Also, the message should end on a goodwill note. The following example of a store's announcement about discontinuing a customer reward program illustrates this situation.

Dear Ms. Cato:

Effective January 1 Frontier Designs is discontinuing our Preferred Customer program so that we may offer several new promotions.

Your accumulated points will be converted to a savings coupon worth as much as or more than your points total. Your new points total is on the coupon enclosed with this letter. You may apply this coupon in these ways:

- When shopping in our stores, present your coupon at the register.
- When shopping from our catalogs, give the coupon number to the telephone service agent, enclose your coupon with your mail order, or enter it with your online order at www.frontierdesigns.com/catalog.

In all these cases we will deduct your coupon value from your purchase total. If you have any questions, please call us at 1-800-343-4111.

We thank you very much for your loyalty. You'll soon hear about exciting new opportunities to shop and save with us.

Sincerely,



THERE'S MORE . . .

Would you like to learn more about breaking bad news? Would you like to learn tips for maintaining goodwill in bad-news situations? Could your tone and style in bad-news messages be improved? Scan the QR code with your smartphone or use your Web browser to visit www.mhhe.com/lesikar13e. Choose Chapter 8 > Bizcom Tools & Tips.