

Crises Rock Carnival Corporation and Rattle Cruise Passengers

Zooming in

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"It's been like a nightmare!" That's how passenger Sahizah Alim of Sacramento described the situation aboard the Carnival Splendor cruise ship that became crippled after a fire in the engine room knocked out all systems. "There's been no food, no power, no electricity, no flushing toilets," she said.¹ For three days, nearly 3,300 passengers subsisted on Spam, Pop-Tarts, and canned food flown in by navy helicopters as the disabled ship was towed to San Diego. Fortunately, no one was hurt in the incident that upset passengers and the ship's operators alike. Carnival Cruise Lines, one of 10 subsidiaries of Carnival Corporation, responded fast. President and CEO of Carnival Cruise Lines, Gerry Cahill, won praise for sincerely apologizing at an early press conference: "Conditions on board the ship are very challenging and we sincerely apologize for the discomfort and



inconvenience our guests are currently enduring. The safety of our passengers and crew is our top priority and we are working to get our guests home as quickly as possible."² The cruise line posted frequent updates on Twitter, Facebook, a popular blog, and its website.

Such adroit communication with disappointed and distressed passengers was needed again when another Carnival ship, Costa Allegra, experienced an engine room fire and power blackout off the Seychelles Islands. This vessel, too, was towed to safety, and none of the 1,000 passengers and crew was injured.³

However, the Costa Concordia accident in Italy that killed 32 passengers reached a different scale, and no amount of apology or compensation is likely to turn the afflicted travelers into repeat customers. Although the world's largest cruise line will recover, in the short term it is facing staggering litigation, a falling stock price, and earnings losses. Micky Arison, chief executive of Costa Crociere parent Carnival Corporation, largely stayed out of the limelight, leaving the Italian Costa Crociere CEO, Pier Luigi Foschi, to fend for himself. Later, Arison told *The Miami Herald*: "Obviously, I am very sorry it happened. When you have 100 ships out there, sometimes unfortunate things happen, but as I said, it was an accident. We as a company do everything we can to encourage the highest of safety standards."⁴ The top executive promised that Carnival would "take care" of passengers, crew, and victims.⁵ You will learn more about this case on page 314.

Critical Thinking

- Suppose you made an honest mistake that could prove expensive for your employer or internship provider. Would you blurt out the bad news immediately or consider strategies to soften the blow somewhat?
- What are some of the techniques you could use if you had to deliver a bad-news message in print or online for a company such as Carnival Cruise Lines?
- Carnival Corporation's chairman and CEO, Micky Arison, was criticized by *The Wall Street Journal* and other commentators for remaining conspicuously silent during the extreme crisis unfolding in Italy. Arison was faulted for not exercising leadership from the top and instead leaving public appearances to Pier Luigi Foschi, the embattled CEO of Costa Crociere, Carnival Corporation's Italian subsidiary. Foschi was facing the news media virtually alone in the days and weeks after the Costa Concordia accident. What might explain Micky Arison's low profile, considering that he also let Gerry Cahill handle the Carnival Splendor crisis alone?

Communicating Negative News Effectively

Bad things happen in all businesses. At Carnival, technical trouble and human error, but also bad weather and virus outbreaks on board, can ruin cruises. In other businesses, goods are not delivered, products fail to perform as expected, service is poor, billing gets fouled up, or customers are misunderstood. You may have to write messages ending business relationships, declining proposals, explaining service outages, describing data breaches, announcing price increases, refusing requests for donations, terminating employees, turning down invitations, or responding to unhappy customers. You might have to apologize for mistakes in orders or

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1

Understand the strategies of business communicators in conveying negative news, apply the 3-x-3 writing process, and avoid legal liability.



pricing, the rudeness of employees, overlooked appointments, substandard service, faulty accounting, defective products, or jumbled instructions. As a company representative, you may have to respond to complaints voiced to the world on Twitter, Facebook, or complaint websites.

The truth is that everyone occasionally must deliver bad news in business. Because bad news disappoints, irritates, and sometimes angers the receiver, such messages must be written carefully. The bad feelings associated with disappointing news can generally be reduced if the receiver (a) knows the reasons for the rejection, (b) feels that the news was revealed sensitively, and (c) believes the matter was treated seriously and fairly.

In this chapter you will learn when to use the direct strategy and when to use the indirect strategy to deliver bad news. You will study the goals of business communicators in working with unfavorable news and learn techniques for achieving those goals.

Articulating Goals in Communicating Negative News

Delivering negative news is not the happiest communication task you may have, but it can be gratifying if you do it effectively. As a business communicator working with bad news, you will have many goals, the most important of which are summarized in Figure 9.1.

The goals outlined in Figure 9.1 are ambitious, and we are not always successful in achieving them all. However, many senders have found the strategies and techniques you are about to learn helpful in conveying disappointing news sensitively and safely. With experience, you will be able to vary these strategies and adapt them to your organization's specific communication tasks.

Applying the 3-x-3 Writing Process

Thinking through the entire writing process is especially important when writing bad-news messages because the way bad news is revealed often determines how it is accepted. You have probably heard people say, "I didn't mind the news so much, but I resented the way I was told!" Certain techniques can help you deliver bad news sensitively, beginning with the familiar 3-x-3 writing process.

Analysis, Anticipation, and Adaptation. In Phase 1 (prewriting), you need to analyze the bad news and anticipate its effect on the receiver. When Microsoft launched its first wide-scale layoff, an administrative glitch caused it to pay more severance than intended to some laid-off employees. After the mistake was discovered, Microsoft sent a bad-news letter bluntly asking the ex-workers to return the money. Employees not only suffered the loss

Figure 9.1 Goals in Conveying Unfavorable News

Explaining clearly and completely

- Readers understand and, in the best case, accept the bad news.
- Recipients do not have to call or write to clarify the message.

Projecting a professional image

- Writers stay calm, use polite language, and respond with clear explanations of why a negative message was necessary even when irate customers sound threatening and overstate their claims.

Conveying empathy and sensitivity

- Writers use language that respects the readers and attempts to reduce bad feelings.
- When appropriate, writers accept blame and apologize without creating legal liability for the organization or themselves.

Being fair

- Writers show that the decision was fair, impartial, and rational.

Maintaining friendly relations

- Writers demonstrate their desire to continue pleasant relations with the receivers and to regain their confidence.

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of their jobs, but, adding insult to injury, Microsoft then demanded the return of \$4,000 to \$5,000 in severance pay. Some employees had already spent the money, and others were planning their futures with it. Obviously, the sender of the bad-news message had not considered the effect it would have on its readers. After the letters seeking repayment began to surface on the Web, Microsoft reversed course and allowed the workers to keep the overpayment.⁷ However, the entire situation might have been handled better if Microsoft had given more thought to analyzing the situation and anticipating its effect.

When you have bad news to convey, one of your first considerations is how that message will affect its receiver. If the disappointment will be mild, announce it directly. For example, a small rate increase in a newspaper or Web subscription can be announced directly. If the bad news is serious or personal, consider techniques to reduce the pain. In the Microsoft situation, the bad-news letter should have prepared the reader, given reasons for the payback request, possibly offered alternatives, and sought the goodwill of the receiver.

Choose words that show that you respect the reader as a responsible, valuable person. Select the best channel to deliver the bad news. In many negative situations, you will be dealing with a customer. If your goal is retaining the goodwill of a customer, a letter on company stationery will be more impressive than an e-mail.

Research, Organization, and Composition. In Phase 2 (drafting), you will gather information and brainstorm for ideas. Jot down all the reasons you have that explain the bad news. If four or five reasons prompted your negative decision, concentrate on the strongest and safest ones. Avoid presenting any weak reasons; readers may seize on them to reject the entire message. Include an ample explanation of the negative situation, and avoid fixing blame.

When the U.S. Post Office has to deliver damaged mail, it includes an explanation, such as the following: "Because the Post Office handles millions of pieces of mail daily, we must use mechanical methods to ensure prompt delivery. Damage can occur if mail is insecurely enveloped or bulky contents are enclosed. When this occurs and the machinery jams, it often causes damage to other mail that was properly prepared." Notice that the Post Office message offers the strongest reason for the problem, although other reasons may have been possible. Notice, too, that the explanation tactfully skirts the issue of who caused the problem.

In composing any negative message, conduct research if necessary to help you explain what went wrong and why a decision or action is necessary.

Editing, Proofreading, and Evaluating. In Phase 3 (revising), you will read over your message carefully to ensure that it says what you intend. Check your wording to be sure you are concise without being brusque. If you find that you have overused certain words, click on your word processing thesaurus to find synonyms. Read your sentences to see if they sound like conversation and flow smoothly. This is the time to edit and improve coherence and tone. In bad-news messages, the tone is especially important. Readers are more likely to accept negative messages if the tone is friendly and respectful. Even when the bad news can't be changed, its effect can be reduced somewhat by the way it is presented.

In the last phase of the writing process, proofread to make sure your verbs agree with their subjects, your sentences are properly punctuated, and all words are spelled correctly. Pay attention to common mistakes (*its/it's*; *than/then*; *their/there*). If your word processing program checks grammar, be sure to investigate those squiggly underscores. Finally, evaluate your message. Is it too blunt? Too subtle? Have you delivered the bad news clearly but professionally?

Avoiding Legal Liability in Conveying Negative News

Before we examine the components of a negative message, let's look more closely at how you can avoid exposing yourself and your employer to legal liability in writing negative messages. Although we can't always anticipate the consequences of our words, we should be alert to three causes of legal difficulties: (a) abusive language, (b) careless language, and (c) the good-guy syndrome.

Abusive Language. Calling people names (such as *deadbeat*, *crook*, or *quack*) can get you into trouble. *Defamation* is the legal term for any false statement that harms an individual's reputation. When the abusive language is written, it is called *libel*; when spoken, it is *slander*.

To be actionable (likely to result in a lawsuit), abusive language must be (a) false, (b) damaging to one's good name, and (c) "published"—that is, written or spoken within the presence of others. Therefore, if you were alone with Jane Doe and accused her of accepting bribes and selling company secrets to competitors, she couldn't sue because the defamation wasn't published. Her reputation was not damaged. However, if anyone heard the words or if they were written, you might be legally liable.

In a new wrinkle, you may now be prosecuted if you transmit a harassing or libelous message by e-mail or post it on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.⁸ Such electronic transmissions are considered to be published. Moreover, a company may incur liability for messages sent through its computer system by employees. That's why many companies are increasing their monitoring of both outgoing and internal messages. "Off-the-cuff, casual e-mail conversations among employees are exactly the type of messages that tend to trigger lawsuits and arm litigators with damaging evidence," says electronic communications guru Nancy Flynn.⁹ Instant messaging adds another danger for companies. Whether your

message is in print or electronic, avoid making unproven charges or letting your emotions prompt abusive language.

Careless Language. As the marketplace becomes increasingly litigious, we must be certain that our words communicate only what we intend. Take the case of a factory worker injured on the job. His attorney subpoenaed company documents and discovered a seemingly harmless letter sent to a group regarding a plant tour. These words appeared in the letter: "Although we are honored at your interest in our company, we cannot give your group a tour of the plant operations as it would be too noisy and dangerous." The court found in favor of the worker, inferring from the letter that working conditions were indeed hazardous.¹⁰ The letter writer did not intend to convey the impression of dangerous working conditions, but the court accepted that interpretation.

The Good-Guy Syndrome. Most of us hate to have to reveal bad news—that is, to be the bad guy. To make ourselves look better, to make the receiver feel better, and to maintain good relations, we are tempted to make statements that are legally dangerous. Consider the case of a law firm interviewing job candidates. One of the firm's partners was asked to inform a candidate that she was not selected. The partner's letter said, "Although you were by far the most qualified candidate we interviewed, unfortunately, we have decided we do not have a position for a person of your talents at this time." To show that he personally had no reservations about this candidate and to bolster the candidate, the partner offered his own opinion. However, he differed from the majority of the recruiting committee. When the rejected interviewee learned later that the law firm had hired two male attorneys, she sued, charging sexual discrimination. The court found in favor of the rejected candidate. It agreed that a reasonable inference could be made from the partner's letter that she was the "most qualified candidate."¹¹

Two important lessons emerge. First, business communicators act as agents of their organizations. Their words, decisions, and opinions are assumed to represent those of the organization. If you want to communicate your personal feelings or opinions, use your home computer or write on plain paper (rather than company letterhead) and sign your name without title or affiliation. Second, volunteering extra information can lead to trouble. Therefore, avoid supplying data that could be misused, and avoid making promises that can't be fulfilled. Don't admit or imply responsibility for conditions that caused damage or injury. Even some apologies (*We're sorry that a faulty bottle cap caused damage to your carpet*) may suggest liability.

Analyzing Negative-News Strategies

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 2
Distinguish between the direct and indirect strategies in conveying unfavorable news.

Unfavorable news in business doesn't always fall into neat categories. To successfully convey bad news, writers must carefully consider the audience, purpose, and context. Experienced business communicators understand that their approaches to negative news must be flexible.¹² However, as a business writer in training, you have at your disposal two basic strategies for delivering negative news: direct and indirect.

Which approach is better suited for your particular message? One of the first steps you will take before delivering negative news is analyzing how your receiver will react to this news. In earlier chapters we discussed applying the direct strategy to positive messages. We suggested using the indirect strategy when the audience might be unwilling, uninterested, displeased, disappointed, or hostile. In this chapter we expand on that advice and suggest additional considerations that can help you decide which strategy to use.

When to Use the Direct Strategy

Many actual bad-news messages are organized indirectly, beginning with a buffer and reasons. Occasionally bad-news messages may be mixed, containing positive news as well, if available, to offset the unfavorable news. However, the direct strategy, with the bad news first, may be preferable in situations such as those shown in Figure 9.2.

Figure 9.2 Deciding When to Deliver Bad News Directly

When the bad news is not damaging

- Negative news is relatively minor (e.g., a small price increase).
- Bad news doesn't personally affect the receiver.

When the receiver may overlook the bad news

- Critical message requires attention (e.g., new policy requirements, legal announcements, changes in service) and should not be overlooked.

When the organization or receiver prefers directness

- Corporate culture favors direct messages even when conveying bad news.
- Individuals insist on a straightforward and no-frills presentation.

When firmness is necessary

- Messages must demonstrate determination and resolve (e.g., the last in a series of collection letters that seek payment on overdue accounts).
- Dire or extremely important situation involves someone who has ignored previous requests or appeals.

Notice in Figure 9.3 that the writer, Steven Ellis, is fairly direct in a letter announcing a security breach at Conectix Federal Credit Union. Although he does not blurt out “your information has been compromised,” he does announce a potential identity theft problem in the first sentence. He then explains that a hacker attack has compromised roughly a quarter of customer accounts. In the second paragraph he recommends that credit union customer Michael Arnush take specific corrective action to protect his identity and offers helpful contact information. The tone is respectful and serious. The credit union’s letter is modeled on an FTC template that was praised for achieving a balance between a direct and indirect opening.¹³

If you must write a security breach message, describe clearly what information was compromised, if known. Explain how the breach occurred, what data were stolen, and, if you know, how the thieves have used the information. Next, disclose what your company has done to repair the damage. Then list the recommended responses most appropriate for the type of data compromised. For instance, if social security numbers were stolen, urge victims to place fraud alerts on their credit reports; include the agencies’ addresses. Designate a contact person in your organization, and work with law enforcement to ensure that your notification does not jeopardize the investigation in any way.

Security breach messages provide a good example of how to employ the direct strategy in delivering bad news. Let’s now explore when and how to use the indirect strategy in delivering negative news.

When to Use the Indirect Strategy

Some writing experts suggest that the indirect strategy “ill suits today’s skeptical, impatient, even cynical audience.”¹⁴ To be sure, in social media, bluntness seems to dominate the public discourse. Directness is equated with honesty; hedging, with deceit. However, many



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September 5, 2015

Mr. Michael Arnush
15 Vanderbilt Avenue
Newton, MA 02459

Dear Mr. Arnush:

Uses modified direct strategy because urgent action is needed to prevent identity theft

We are contacting you about a potential problem involving identity theft. On August 30, names, encrypted social security numbers, birth dates, and e-mail addresses of fewer than 25 percent of accounts were compromised in an apparent hacker attack on our website. Outside data security experts are working tirelessly to identify the causes of the breach as well as prevent future intrusions into our system. Immediately upon detecting the attack, we notified the local police authorities as well as the FBI. We also alerted the three major credit-reporting agencies.

We recommend that you place a fraud alert on your credit file. A fraud alert tells creditors to contact you before they open any new accounts or change your existing accounts. Please call any one of the three major credit bureaus. As soon as one credit bureau confirms your fraud alert, the others are notified to place fraud alerts. All three credit reports will be sent to you, free of charge.

Suggests recommended steps and provides helpful information about credit-reporting agencies

Equifax
800-685-1111

Experian
888-397-3742

TransUnion
800-680-7289

Gives reasons for the recommended action, provides contact information, and offers additional pointers

Even if you do not find any suspicious activity on your initial credit reports, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) recommends that you check your credit reports periodically. Victim information sometimes is held for use or shared among a group of thieves at different times. Checking your credit reports periodically can help you spot problems and address them quickly.

If you find suspicious activity on your credit reports or have reason to believe your information is being misused, call 518-584-5500 and file a police report. Get a copy of the report; many creditors want the information it contains to absolve you of the fraudulent debts. You also should file a complaint with the FTC at www.ftc.gov/idtheft or at 1-877-ID-THEFT (877-438-4338).

Please visit our website at www.conectix.com/databreach for updates on the investigation, or call our privacy hotline at 800-358-4422. Affected customers will receive free credit-monitoring services for one year.

Ends by providing more helpful information, company phone number, and offer of one-year free credit monitoring

Sincerely,

Steven Ellis

Steven Ellis
Customer Service

communicators prefer to use the indirect strategy to present negative news. Whereas good news can be revealed quickly, bad news may be easier to accept when broken gradually. Even a direct bad-news message can benefit from "sandwiching" the negative news between positive statements.¹⁵ Figure 9.4 illustrates instances in which the indirect strategy works well.

REALITY CHECK: Don't Be a Scold!

"Any declarative sentence starting with 'you' when talking to a customer is best avoided—it comes across as shaking your finger at the customer, and no one wants to feel like we're talking to our mother! Better choices are 'We can' or 'Let's do this together' or 'What I could suggest is.'"¹⁶

...ative coach, consultant, and author of Spectacular Support Centers



Figure 9.4 Deciding When to Deliver Bad News Indirectly

When the bad news is personally upsetting

- Negative news involves the receiver personally (e.g., refusal of a promotion request, rejection of a grant proposal, a layoff notice).
- An organization makes a mistake that inconveniences or disadvantages a customer.

When the bad news will provoke a hostile reaction

- Message will irritate or infuriate the recipient.
- Giving reasons before the bad news is likely to defuse and soothe.

When the bad news threatens the customer relationship

- Indirect presentation of bad news can salvage the customer bond.
- Unfavorable news is revealed slowly and with reasons that explain it.

When the bad news is unexpected

- Readers who are totally surprised by bad news have more negative reactions.

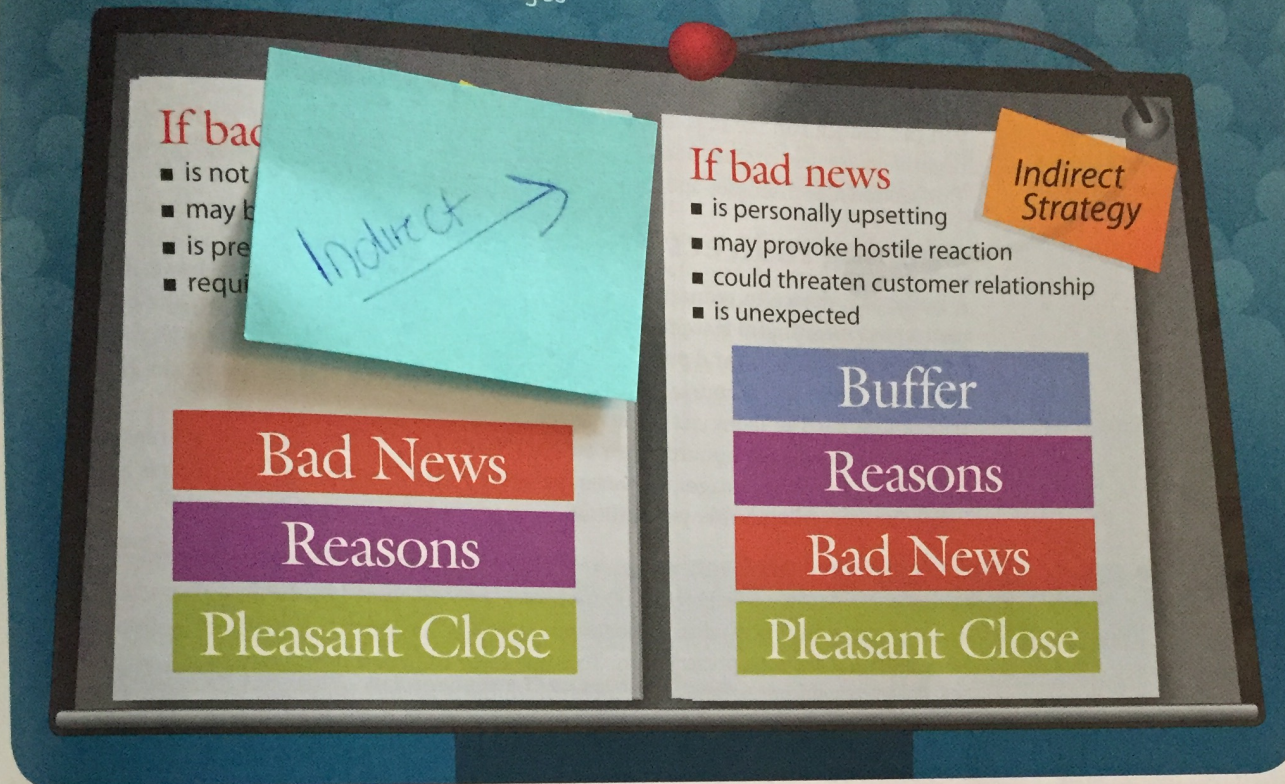
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Whether to use the direct or indirect strategy depends largely on the situation, the reaction you expect from the audience, and your goals. The direct method saves time and is preferred by some who consider it more professional and even more ethical than the indirect method. Others think that revealing bad news slowly and indirectly shows sensitivity to the receiver. By preparing the receiver, you tend to soften the impact. Moreover, although social media users may favor the direct approach, the majority of negative

st months into her new job as CEO, Marissa Mayer ended Yahoo's telecommuting policy, sparking a lively debate in the national media. A companywide memo instructing employees to return to the workplace opened with upbeat talk about "energy and buzz" in Yahoo's offices. The memo's second paragraph touted the benefits of "physically being together." Then came the bad news: "Beginning in June, we're ending all employees with work-from-home



Figure 9.5 Comparing the Direct and Indirect Strategies for Negative Messages



messages are still conveyed indirectly. As you can see in Figure 9.5, the major differences between the two strategies are whether you start with a buffer and how early you explain the reasons for the negative news.

Keeping the Indirect Strategy Ethical

You may worry that the indirect organizational strategy is unethical or manipulative because the writer deliberately delays the main idea. Now, consider the alternative. Breaking bad news bluntly can cause pain and hard feelings. By delaying bad news, you soften the blow somewhat, as well as ensure that your reasoning will be read while the receiver is still receptive. One expert communicator recognized the significance of the indirect strategy when she said, "People must believe the reasons why before they will listen to the details of what and when."¹⁸ In using the indirect strategy, your motives are not to deceive the reader or to hide the news. Rather, your goal is to be a compassionate, yet effective communicator.

The key to ethical communication lies in the motives of the sender. Unethical communicators *intend to deceive*. Although the indirect strategy provides a setting in which to announce bad news, it should not be used to avoid or misrepresent the truth. For example, the Internet is rife with bogus "free" trial offers for teeth whiteners and açai supplements, to name just two of the current scams. Unscrupulous marketers advertise on trusted websites of national news organizations and falsely claim endorsements by Oprah Winfrey and Doctor Oz. Unsuspecting consumers end up paying hundreds of dollars, the Better Business Bureau reports.¹⁹ As you will see in Chapter 10, misleading, deceptive, and unethical claims are never acceptable. In fact, many of them are simply illegal.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 3

Explain the components of effective negative messages, including opening with a buffer, apologizing, showing empathy, presenting the reasons, cushioning the bad news, and closing pleasantly.

Composing Effective Negative Messages

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. Most negative messages contain some or all of these parts: buffer, reasons, bad news, and closing. This section also discusses apologies and how to convey empathy in delivering bad news.

Opening Indirect Messages With a Buffer

A buffer is a device to reduce shock or pain. To buffer the pain of bad news, begin with a neutral but meaningful statement that makes the reader continue reading. The buffer should be relevant and concise and provide a natural transition to the explanation that follows. The individual situation, of course, will help determine what you should put in the buffer. Avoid trite buffers such as *Thank you for your letter*.

Not all business communication authors agree that buffers actually increase the effectiveness of negative messages. However, in many cultures softening bad news is appreciated. Following are various buffer possibilities.

Best News. Start with the part of the message that represents the best news. For example, a message to workers announced new health plan rules limiting prescriptions to a 34-day supply and increasing co-payments. With home delivery, however, employees could save up to \$24 on each prescription. To emphasize the good news, you might write, *You can now achieve significant savings and avoid trips to the drugstore by having your prescription drugs delivered to your home.*²⁰

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, *The Thaliens have my sincere admiration for their fund-raising projects on behalf of hungry children. I am honored that you asked me to speak Friday, November 5.*

Appreciation. Convey thanks for doing business, for sending something, for showing confidence in your organization, for expressing feelings, or simply for providing feedback. Suppose you had to draft a letter that refuses employment. You could say, *I appreciated learning about the hospitality management program at Cornell and about your qualifications in our interview last Friday.* Avoid thanking the reader, however, for something you are about to refuse.

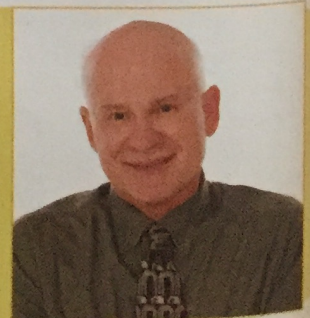
Agreement. Make a relevant statement with which both reader and receiver can agree. A letter that rejects a loan application might read, *We both realize how much the export business has been affected by the relative weakness of the dollar in the past two years.*

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.*

REALITY CHECK: Mending Fences and Restoring Trust With Effective Apologies

"These days, apologizing is a leadership skill. We see our decision makers dodging and weaving instead of accepting responsibility, and that disappoints us. We don't expect them to be perfect. Just willing to learn. In the long run apology leads to better outcomes and more durable relationships."²¹

—JOHN KADOR, blogger and author of *Effective Apology*



Courtesy of John Kador

Understanding. Show that you care about the reader. Notice how in this letter to customers announcing a product defect, the writer expresses concern: *We know that you expect superior performance from all the products you purchase from OfficeCity. That's why we're writing personally about the Omega printer cartridges you recently ordered.*

Apologizing

You learned about making apologies in adjustment messages discussed in Chapter 8. We expand that discussion here because apologies are often part of negative-news messages. The truth is that sincere apologies work. Peter Post, great-grandson of famed etiquette expert Emily Post and director of the Emily Post Institute, said that Americans love apologies. They will forgive almost anything if presented with a sincere apology.²² An apology is defined as an "admission of blameworthiness and regret for an undesirable event."²³ 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. Professional writer John Kador recommends what he calls "the 5Rs model" for effective apologies in business messages²⁴ summarized in Figure 9.6.

Figure 9.6 Apologizing Effectively in the Digital Age: The 5Rs

Recognition

Acknowledge the specific offense.

- Organizations that apologize have better outcomes.
- Individuals who apologize well rise higher and have better relationships.

Responsibility

Accept personal responsibility.

- Accountability means taking responsibility and rejecting defensiveness.
- Accountability is an important skill.
- The cover-up is always worse than the crime.

Remorse

Embrace "I apologize" and "I am sorry."

- Apologies may become necessary unexpectedly.
- We can prevent automatic defensiveness by being prepared to apologize when the need arises.
- Apologies should be honest, sincere, and authentic.

Restitution

Explain what exactly you will do about it.

- A concrete explanation of what you will do to make things right is best.
- The remedy should be appropriate, adequate, and satisfying.

Repeating

Promise it won't happen again and mean it.

- Written apologies are more formal than spoken but work about the same.
- By communicating effectively over the long term, businesses gain the trust of employees, the public, as well as the media and are therefore well equipped to weather crises successfully.

FACTS CHECK:

Apology or Lying?

After why Netflix CEO Hastings' apology and a firestorm of criticism. "It is clear from the backlash over the past months that many viewers felt we lacked respect and humility in the way we announced the discontinuation of DVD streaming, and the changes. That was not only not our intent, but I offer my sincere apology. [...] I want to ... apologize again to those viewers, both current and former, who felt we misled them thought-

"25

Consider these poor and improved apologies:

Poor apology: We regret that you are unhappy with the price of frozen yogurt purchased at one of our self-serve scoop shops.

Improved apology: 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.

Poor apology: We apologize if anyone was affected.

Improved apology: 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.

Poor apology: We are sorry that mistakes were made in filling your order.

Improved apology: You are right to be concerned. We sincerely apologize for the mistakes we made in filling your order. To prevent recurrence of this problem, we are . . .

Showing Empathy

One of the hardest things to do in negative messages is to convey sympathy and empathy. As discussed in Chapter 3, *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."²⁶ 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 laying off 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 . . .*

Presenting the Reasons

Providing an explanation reduces feelings of ill will and improves the chances that readers will accept the bad news. Without sound reasons for denying a request, refusing a claim, or revealing other bad news, a message will fail, no matter how cleverly it is organized or written. For example, if you must deny a customer's request, as part of your planning before writing, you analyzed the request and decided to refuse it for specific reasons. Where do you place your reasons? In the indirect strategy, the reasons appear before the bad news. In the direct strategy, the reasons appear immediately after the bad news.

Explaining Clearly. If the reasons are not confidential and if they will not create legal liability, you can be specific: *Growers supplied us with a limited number of patio 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 the*



frailties of human error. Rest assured that your account has been credited as you will see on your next bill. In refusing a speaking engagement, tell why the date is impossible: *On January 17 we have a board of directors meeting that I must attend.* Don't, however, make unrealistic or dangerous statements in an effort to be the "good guy."

Citing Reader or Other Benefits, if Plausible. 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, Lands' End wrote: "We tested our ability to hem skirts a few months 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."²⁷ 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 are increasing our brokerage fees.*

Explaining Company Policy. Readers resent blanket policy statements prohibiting something: *Company policy prevents us from making cash refunds* or *Contract bids 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 have found that people familiar with our organization make the quickest contribution to our team effort.* By offering explanations, you demonstrate that you care about readers and are treating them as important individuals.

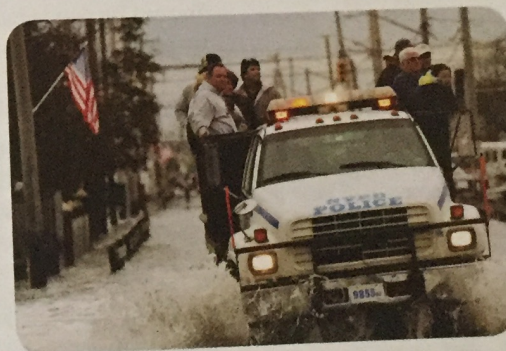
Choosing Positive Words. Because the words you use can affect a reader's response, choose carefully. Remember that the objective of the indirect strategy is holding the reader's attention until you have had a chance to explain the reasons justifying the bad news. To keep the reader in a receptive mood, avoid expressions with punitive, demoralizing, or otherwise negative connotations. Stay away from such words as *cannot*, *claim*, *denied*, *error*, *failure*, *fault*, *impossible*, *mistaken*, *misunderstand*, *never*, *regret*, *rejected*, *unable*, *unwilling*, *unfortunately*, and *violate*.

Showing Fairness and Serious Intent. In explaining reasons, show the reader that you take the matter seriously, have investigated carefully, and are making an unbiased decision. Receivers are more accepting of disappointing news when they feel that their requests have been heard and that they have been treated fairly. In canceling funding for a program, board members provided this explanation: *As you know, the publication of Urban Artist was funded by a renewable annual grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Recent cutbacks in federally sponsored city arts programs have left us with few funds. Because our grant has been discontinued, we have no alternative but to cease publication of Urban Artist. You have my assurance that the board has searched long and hard for some other viable funding, but every avenue of recourse has been closed before us. Accordingly, June's issue will be our last.*

Cushioning 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 cushion the blow.

Positioning the Bad News Strategically. Instead of spotlighting it, sandwich the bad news between other sentences, perhaps among your reasons. Don't 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 another candidate was hired, we appreciate your interest in our organization and wish you every success in your job search.* Subordinate clauses often begin with words such as *although*, *as*, *because*, *if*, and *since*.



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George Hirsh displayed sensitivity when he announced the controversial decision to cancel the 2012 New York City Marathon because of storm damage from Hurricane Sandy. "It is with heavy hearts that we share the news that the 2012 ING New York City Marathon has been canceled," he explained. He then proceeded to explain that city services should focus on storm relief, not the marathon.

Using the Passive Voice. Passive-voice verbs enable you to depersonalize an action. Whereas the active voice focuses attention on a person (*We don't give cash refunds*), the passive voice highlights the action (*Cash refunds are not given because . . .*). Use the passive voice for the bad news. In some instances you can combine passive-voice verbs and a subordinate clause: *Although franchise scoop shop owners cannot be required to lower their frozen yogurt prices, we are happy to pass along your comments for their consideration.*

Highlighting 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 allow credit card purchases*, try a more positive appeal: *We are now selling gasoline at discount cash prices.*

Implying the Refusal. It is 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 in Glendale, all our funds are earmarked for relocation costs. We hope that next year we will be able to support your worthwhile charity.* The danger of an implied refusal, of course, is that it is so subtle that the reader misses it. Be certain that you make the bad news clear, thus preventing the need for further correspondence.

Suggesting a Compromise or an Alternative. A refusal is not so depressing—for the sender or the receiver—if a suitable compromise, substitute, or alternative is available. In denying permission to a group of students to visit a historical private residence, for instance, this writer softens the bad news by proposing an alternative: *Although private tours of the grounds are not given, we do open the house and its gardens for one charitable event 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.

Closing 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, freebies, resale information, or a sales promotion. *Resale* refers to mentioning a product or service favorably to reinforce the customer's choice. For example, *you chose our best-selling model.*

Forward Look. Anticipate future relations or business. A letter that refuses a contract proposal might read: *Thanks 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: *I will be happy to give you a free inspection and consultation. Please call 301-746-8112 to arrange a date for my 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 website contained an unfortunate misprint offering \$850-per-night Bora Bora bungalows at \$85. Although we cannot honor that rate, we are offering a special half-price rate of \$425 to those who responded.*

Good Wishes. A letter rejecting a job candidate might read: *We appreciate your interest in our company, and we extend to you our best wishes in your search to find the perfect match between your skills and job requirements.*

Freebies. 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: *Your loyalty and your concern about our frozen entrées are genuinely appreciated. Because we want you to continue enjoying our healthy and convenient dinners, we are enclosing a coupon that you can take to your local market to select your next Green Valley entrée.*