

Communicating Professionally in Writing with Customers

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The reality is that no matter in what type of business environment you work, you need to master the basics of business writing and effective written communication in order to deal effectively with others. Written correspondence from you that is poorly worded, misspelled, and is missing punctuation sends a negative impression of you to your customers, peers, supervisor, and managers.

The importance of documentation

From a legal standpoint in business, the cliché of, *“If it isn’t in writing, it didn’t happen,”* is very important. If you retain nothing else from this article, remember --- documentation, documentation, documentation. By putting your thoughts and important details in writing, you create a “paper trail” that will assist if you ever need reference material in the future. Having key elements of a conversation or agreement along with background information in a letter, memorandum, report, e-mail, or other document can help you successfully resolve many issues in a customer service environment.

In some cases, you may need to send a brief reminder to someone or provide an in-depth detailed piece of documentation. In either instance, the way in which you express yourself in it can leave a lasting impression on how others view you and your organization. Writing is just another form of nonverbally sending a personal image of your abilities to others and some people can be very judgmental.

The power of writing well

Taking the time to express yourself effectively is important because you are often competing with others in your department for advancements, incentive pay, opportunities, and other employment opportunities. By communicating well, you set yourself above most of your peers since many people cannot write effectively. The importance of employee communication skills was highlighted in a study of employers conducted by the National Center on the Evaluation of Quality in the Workplace. The study asked employers to rate the job skills most critical to job performance. The results showed that employers listed communication skills as the second most important job skill.

Before customers can react to your documents, they must receive your intended message. This is why you have to reach out through your writing style and grab their attention. In most cases, you have only a few seconds to accomplish this before the customer makes the “read or don’t read” decision.

The easiest way to get your customer’s attention when writing is to share the *Added Value And Results For Me (AVAR-FM)* in the document so that they can identify the rewards of reading your message. To do this, state your purpose for writing early in your correspondence and let them know why they should read it.

For example:

“Thank you for your recent telephone call in which you shared your comments about our latest product line.”

“I am writing to ask your assistance in improving our service to you.”

“Please take a moment to read over the enclosed update to your product warranty for...”

Each of these examples is either an expression of appreciation or something that will help the customer or make his or her life better.

Once you get the customer’s attention, you need to prompt him or her to take action in the body of your correspondence. This action might be one of the following:

- To respond (e.g. answer a survey, call for additional information, or share an opinion).
- To use your products or services.
- To tell others about your organization and its products and/or services.
- To contact you in the future (e.g. with questions or to order additional products or services).

The impact of writing style

Your image, and that of your organization, is at stake each time you pick up a pen or sit down at your computer to create some form of written communication. All those things you learned about grammar in high school English ARE important when you start to express your thoughts and ideas to others. If your use of grammar is poor, it reflects negatively on your professionalism. In many cases it can be a determinant in whether you win, lose, retain, or regain a customer. People often form an opinion of your organization’s ability to perform and meet their needs by the information they receive from you and others who represent it.

While there have been some changes in sentence and word usage in the past, much of what you learned in high school has been taught to students for decades. Mastery of written English can help you with customer situations and can often strongly influence your career opportunities.

Improving writing abilities

There are tools readily available to help you. Many computer software packages have grammar and syntax checkers along with spelling checkers. Keep in mind that these are only tools to assist you. They do not replace you. Humans who are capable of making mistakes designed them. You cannot afford to have your reputation resting on such technology. Your options are to improve your own skills related to grammar, spelling,

and composition, and/or have someone else who has strong skills in those areas available to proofread what you write.

In most cases, the format and appearance of your written materials sent to customers is dictated by tradition, organizational and industry precedence, and established procedure. Many companies have standard formats for written customer interactions (e.g. rejection letters, collection letters, solicitations, and so on). These formats are often stored in a computer database. When needed, a customer name and electronic signatures are added, an envelope is addressed, and the correspondence is sent.

Whenever you are going to write anything that will go to a customer, it is a good idea to think first. Whether you are creating a letter, memorandum, or e-mail you should follow four simple steps:

1. Plan
2. Write a draft
3. Edit
4. Proofread.

Only after you have completed these phases are you ready to put your masterpiece into an envelope or hit the send button on your computer.

Obviously, a short article like this one will not prepare you to communicate effectively in writing with customers. For that reason, consider taking a course or attending a local seminar dealing with grammar, syntax, proofreading, and communicating effectively in writing. Do some research at the library or online related to parts of speech, punctuation, and other basic tools of grammar.

The more comfortable and proficient you become with the written word, the better you will be able to serve your customers.

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