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Say It Like You Mean It How to Apologize to Your Customers the Right Way

Introduction

Oops, it’s happened again.

A computer glitch double charged a customer.

A cancellation has not been processed and the customer is still being billed.

The website was hard to navigate had the incorrect information.

There’s a stock issue and the customer will wait no more.

An under-experienced agent treated a customer badly or failed to provide a much-needed solution.

And so we can continue.

What do each of these situations have in common? For starters, each of them left a customer with unfulfilled needs. And, to resolve all of these situations, you must first lead with an apology.

Depending on the companies you have worked for, you may have at one time or another been dissuaded from apologizing in a customer service scenario as a means of not accepting liability.

But, as consumer advocate and author Ron Burley puts it*, “An apology isn’t a confession of culpability. It’s a statement of compassion. A sincere apology tells your customer that you regret his having to interrupt his day to make that call. An apology defuses the situation and can allow for a conversation in which you get an opportunity to diagnose what went wrong, with the possibility of preventing similar future problems.”*

We will now take you through some of the reasons why you should apologize to your customers, and teach you how to apologize to them the right way, so that you don’t miss a single opportunity for customer satisfaction.



Why Is Apologizing so Important?

According to psychology professor, Michael McCullough, *“People often think that evolution designed people to be mean, violent, and selfish, but humans need relationship partners, so natural selection probably also gave us tools to help us restore important relationships after they have been damaged by conflict.”* Apologizing is one of those relationship-restoring tools.

A study that McCullough lead at the University of Miami reveals that *“peace-making efforts such as apologies, offers of compensation and owning up to one’s responsibility increase forgiveness—and reduce anger—by making the aggressor seem more valuable as a relationship partner and by causing the victim to feel less at risk of getting hurt again by the transgressor.”* This relates to customer service several ways:

* **Apologizing preserves relationships with customers and lowers customer churn rate.** The Harvard Business Review [says](https://hbr.org/2014/10/the-value-of-keeping-the-right-customers) that *“acquiring a new customer is anywhere from five to 25 times more expensive than retaining an existing one.”* A well-crafted apology coupled with a thoughtful solution can help you keep your current customers in business with you, despite whatever obstacles may have come up.
* **Apologizing to customers augments their satisfaction.** If a customer walks out of a situation without feeling like we have done our best to make amends, they may leave unsatisfied, and with unresolved anger towards the situation. By apologizing you can help diffuse and resolve a customer’s anger, and ultimately leave them feeling satisfied instead of upset.
* **Apologizing leads to better reviews/customer feedback scores and NPS scores.** A sincere, potent apology can help an upset, detractor review customer arrive at a satisfying resolution, and give you a promoter review and/or positive feedback.
* **By apologizing to customers, you can generate more leads over time.** Customers who feel like their issue was resolved compassionately, professionally, and effectively are more likely to refer their social circle (or even strangers on the internet) to you or your store. A well-crafted apology can help with that.

**Types of Apologies**

* **Tactical apology**—when a person accused of wrongdoing offers an apology that is rhetorical and strategic—and not necessary heartfelt.
* **Explanation apology**—when a person accused of wrongdoing offers an apology that is merely a gesture that is meant to counter an accusation of wrongdoing. In fact, it may be used to defend the actions of the accused.
* **Formalistic apology**—when a person accused of wrongdoing offers an apology after being forced to do so by an authority figure.
* **Happy ending apology**—when a person accused of wrongdoing fully acknowledges responsibility for the wrongdoing and is genuinely remorseful.

It is important for sales agents to evolve from the first three types of apologies, and aim to cultivate the empathy and maturity needed to give a “happy ending” customer service apology.

**When Should You Apologize?**

Company culture consultant, Kristin Robertson [says](http://www.krconsulting.com/how-to-handle-angry-or-upset-customers/): *“The rule of thumb for when it is appropriate to apologize is, ‘If your company has made a mistake, by all means, apologize about the situation.’”* This means apologizing whenever a customer is unhappy, regardless of whether or not you are personally responsible for the misstep that led to their unhappiness (more often than not, you won’t be!).

That being said, it is also important to apologize when something has negatively impacted a customer, even if no visible mistake has been made, or if the mistake seems to have happened in part on the customer’s end. For example, if a customer is upset because they misinterpreted what our product was, or even misread something on the website, you can still empathize with them, and give them a sincere apology regardless of who is at fault.

**How to Apologize to Customers**

You can apologize at the right time, but if you don’t apologize in the right way, your apology could lose its value or even cause your customer to become more upset. For the best, most impactful and satisfying apology, be sure to follow these steps:

1. **Listen**

It’s infuriating to get an apology from someone who doesn’t know what they are apologizing for, or who apologizes for the wrong thing. That is why before you apologize to your customer, you must first understand the problem at hand—and you can reach this understanding by listening.

When you listen attentively to your customer, you will be able to give them an apology that is relevant to their situation. Listening is also the only way that you can learn what exactly you need to do to find your customer the very best solution to their issue.

Show your customer that you are listening by listening actively. Small cues such as saying “Uh-huh,” or “I see,” while your customer is explaining the situation can go a long way in your customer’s eyes, and will let them know that they are being heard. Even repeating the situation back to a customer in your apology can be a great way to show them that you understand what they are going through and that you acknowledge what went wrong.

***Example:*** *“I’m very sorry that your phone arrived so late.”*

*In this example, the customer service agent shows that she has been listening to her customer by selectively repeating a part of what she was told back to the customer.*

1. **State Empathy**

Apologizing to a customer is in part about validating his or her experience or perspective. When a customer has suffered an inconvenience or a bad experience, it isn’t uncommon for them to approach the situation aggressively, expecting to have to fight to get their reparations. By telling a customer that you can see the situation from his or her point of view, you can help defuse an angry customer and can soothe their worries that you will oppose them.

According to psychologist and keynote speaker, Guy Winch, each customer who considers making a complaint shares the same fears:

* + Complaining will be too much of a hassle.
  + Complaining will not help and they are unlikely to get a satisfying resolution.
  + The company does not care and CSR might even retaliate by sabotaging them.

It is these fears that cause the aggressive, distraught behaviour of some callers. By stating empathy you show the customer that you care, and that you are on their side. You also help your customer ease some of their fears surrounding what will become of their complaint, effectively taking out fear number 3, and working your way to an impactful apology.

***Example:*** *“I’m very sorry that your phone arrived so late. If I had ordered a phone with the expectation that it would arrive in time to give my child a gift on his graduation day, I’d be upset too.”*

*In this example, the agent puts herself in the customer’s shoes and is able to relate to the customer’s situation, validating his feelings and showing him that they are on the same page.*

1. **Say You’re Sorry**

“I’m sorry.”  
“Ek’s Jammer”

“Ngiyaxolisa”

Whatever language you’re saying it in, an apology is just not an apology without an “I’m sorry.” Saying that you are sorry doesn’t mean breaking down and self-flagellating in front of your customer over a mistake that was made in the processing department. When you say that you’re sorry, it is important that you do so in a neutral, assertive and respectful way, on behalf of the company.

***Do:****“…I’m very sorry that we have disappointed you, and I hope that we can make amends going forward.”*

***Don’t:****“I’m so sorry… really, that was so unacceptable and I can’t believe that that happened… I feel like we look like such idiots. I hope you can forgive me and the rest of the company…”*

*In the “Do,” example, the customer responds even-headedly and maturely to the situation, enabling her to give an assertive response. The “Don’t” scenario, on the other hand, is an unprofessional*

*overly passive “sorry,” which could further upset a customer who is looking for a solution, not just a profuse apology.*

1. **Take Responsibility**

Jan Carlson, CEO of SAS Airlines, says that *“whenever you have an encounter with a customer, you represent the whole company in that interaction”.* The customer builds an impression of the entire company by how you treat them at that moment. They don’t care that you work in a different building from the person that created their problem; they just want you, as a representative of the entire organization, to take ownership and fix the problem.

Customers want to hear an apology from someone that takes responsibility for their issue. When you fulfil that role and take responsibility for something that has happened, you aren’t incurring the blame yourself, but rather, you are speaking for the company as a whole, and showing your customer that their issue matters.

Statements like: “I’m going to take care of this for you;” “I’m going to make sure that we solve this problem for you,” etc. can help customers know that they are in expert, responsible hands and that a solution is just on the horizon. If you give a customer personal details such as your name and contact information, you will give them even greater comfort.

***Do:****“…I’m going to look into this for you right away, and see what we can do to fix this. My name is Albert by the way, and in case the call drops or you have any further issues in the future please do not hesitate to ask for me.”*

***Don’t:****“It must’ve been the courier service’s fault that the phone didn’t arrive on time.”*

In the “Do,” example, the customer service agent assumes responsibility for the situation, and with that assumption comes what every dissatisfied customer wants to hear: the promise of action. By putting her name on the line, she further demonstrated her commitment to helping the customer. In the “Don’t” example, the agent passes the blame on to someone else, leaving the customer wondering if the representative will do anything at all to help him.

1. **Be Sincere**

Without sincerity, an apology is just a meaningless string of words. Make sure that you are giving a sincere apology by *avoiding* the following:

* + **Robotic statements.** Robotic statements can include scripted, un-personalized or canned messages, and ultimately feel inauthentic to customers. While these sorts of replies can be helpful for composing live chat and email messages, they are pretty awkward to hear over the phone. When you do send canned apology messages over live chat or email, be sure to personalize these apology messages for each customer, so that they come across as sincere and individualized as possible.

***Example:*** *“I apologize for the inconvenience., we want all of our customers to have only the best experiences, and we regret having fallen short.”*

* + **Non-apologies.** A non-apology is a statement that is written or spoken in the form of an apology but that does not express remorse or assume responsibility. Instead, the non-apology uses chosen words such as “if” in order to put the fault on the customer and even imply that they are being too sensitive.

***Example:*** *“I’m sorry you feel that way”  
“I’m sorry if you were offended.”*

* + **Excuses.** Excuses are used for avoiding blame and negating responsibility in a situation. They are all-too-familiar destroyers of even the most thoughtful apologies.

***Example:*** *“I’m sorry, we’ve been swamped with orders. Half our staff is out with the flu, and I have a headache but I came into work anyway.”*

* + **Antagonistic apologies.** Antagonistic apologies include sarcasm, apologies with aggressive or blaming vocab, and shift the blame back to the customer.

***Example:*** *“Wow, I’m so sorry that happened! Next time try placing your order a little earlier to make sure that you get your order in time!”*

*Each of these examples come across as insincere. Avoid aggravating and disappointing your customer by crafting non-hostile, responsible, and sincere apologies.*

1. **Explain What Went Wrong**

Sometimes things go wrong for no explainable reason. Other times, you may know exactly what the problem was. An explanation may not always available for every situation, however, there will be situations where your apology will be strengthened if you let the customer know exactly what went wrong. This is because customers value transparency, and if you can be honest with them, they will trust you to be honest again in the future.

Remember: an explanation is NOT an excuse. Do not use it as if it were one. An explanation is used to shed light on what is happening or what has happened, not to shift or avoid blame. You make the distinction clear to the customer by following an explanation with what should have been done instead. This shows thoughtfulness, responsibility, and keeps your explanation from sounding like an excuse.

***Example:*** *“…It seems that due to the severe weather, there was a delay in sending products out for shipment. It was wrong of us to not send out a notice about the delay, and I am very sorry about the impact that our inaction had.”*

*In this example, the agent gave the customer some insight as to why his phone arrived late, without redirecting the blame—a move that makes both the agent and her company seem more trustworthy.*

1. **Find a Solution**

Great, so you’ve apologized! But your work here isn’t quite done yet. The thing is that customers usually don’t contact your company just to hear someone tell them that they are sorry. No matter how heartfelt the apology may be, it won’t win you or the company many points without an active solution to accompany it.

To find the best solution for your customer, first ask yourself: ***What does my customer want?*** Sometimes you can get your customer what he or she wants, and proceed to a solution that delivers that.

If not, you’ll have to ask yourself a second question: ***What are my customer’s needs?*** Every want is underlined by a need. For example, if a customer who wants a certain DATA plan does not qualify for the plan that he wants, you can still meet him halfway by getting to the bottom of what he needs the plan for, and then suggesting alternatives that meet these needs rather than his wants.

Finally, ask yourself: ***What is the best way that I can meet my customer’s needs, given the situation?*** The most ideal option for fulfilling your customer’s needs may not always be available to you. But how can you go about working with what you have? Is there any way that you can still go above and beyond?

***Example:*** *“…I know I can’t go back in time and make your phone arrive before your son’s graduation, but how about I include some pre-paid simcards for the rest of your family, then you can all call each other at no additional cost.*



1. **Make Amends**

Once you have presented the solution to your customer, it is time for you to decide if enough has been done. Is your customer satisfied with the solution? How grave was their complaint? These questions will help you decide if any further steps are required to remedy the relationship with your customer.

***Example:*** *“…I want to stress that the sim cards would be free of charge, as our way of trying to compensate for the inconvenience.”*

*By giving the sim cards free of charge, the agent turns the situation from a disaster into an unexpected bonus experience, with the introduction of a complimentary product.*

1. **Avoid Repeats**

Once your apology has been made and your customer has been sent off on their way, it is important to take steps to make sure that the situation does not happen again. This can include RED flagging a process that has failed, forwarding information to your managers and/or the appropriate departments, and more.

Some customers contact the company with their complaints specifically to give the company a chance to improve so that other customers don’t have the same issue. These customers are especially keen to find out what process changes were implemented as a result of their complaint.

**Conclusion**

Regardless of whether you are at fault or not, apologizing to your customer will help give them a sense of ease, and will get you started on the right path towards calming the situation and solving their problem.

By following these steps for crafting the perfect customer service apology, you will be able to give your customers the “happy ending” apology that they yearn for, with a “happy ending” resolution to follow.

