

Dear Dennis: Your Customer Support Writing is Insupportable

By Heather Reimer

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Customer support writing has a public relations problem. When it's good, you scarcely notice it. When it's bad, it can sabotage a company and go undetected for a long time. Then heads roll.

It's tempting to make excuses for the overworked and much-maligned customer support staffers. Working in customer service is like wearing a sign saying, "Kick me". It's a tough, thankless job. But it's a hugely important one that can be either a great boon to a company or a great liability.

The problem has been on my mind these days because I recently became a customer support casualty. I was considering buying some new anti-virus software and had written the vendor to ask if their product was compatible with my system. If they had responded well, I would have bought the software that same day. Here's the reply I got from Dennis with my snarky asides in brackets:

Dear Valued Client: (So valued you couldn't be bothered to copy/paste my name?)

Hello there! A pleasant day to you! My name is Dennis from Technical Support and I will be assisting you on this issue. (Clearly a former waiter at The Olive Garden.)

To keep our records up-to-date, it is very important to RESPOND to this e-mail. (You haven't even answered my question yet and you're demanding a "RESPONSE"? And why are you yelling?)

I am definite that the software in question will run properly on your system. (Now we're getting somewhere.) However, may I suggest that you download first a trial version of the software? Then, verify if this would run smoothly on your current system configuration. (Wait, you just told me that it would run properly on my system. Now you're not sure? Why would I waste time downloading software that may not work? And does your boss know you're pushing the free trial over the paid version?)

Please inform us if your concerns have been fully addressed so we can close the case ("the case"? Dennis, I'm a human. Are you?), suggest another solution, or correct any errors in the solution above.

Best Regards,

Dennis A. Smith
Consumer Support Team

I guess Dennis is pretty miffed with me because not only didn't I RESPOND to his email (gasp!) but I didn't buy the software either.

So, to him and all the other underloved, underpaid minions toiling away unnoticed in the customer service dungeons of the Internet, I offer my tips for proper customer support writing. CS team managers take note, because I'm sure there's at least one Dennis lurking among you:

-Be sure you understand the complaint/question before you answer it. If it isn't clear, then ask the writer for more details.
Above all, don't guess!

-Take the time to research your answer thoroughly. Check the database to see if the writer has had previous interactions with your company.

-Personalize your response. Even if your employer requires you to use pre-formulated copy/paste responses to speed up replies, it doesn't take much extra effort to use the customer's name.

-Don't be afraid to say "I" in your letter and sign it with your own name. (Way to go, Dennis!)

-Respond quickly.

-Be brief and clear.

-Use plain English not jargon.

-Double-check spelling and grammar. To some of your clients, it matters a great deal.

-Be professional and polite, even in the face of abusive language, lies, or ignorance. This is not as easy as it sounds and often separates the customer service professionals from those more suited to accounting or copywriting.

-Express concern and regret over any difficulty the customer is having, regardless of whether you or your company is to blame.

-Follow up. After you've sent your reply, stay in touch with the client until you are sure the issue has been resolved. Requiring the customer to contact you a second time on the same issue is a pipe dream. By then, they've moved on to your competitor.

You know, after reading that list, I suddenly feel inspired to respond to old Dennis after all:

Dear Dennis:

My name is Heather, and I'll be responding to your attempt to solve my problem. Am I right in guessing that you don't have a clue whether your software will work with my system or not? If I am mistaken, please write back to clarify and I will attempt to pinpoint more accurately the source of my discontent.

While my concerns have not been fully addressed by your recent reply, I would have no objection to you closing my case if it helps you keep your records up to date. Dennis, I sincerely hope this response meets your needs and that it arrived promptly enough. My fellow customers and I truly regret any inconvenience caused by our attempts to get clear and accurate information from your company.

All the Best!

A Lost Prospect

PS: I'll be contacting you again in several days to see how the above solution is working out for you.

Heather Reimer is an SEO copywriter, web content writer, and founder of <http://www.TheWriteContent.com>

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