

How to Handle Customer E-mails Like a Pro

By Heather Reimer

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Heather Reimer
heatherreimer@codetel.net.do

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Sometimes as part of my work I'm asked to mediate between customers and website owners in dispute. As such, I get to read e-mail correspondence between both parties and I'm often appalled at what I read.

One client wrote to company X to find out why it was taking them so long to apply a credit they owed to her credit card. The customer service agent for company X sent this reply:

Dear Madam:

We received your inquiry. Your refund will be credited to your account within 7 to 10 business days. If you had read our policy statement, you would know this. I hope this fully answers your question.

Regards,
Company X

Whoa! Snarky.

These days, a large volume of customer service communication is done by e-mail because it's so cheap and (potentially) fast. But one of the drawbacks is that it's so easy to leave the wrong impression, to say things in cyber space that you would never say over the phone or face to face.

Here are a few tips you can use to improve your online customer relations.

- Be professional and polite, even in the face of abusive language, outright lies or stupidity. This is not as easy as it sounds. But you can't win the argument AND keep the customer.
- Express concern and regret over the difficulty the customer is having, even if your company is not to blame.

- Be 100% sure you understand the complaint/question before you answer it. If it isn't clear, then ask for more details. Above all, don't guess! Major turn off.
- Move fast. Speed is half the battle won.
- Write tight. Just get to the point and leave the literature to Shakespeare.
- The jury is out on form letters. Some companies ban them outright. But they do come in handy when you're dealing with large volumes of the same queries, over and over. My take: if you use a form letter, modify it to suit the situation and add a personal touch.
- Use plain English, not jargon. Your customers don't care about ISPs, HTML and File Transfer Protocol. They just want to know what happened to their order of variegated widgets.
- Give a little bit extra. Amazon.com is a great example of this. Not only do they correct the problem but they top it up with free shipping and a credit to say "we're sorry".
- Don't be afraid to say "I" in your letter and sign it with your own name. People want to know they're corresponding with a human being not an autoresponder.
- Once you've sent your message on its mission of mercy, there's one last but paramount detail. Follow up. Make a 'pending' folder or whatever you want to call it. Visit that folder daily until you are 100% sure the issue has been resolved and the customer is in your pocket for the rest of his or her natural life!

When you've done all of the above, create one more folder on your inbox - the folder where you'll save the hundreds of e-mails you're going to receive from all your grateful customers. That folder might come in handy at your next salary review!

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