

SUPERIOR SERVICE



Build Your Brand through Email

The medium may be virtual, but the relationship is real. Make sure your reps can craft email responses that keep customers coming back.

By Wanda Sitzer, *Look.Listen.Be.*

Writing empathetic and effective email can transform email communication into a relationship-building tool that creates customer loyalty.

In both the business and personal worlds, email has become one of the most preferred modes of communication. In fact, according to technology market research firm the Radicati Group, more than 55 billion non-spam emails are sent each day.

In a contact center environment, email is a key tool in the drive to build enduring, positive relationships with customers while answering everyday inquiries or handling concerns. But building that relationship through email is not as easy as it sounds. Unlike phone interactions in which service reps can gauge the customer's underlying mood and concerns from his or her tone of voice, customer email arrives with no voice tones or facial expressions to clue reps into the customer's state of mind. Customer email requires careful interpretation of a range of details, including:

- Word choice (is the customer being sarcastic or negative?)
- Use of capital letters and punctuation (especially emphatic punctuation, such as exclamation points and multiple question marks)
- Formatting (especially bold type and underlining)

Conveying Empathy Via Email

Equally important is ensuring that all reps who communicate with customers by email are skilled at writing clearly, as well as responding to customers with empathy. Empathetic responses become even more important in a difficult economy, when many centers experience a marked increase in communication from customers who are distressed or anxious.

The first step in the process of crafting email responses that not only deliver on your brand promise but also strengthen customer ties to your organization is to make sure that your reps understand what empathy really is. It is more than telling the customer, "I know how you feel." True empathy is a powerful force that can help reps connect to the customer and defuse negative emotion. An empathetic response does not simply tell the customer that the rep understands the issue, it demonstrates their understanding. Automatic replies or canned email responses don't hit that mark.

So how can you help your reps create empathy in their email responses? The email should open with a statement that contains two essential parts — a reflection of the emotion the customer has expressed in his or her email and a reframing of the issue in need

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of resolution. Consider this example: If a customer's email expresses displeasure about a refund he has not yet received, the beginning of the rep's response should look similar to this: "I imagine the delay in your refund showing up on your statement is frustrating." The rep has expressed her understanding of the customer's frustration, and has clearly and succinctly restated the customer's concern. Now she can move onto offering a solution: "It usually takes 30 to 45 days for refunds to be reflected on your statement. I checked your order history and you'll be happy to know that your refund is currently being processed and should appear on your next statement."

When communicating with customers by email, it is important to bear in mind the fact that, just as your reps cannot gauge the customer's mood through the usual clues in tone of voice, there is no guarantee that the customer will interpret your reps' words on their computer screen in the positive, helpful spirit in which they were written. To create email responses that are less likely to be misinterpreted, reps should follow a few simple writing rules.

1. Keep it brief, but not too brief.

While a concise email can effectively convey the facts, if it is too short, the tone may be interpreted as curt or dismissive. It could feel like a brush-off to the customer.

2. Use positive language.

Steer clear of negatives like "we can't," "our company does not" or "we won't." Reps who know how to frame their thoughts in light, positive

language — "What I can do for you..." or "You'll be happy to know..." — will be more likely to evoke a positive feeling in the customer.

3. Use punctuation with care.

Advise reps to avoid using too many emphatic punctuation marks. Multiple exclamation points start to seem insincere or can be interpreted as shouting. Make sure that they avoid writing in all capital letters for the same reason.

4. Invite customer feedback.

To build the relationship and keep the dialog going with customers, reps should include an offer to answer any additional questions or to receive feedback on whether their response has resolved the customer's issue.

Writing empathetic and effective email is a skill that requires both training and hands-on practice. Providing in-depth training to new employees and refresher courses for current employees can help your team develop the skills needed to transform your contact center's email communication into a relationship-building tool that creates customer loyalty. 

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