

ANSWERING E-MAIL FROM ANGRY CUSTOMERS

How to turn furious people into fans

by Marilynne Rudick and Leslie O'Flahavan

In a perfect world there would be no angry customers. The product would work flawlessly, it would arrive on time, and no customer would wait—listening to elevator music—for 30 minutes.

But absent that perfect world, you will have angry customers. And they will send angry e-mails.

Whether you're hearing from your angry customer by phone or e-mail, your goals are similar: fix the problem and convert an angry customer into your biggest fan.

Follow these ten tips for answering e-mail from angry customers and you'll solve the customer's problem and soothe his anger.

1. Restate the problem

Before you answer an angry customer's e-mail, show that you understand the problem.

If the customer has included all relevant information in the e-mail, you should simply restate the problem and then set about solving it. Quote or paraphrase the customer's own wording to show you've read his e-mail carefully. Include all relevant information you have about the customer: purchase history, account number, previous customer service contact, etc.

But if you don't understand the problem completely, see Tip 2.

2. Ask for clarification

Angry customers may not write clearly. The customer may be unskilled or his e-mail may have degenerated into a rant about the company rather than an explanation of the problem.

So you may have to ask the customer to clarify the problem: *"I need some more information to solve your problem with the replacement parts for your storm door handle. Were the parts you received broken, or did you receive the wrong parts?"*

You may also have to clarify how the customer would like the problem resolved. *"Do you want us to rush the parts to you overnight or do you want a refund?"* Unless you clearly understand the problem and the preferred solution, you're bound to make the customer even angrier.

3. Personalize your response

Nothing infuriates an angry customer more than the feeling that no one is listening. *"Dear Customer: Thank you for your e-mail. We take our customers' problems seriously and are glad to hear from you."*

So, personalize e-mail to an angry customer to reassure him that he's being heard loud and clear. Use the customer's name and title: Mr., Mrs., Ms., Dr. Or use the customer's signature as your salutation: Jim Jeffries, Dr. Jeffries, Jim.

Review the customer's account information and incorporate it into your response. *"We're proud that you've selected us as your ISP for the last six years, and we would like the opportunity to keep you as a satisfied customer."* Sign your e-mail. An angry customer needs to know a real human is trying to solve his problem.

4. Tell the customer how you will respond to the problem

Angry people want action, so you must specifically explain how you will resolve the problem. If the resolution is complicated, outline the steps you will take.

If possible, tell the customer when actions will occur:

*"We will overnight the parts to you so you receive them by 10:00 a.m. tomorrow."
"We will immediately trace the shipment to see exactly what went wrong."
"We will issue a credit for the shipping costs; this credit will appear on your next statement."*

5. If you have good news, put it first

If you can make the customer happy, put the good news first and the empathy second:

Good news: *"We are happy to refund your money, as you requested."*
Empathy: *"We understand the frustration of receiving the Christmas gift after Christmas."*

But if you can't make the customer happy—if you have to tell the customer no—put the empathy first and the "bad news" second:

Empathy: *"We understand the frustration of receiving the Christmas gift after Christmas."*
Bad news: *"We can't refund your money because you ordered the camera after our guaranteed shipping date."*

6. Use a polite, positive tone

You may be tempted to match the customer's angry or accusatory tone: *"You dropped the camera on your cement driveway. Our warranty does not cover your incompetence."* But you should never match fire with fire; you'll only get more e-mail!

Keep your tone polite and positive: *"The problem you're having seems to be the result of the camera falling on your driveway. We're sorry to have to tell you that our warranty covers camera malfunctions caused by manufacturing defects only."*

7. Avoid scolding the customer

Emphasize the pronouns *I* and *we* rather than *you*.

Don't write: *"Your order was not filled because you didn't include your mailing address on the order form."*

Do write: *"We didn't fill your order because we didn't have your mailing address."*

8. Acknowledge the customer's pain and suffering

Maybe the problem is not your company's fault, or maybe you can't fix the problem. But you can acknowledge the customer's frustration. Empathize with the customer: *"We know that having our server down—regardless of the reason—has made it difficult for you to do your job."*

9. When you are at fault, apologize

When your company is at fault, apologize. Make your apology genuine and specific: Don't write: *"We're sorry for the confusion regarding your scholarship application."* Do write: *"We apologize for posting the wrong date on your scholarship application. We've corrected this error."*

Never put a *but* in an apology:

Don't write: *"We're sorry it took us a full week to process your credit application, but you provided two addresses and it took us extra time to verify both."*

Do write: *"We are sorry for the delay in processing your credit application; we were verifying both addresses you provided."*

10. Satisfy the customer by offering something of value

If your policy allows, give your customers a product, a discount or a rebate: *"We can offer you a \$50 discount on the purchase of a new camera."* Or give something else of value: a software upgrade, a whitepaper download, even a follow-up e-mail a couple of weeks later to check on the situation.

Answering angry e-mails is hard work. And unlike when you resolve a problem for a customer on the phone, e-mail doesn't give you the chance to hear the relief in the customer's voice or experience, in real time, the gratification of turning the customer's anger into appreciation. Your satisfaction may come from keeping problems from escalating out of control.

As the acclaimed social commentator H.L. Mencken pointed out: *"Every normal man must be tempted at times to spit upon his hands, hoist the black flag, and begin slitting throats."*

You've done your job well if you've diffused your customer's anger while he is still spitting upon his hands.