

3.5.4: Criticism of Customers

Learning Objectives

- Write an external critical message to an existing customer.

We have discussed the importance of happy, satisfied customers to the success of a business. But what if an issue arises that necessitates a critical message to an existing customer?

When the need to send a critical message to a customer arises, we should take a step back and think through several factors. What is the exact outcome we desire? How can we communicate firmly yet tactfully so as to maintain our good business relationship? What facts need to be included in the message?

The indirect strategy would be best for a critical message to a customer. Such a message should start with some complementary language about how the relationship is valued. Next, a full explanation of the facts of the matter and any context should be given. After this buffer, the criticism or critique should be revealed, followed by a warm closing.

To: Mike Cross

From: Bill Langely

Subject: Could I ask for your assistance on an important matter?

Dear Mike,

I hope this message finds you well.

It is hard to believe that we have been doing business for over 10 years. The relationship between our companies has been mutually beneficial, and we hope to continue working with you for another decade.

As you may know, we have contracted out our A/P department to a third-party company. They rely on a different financial system than the one we used in all of our prior dealings with your company. Apparently, this system cannot handle your firm applying credit memos to our invoices directly; they must be handled as separate line items. As a result, several of our invoices to you are now showing as late or delinquent. Our finance folks and yours have had several calls on this matter, but apparently your staff wants to continue the older process because it is easier for them. Yours is the only company that still maintains this Payable practice.

I think perhaps you meeting with your CFO would go a long way to satisfy this issue.

We look forward to working with you and your marketing team on our joint efforts at the June trade show. I feel positive about strengthening our relationship as business partners and the bright future ahead.

Best regards,

Bill Langeley

VP Marketing

Arrow LLC

This example message follows the indirect strategy for a critical written communication. The subject line gets attention but delays the bad news until after the buffer. The opening is pleasant and complimentary. The buffer attempts to explain the necessary facts and context, e.g., Mike's company is the only one with the problem process. The bad news is passive voice (instead of: "Can I ask you to get involved directly to meet with your CFO to resolve this matter?"). The close avoids referring to the problem and instead has a pleasant, future-looking statement.

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