

Customer Service through E-mail and the Internet

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E-Communications

For the sake of this lesson, we shall consider e-mails, social media postings, replies to corporate website posts, and other forms of writing for online platforms as *e-communications*. Writing for an online platform typically has a very different style and structure than communications such as memos, letters, reports, and other documents that may have a wider distribution or more formal purpose. As more offices and entire companies go paperless, it becomes all the more critical to develop writing skills for electronic media.

We should not think of e-mails and website posts as transient bits of communication. Indeed, e-mails and social media postings may last well after a hard-copy letter, fax, or piece of direct mail has been discarded. Ironically, we often spend much less time preparing digital messages that may sit indefinitely in electronic memory than we do on those disposable paper versions.

By their nature and necessity, electronic communications such as e-mails and forum posts are typically brief, focusing on a key point or two; yet they attempt to convey complete messages without a need for ongoing back-and-forth follow-ups. That's where the challenge lies: constructing a message that is concise yet comprehensive.

Furthermore, when sent without the inclusion of a few social pleasantries, short messages have the potential to be received as also short in temperament, and that shortness may be interpreted as rudeness or disrespect. Fortunately, as we become more comfortable with such forms of communication, we've also become much better at accommodating the limitations of the format.

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Another potential problem, when customers are at a computer, their attention may be spread between several tasks: other incoming messages, searching a competitor's website, or trying to mute a video playing in the background. As such, your message has to earn their attention, succinctly convey necessary detail, avoid misinterpretation and ambiguity, and maintain a tone of cordial service. It's a big order, but a few tips can help you get the job done.

The first tip is to use template copy where possible. This copy through trial and error may be cleaned up of possible ambiguities, and field-tested for effectiveness. Many of the issues you deal with, such as explanation of a common software function, or an apology for late delivery of a product, will present themselves over, and over. Personalize the template copy as necessary, and in ways that may help your message appear fresh and relevant (such as, "Mr. Sanchez, Thank you for your phone call this morning regarding the late delivery of your refrigerator. We are very sorry for any inconvenience this may have caused ...")

You must carefully consider how to open and close your message. In business communications, you may well prefer a simple opening acknowledgement of the recipient, as in *Mr. Sanchez* or *Ms. Smith*, or their first name for a little more informality; followed with a comma and paragraph break, then the start of your message. Adding a *Hi* or *Hello* adds a friendlier tone, and may be appropriate for ongoing follow-up communications or if your company prefers a friendlier touch. The use of *Dear* seems colloquial and a throwback to more formal written letters, and is not used as often in electronic communications. Certainly informal salutations such as *Hey* and '*Sup* should be kept to friends, family, and familiar business associates; not formal customer service communications.

Likewise, a suitable closing would simply be your name signature, however even in business communications a cordial tone is added with a *Best regards* or *We look forward to serving you in the future*, rather than an abrupt ending that may be misinterpreted as indifference. While you may like to get creative with your personal communications, the best bet in business is to stick with openings and closings that are simple, cordial, clear—and most importantly, brief.

Next, get to your point quickly, clearly, and without unnecessary clutter that tires the reader trying to untangle your message. For example, here is the sort of message you would *not* want to send:

Hi, Mary. How are you? I hope all is well. We haven't seen you since the last time, but we hope to see you soon.

FWIW, my house is on fire. The flames are beginning to get closer to me and the dog, and the fire has already burned that nice painting you gave me for my birthday. That was a fun party.

And BTW, please send help. I wish I had bought those fire extinguishers when they were on sale when we went shopping. Did that sweater you bought fit OK?

We hope you can come to dinner for the holidays ... if our house is still standing. Maybe you can bring that wonderful fruit salad of yours.

Love, John

Obviously, the key message here is *Fire! Send Help!* You can save the pleasantries until later over lunch, and no one will fault you for brevity. Your e-mail or online posting should cover one or two critical topics or instructions. If you need to cover more than that, it may be better to write a separate message. Remember you want your readers to spend their limited attention doing what needs to be done, not dissecting your message.

Be sure to use a descriptive subject heading, so the intent of your message is clear. This helps your reader decide to open your e-mail or posting, and search it out again if necessary. A few samples:

- *Re: Your Refrigerator Purchase*
- *Re: Your Software Issue*
- *Re: Your Package Delivery*
- *Re: My House is On Fire!*

It helps to write in smaller paragraphs, so as not to overwhelm your reader with big blocks of text. It also is critical that you to keep your message focused, with succinct writing in smaller bits of information.

And though you may be working under tight time constraints, it's a good idea to pause before hitting "send" or "post"—review your message one last time for clarity and those pesky typographical errors and auto-corrects that can usurp the authority of your message. If you can save it and return a few minutes later with fresh eyes, that's all the better. Better still for critical messages is to have a team member or supervisor review your copy prior to its sending or posting.

Let's finish with a few more words on the benefits of the Internet to assist with your own professional and personal growth. It is not possible or necessary for you to be an expert on every problem that may presented to you, but with a few well-chosen search terms,

you can find online information on just about any topic imaginable. A few minutes of invested research can save hours of attempted-and-failed remedies later.

And of course, the Internet is a valuable tool for developing your career growth. Say you wanted to start with a customer service job in a company, then advance to a higher position in the public relations office. You could take [Saylor](#) courses such as this one in customer service and/or in [public relations](#) – they're free and comprehensive. [Wikipedia](#) offers useful background information and reference links on countless topics. Professional practitioners share their experience and free career tips in blogs and educational forums such as [AboutPublicRelations.net](#).

We live in a wonderful age when informative communication can be instantly effective; knowledge is free and widely available for the searching. The technologies are evolving ever higher in productivity while lower in cost. Accessibility is becoming worldwide, to all levels of society. Let's put it to good use.

Summary:

- E-communication involves messaging through business platforms such as e-mail, corporate websites, social media postings, and other forms of electronic writing.
- Writing for electronic media may necessarily be brief, yet must clearly and succinctly convey important detail while maintaining a cordial tone.
- By using template copy where possible that has been customized and tested, you can avoid unnecessary work, typos, ambiguities, and misinformation.
- Pause for a little time before sending or posting your messages, and double-check for errors.
- The Internet is a valuable tool for searching out answers to issues you may be working with, as well as developing your own career.