

Ask the Editor: What should I look for when reading?

Dear Editor: “I know it’s important to show consumers I’ve read their emails. But what should I be looking for so I can best respond to them?”

Fantastic question. In fact, being a critical reader is the first step in delivering a world-class response. Here are three simple things to look out for:

❶ **Identify the consumer’s problem or question with an understanding that he or she may have more than one.** Whether the consumer presents one concern or several, it’s your responsibility to respond to each. All too often, I see emails that address one issue well and either fall short on the others or ignore them altogether. Once you’ve identified the consumer’s issue(s), jot them down on a piece of paper to help keep you focused and make sure you cover them all.

❷ **Look for cues regarding tone, so you can mirror it in your response.** That means assessing from consumers’ language and structure whether they’re happy, confused, angry, frustrated, etc. For example, does the consumer use sentence fragments and/or contractions (which connote a more casual tone) or full sentences throughout? Is the email well organized or does the consumer ramble (which can indicate confusion, anger, or general frustration)? If you just can’t get a handle on tone, ask one of your colleagues for help. Somebody else might be able to read what you’re not.

❸ **Look for opportunities to promote our brands.** Send consumers to the web pages as appropriate, based on what they need to know versus what we need to tell them. So don’t just generically send someone to the home page if you can send them someplace more specific—someplace that makes better sense in terms of their email. For example, if a consumer has a question about a recipe, bypass the home page and send him or her directly to the recipes page. Remember, as the consummate professional, it’s your job to know what’s on these sites and how to guide consumers through them accordingly.

Best in Show: Satisfying consumers through customization

Congratulations to Margie Linn for responding to a touching albeit potentially sensitive email with grace and eloquence. Below is her impressive example of how a customized response not only humanizes an exchange, but shows consumers how dedicated we are to their wellbeing. Notice the great organization and flow, easy language, and use of the consumer’s name for a personal effect.

From the consumer:

I just wanted to let you know that your product helped me through a tough period in my life. In 2005, I was diagnosed with leukemia and had radiation, chemo, and a bone marrow transplant. I had to drink a lot of fluids to keep hydrated. Gatorade was the only drink that did not make me feel ill and stay in my system. I am doing very well now and still drink Gatorade every day. My personal favorite is Gatorade Frost Riptide Rush. We always have your product in the house. Thank you, Brenda

From Margie:

Brenda:

What a lucky, strong and brave lady you are. We’re ecstatic to learn that you’re doing very well and appreciate you sharing your story.

We're glad we were able to help you get through that difficult time in your life. We've mailed you some coupons to enjoy drinking Gatorade in good health. The coupons should arrive within 10 business days.

We have ways of measuring success, but none of them are as satisfying as receiving emails like yours. Please be assured that we will always do our best to produce high-quality products for you to enjoy.

Thank you, Brenda for your loyalty to our brand and for brightening up our day. We wish you a wonderful holiday season and a happy and healthy new year.

On Language: A conversational approach

How do you mirror the tone of an overly informal consumer? You know, the one who uses slang, writes in all lowercase, or without punctuation? While I don't recommend going overly casual, I do recommend being appropriately conversational in your email. That means writing like you speak, using a tone that lets consumers know you're both a person *and* a professional.

Here are some tips:

- **Start by thinking of your email as a conversation with a friend.** Visualize this friend—or, if you think you can, the consumer. Then, type the words you'd actually speak in response to his or her concern in your icky first draft. Once you've got the dialogue all out, refine it accordingly in terms of content, structure, and proper punctuation and grammar.
- **Use contractions.** Often, they take the starch out of sentences. Consider this example: "We are happy you like our new packaging" versus "We're happy you like our new packaging." If you say each out loud or read silently, you can see how a simple contraction changes the tone from stiff and formal to relaxed. Contractions also make your writing conversational because people organically speak in contractions. Think about it. When was the last time you heard someone say, "How are you doing?" or "Where is the bathroom?"
- **Use sentence fragments with discretion.** Now don't go crazy, you don't want to use too many (just like you want to vary your sentence structure, so you don't have too many long or short sentences). Instead, remember that a well-placed, well-written fragment can go a long way in making a stiff email more casual. The trick is to break up copy so it flows like conversation. And isn't abrupt or unnatural. (Here's another example from "Ask the Editor": "Fantastic question. In fact, being a critical reader is the first step...")
- **Make sure you talk directly to the consumer in your email.** All too often, I read emails that speak to consumers as an entire population versus just one person. So watch your approach. Instead of writing "We always want to make sure our consumers are satisfied" write "We want to make sure you're satisfied."

Finally, good effective writing, casual or otherwise, requires the presentation of concepts using basic language and clear structure. This always applies no matter who you're writing to. If you write simply, actively, and naturally, you'll never go wrong.

Can this email be saved? Managing multiple issues

As you know, consumers will often write with several issues to be addressed. As I mentioned earlier, when this happens, one or more of those issues can fall through the cracks. To help you better respond to emails with multiple problems or concerns, take a look at the following exchange.

From the consumer:

I am so disappointed that you have changed the ingredients in your Natural Granola (coconut oil is one of the worst fats out there) and nearly doubled the price. I've been eating this cereal for years but will not be continuing to buy it. Plus, that's a lie—same great taste. It tasted better before.

From the consumer response representative:

Lois,

We're sorry you were unhappy with your recent purchase of Quaker Natural Granola. To replace your purchase, we're sending a full value coupon for any Quaker product. It should arrive in about a week.

We feel it is important for you to know that, while the name of the product has recently changed, we have not changed the formula. Coconut oil has been a part of the formulation since April 2005, when we used it to replace the partially hydrogenated oil that had been in the product.

While we feel coconut oil is a healthier alternative than hydrogenated oil, we do understand your concerns, and have shared your comments with our product development team. We constantly experiment with our formulas to find healthier alternatives which still provide the taste and texture our consumers have come to expect.

It may also help you to know that we are not responsible for any change in the price of our products. Prices are set by the store from which you purchase the product. Increased gas prices may have caused the store's distributors to raise their price, but this is only one of many possibilities which could lead to increased price.

We feel the claim "same great taste" is accurate as the formula is the same as the product we have been selling for the past two and a half years. However, since your recent purchase did not have the same taste, we would like to report your experience to our Quality Assurance Team. To help us do so:

Please provide us with the Best If Used Before Date (including the code which follows it) from the opening flap of the box. We appreciate your cooperation.

We're sorry Quaker Natural Granola no longer meets your needs, Lois. We appreciate your business and hope you are able to find another Quaker product you can enjoy.

Here are my thoughts:

Before we get into what I think, let's outline the three issues the consumer presents in her note. She claims we've:

- ❶ Changed the ingredients.
- ❷ Nearly doubled the price.
- ❸ Ruined the taste.

Ouch. These are three fairly big issues. And the rep did a pretty good job of addressing them all. Still, there is always room for improvement. Here are some suggestions:

- In the first paragraph, "full-value" should be hyphenated.
- The second paragraph sounds defensive so, in the edited version that follows, I try to soften the language, changing the tone from protective to informative, remembering that I was dealing with an unhappy consumer.
- The rep used a lot of "we feels" in the note, and I took some of them out. It doesn't matter what we, as a company, feel. It's what we know that counts. So, for example, in the third paragraph, instead of saying, "We feel it's a healthier alternative," I changed it to "We continue to find it a healthier alternative." It's a subtle change, but one that makes the statement less of an opinion and more of a fact.
- In the third paragraph, the rep says that he/she will report the issue to one team, and later report it to another. Be careful about saying you'll report problems to various teams in one email. It comes across as disingenuous. Plus, one team is capitalized and one isn't. Does that mean one is more important? Or this rep is confused about style?

- In the rep's fourth paragraph, again, he/she comes across as defensive. Of course, we're responsible. It's our product. And yet, there's always a kinder, gentler, and more empathetic way to respond to these things we can't control. Specifically, to tell consumers what we can do, versus only what we *can't*.
- In the fifth paragraph, the rep didn't need to end with a colon, especially since he/she was giving only one directive. Now, if there were a list of directives with several bullet points, a colon would have been appropriate.
- I didn't use bullets in my rewrite, but I've seen multiple-issued emails that could easily call for them in terms of presenting a clearer structure and showing the consumer that you've identified all their concerns and are addressing them. Just something to keep in mind if you're ever stuck or unsure about how to answer several issues in one response. It's always okay to say, "Let me tackle your issues one at a time ... bullet: ...bullet: ... Whatever it takes to make information easy for the reader.

Now take a look at my revised version:

Lois,

We're sorry you were unhappy with your recent purchase of Quaker Natural Granola. To replace your purchase, we're sending a full-value coupon for any Quaker product. It should arrive in about a week.

In the meantime, I would like to address some of your concerns in the hopes that you'll consider giving Quaker Natural Granola another chance.

You may be interested to know that, while we've changed the name of the product, we have not changed the formula. I know this can sometimes be confusing and apologize if that's the case. The truth is we've been using coconut oil in our granola since April 2005, when we used it to replace the partially hydrogenated oil that had been in the product. While we understand your concerns, we continue to find coconut oil a healthier alternative.

Since the formula remains the same, so too should the taste and texture. If it doesn't, we apologize and would like to report your experience to our quality assurance team. To do that, would you mind providing us with the "Best If Used By" date (along with the code that follows it)? You can find this on the opening flap of the box.

Finally, while we'd like to help with the cost, unfortunately we can't because we don't set the prices in your area. Your grocers do. We do, however, hope you find the full-value coupon a help.

Lois, please accept our apologies for your concerns and thank you for taking the time to share them. We appreciate your business and if you still decide Quaker Natural Granola no longer meets your needs, we hope you'll find another Quaker product that does.

Usage: Navigate everyday punctuation with ease

Ah punctuation. It's one of the most important aspects of good writing, as well as the most confusing. Does the period go inside the quotation marks or outside (inside)? Do you capitalize the words "marketing team" or not (not)? When is it okay to use an exclamation point (rarely if ever)?

We could literally spend days going through these kinds of questions, but instead consider this easy refresher on the punctuation marks we use most frequently.

Apostrophe: Use this to create possessive forms (e.g., the consumer's question [singular possessive] versus consumers' [plural possessive] questions), contractions (it's for it is), and some plurals.

Capital letters: Use capitals only at the beginning of sentences or with proper nouns. Don't use them pretty much every other time. For example, you don't have to capitalize people's titles (unless they precede the person's name like "President George Bush" versus "George Bush, president of the United States"). Or, things like "marketing team" or "quality assurance team" or "consumer affairs department" unless they're proper names, which in most cases, they're not.

Colons: Use these before a list or an explanation that is preceded by a clause that can stand by itself. Think of the colon as a gate inviting somebody to go forward. Or when you want to make an example of something: like the need to turn passive writing into active whenever possible.

Commas: Use these to separate elements in a series (three or more elements), to connect two independent clauses, to set off introductory, quoted elements, and parentheses, and to generally avoid confusion. The general rule is to put comma where you'd like the reader to pause, but beware of this rule. It can lead to overuse.

Dashes: Use these as a super-comma or set of super-commas to set off parenthetical elements (especially when those elements also contain punctuation). Here's an example: "All four of them—Dan, Michael, Brandon, and Theresa—got great reviews from consumers."

Exclamation points: Use these (sparingly, if at all) at the end of an emphatic declaration, interjection, or command.

Parentheses: Use these when including material that you want to de-emphasize or wouldn't normally fit into the flow of your text, but you need to include anyway. (See period definition below for an example.)

Period: Use a period at the end of a sentence that makes a statement and remember to use only one space in between sentences (versus two).

Question mark: Use this at the end of a direct question (e.g., "Are you finished?"). Be careful, however, not to put a question mark at the end of an indirect question (e.g., "The instructor asked the students whether they were finished.")

Quotation marks: Use these to set off materials that represent real quotes (and not just to emphasize a particular word or point) or spoken language, and other things that typically don't stand by themselves, like short stories, poems, and articles. In the United States, periods, commas, etc., generally go inside quotation marks.

Semi-colons: Use semi-colons to help sort out monster lists (e.g., "There were consumer emails from Bangor, Maine; Hartford, Connecticut; Newport, Rhode Island, etc.).

Being the Consumer: How we compare to our competitors

This month, we not only take a look at our competitors but welcome David Manton to the Telerx consumer response team. As part of his orientation, we asked him to write to a consumer brand company and share its response. So here it is. Naturally, I have some thoughts on how The Dish Network could have done better (how about you?). As always, read on for the details.

From David:

I want to share some feedback on your business practices. I recently saw your HD offer for a free HD DVR receiver with a programming contract. I called to find out if I could participate in the promotion. I was told by "John" that this offer was for new customers only. I was informed about the offer for existing customers, but it still would have cost me \$79 to get what new customers would get for free. I believe existing customers should be treated at least as well as new customers (if not better).

From The Dish Company:

Dear Mr. Manton,

Thank you for your email. We want to apologize for not meeting your expectations in customer service. We pride ourselves with providing each and every customer with a positive experience when contacting us. Feedback from our customers, both positive

and negative, drives the quality of our customer service. It is apparent in our quest for providing our customers with world class customer service, we have fallen short. The decisions made are based on company policy. If we find that a policy is negatively impacting the majority of our customer's satisfaction, that policy is scrutinized for effectiveness. Again, we apologize for any confusion or inconvenience caused by this issue.

Your business is greatly appreciated and we thank you for allowing us to be of assistance to you. If you have any further questions or concerns, please refer to www.xxxxxxxxxx.com or reply to this email.

Sincerely,
Adrian P.
Network E-Care

As you've probably deduced, this looks like your basic cut-and-paste job. A reckless form letter from a rep who surely had the best of intentions, but fell short on the job. Let's take a sentence-by-sentence look:

We want to apologize for not meeting your expectations in customer service. This sentence is extremely wordy and, in my opinion, fails to address the consumer appropriately. For example:

- Why "want to" apologize. Why not just do it?
- Also, never write in the negative: "...not meeting your expectations..." Why not just say "We apologize for failing to meet your expectations..."
- Why do we need "customer service?" Why not just say, "We're sorry we didn't meet your expectations."
- On that note, why put the blame on the consumer—who's always right and who's time, effort, and business we should always appreciate—for having expectations. Instead, it should be, "We're sorry to disappoint you."

We pride ourselves with providing each and every customer with a positive experience when contacting us. Who cares about every customer? What about this customer? This is obviously canned language used for each and every consumer. It doesn't make us feel special or important and certainly shouldn't be one of the hooks reps use to draw us into the rest of the email—mainly because it doesn't.

Feedback from our customers, both positive and negative, drives the quality of our customer service. Who cares again? We don't care what drives the quality of their customer service, just like we don't care what inspired the Wright Brothers to come up with an airplane. We just want to know how much a ticket costs, what time the plane leaves and arrives, and when we have to be there.

It is apparent in our quest for providing our customers with world class customer service, we have fallen short. If the consumer wanted a guilt trip, he'd have called his mother (or, okay, mine). This is not only inappropriate, but a wordy sentence that's more about the company than the consumer. There should be a hyphen between "world" and "class."

The decisions made are based on company policy. If we find that a policy is negatively impacting the majority of our customer's satisfaction, that policy is scrutinized for effectiveness. Another who cares? I don't need to know about the wizard behind the curtain—or the company's policy.

Again, we apologize for any confusion or inconvenience caused by this issue. Aha! Finally, a sentence I can work with! The apology—buried so far in to the email that, if I were the consumer, I would've never gotten to it because I'd have clicked out long ago. I find it interesting that the rep used the word "again" since this was the first real apology in the response. The first attempt was more about self-deprecation and guilt than saying "I'm sorry" to an unhappy consumer.

Your business is greatly appreciated and we thank you for allowing us to be of assistance to you. Okay, you “appreciate our business,” even though the phrase itself is written in the responsibility-free passive voice when active is preferable. And while the rep may appreciate the chance to be of assistance, he never addressed the consumer’s problem specifically: Why aren’t existing customers getting as good a deal as new customers? Doesn’t it make sense to reward the people who are already patronizing your business? He may have appreciated the chance to help, but he didn’t help. That much is clear.

If you have any further questions or concerns, please refer to www.xxxxxxxxx.com or reply to this email. It’s obvious the rep is trying to make good by inviting the consumer to reach out again if necessary. But after reading this, if I were the consumer, I’d have to wonder what would be the point. This is obviously a raging form letter. Wouldn’t I simply get another one? Don’t I have better and more productive things to do with my time—like cancel my service or sign on with a competitor?

Now, I know you think I’m being harsh. But I promise you, I’m not being any harsher than the consumers who write to you every day. David himself reports that, once his current service agreement is up, he’ll be looking for a new provider.

That said, I suggest taking the time to think about how you might rewrite this—and retain David as a consumer—using the elements of good writing.



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