

Ask the Editor: What do you do with praise?

Dear Editor: “We often have consumers write just to tell us they love our products. And they typically don’t give us much more than that to go on. How do we respond?”

Excellent question. There will be those occasions when consumers will write simply to express their satisfaction. When that happens, it’s okay to send a somewhat generic reply back -especially if you don’t have much information to work with or any other issues to deal with.

Consider, for example, this response:

“Thanks for your kind words about [product]. We hope you continue to use and enjoy [product] and invite you to visit [web site] to learn more about our offerings (especially our new or related product).”

Finally, please stay in touch and let us know how we’re doing. After all, we always enjoy hearing from our consumers -and value your business.”

This is a good place to start. But also recognize when it may not be enough. There may be those times that you’ll have to add more and customize. When that happens, the elements of good writing always apply. That means:

- Capturing the right tone. After all, an “I love your products” is friendly. So it doesn’t call for a formalized response, with stiff language, long sentences, and big words, etc.
- Avoiding anything canned -consumers can spot it a mile away. Phrases like, “we are dedicated to producing high quality products” or “they affirm our standards” or “advanced technology allows us to offer superior packaging” sound like they’re coming from a robot or a glossary of approved terms. Remember, you’re talking human to human. Write accordingly.
- Including the right content. If the consumer’s email is a simple matter of “thanks,” general is fine. But if there’s more, acknowledge it. Do they have an additional question? Personal story to share? Or something duly specific? If so, address it in your email. And remember to include a beginning, middle, and end.
- Cross selling as appropriate. Responding to a general thank you can be an opportunity to promote a new product, initiative, or promotion. After all, you’ve already got a satisfied and captive audience. Don’t go overboard, but do let the consumer know, for example, that if they like Pepsi, they may want to try Pepsi Max. Then, send them to the web site for more information.

Finally, as always, proofread, proofread, and proofread. Even if you’re talking to an already happy customer, the stakes are high in terms of building consumer loyalty. Even one typo can do unnecessary damage. Good writing, as always, is critical.

Best in Show: An email that retained and delighted

Congratulations to Dan Wentzel of Telerx for a job well done. Read on for the details:

From the consumer:

To Whom It May Concern:

I truly enjoy Naked Juices. However, I am having a problem with the consistency of what I can get. Some of them are wonderfully thick like a true fruit smoothie. Others are thinner like plain juice. I know that it is difficult to get it exact every time. But, is there any way to get them slightly closer? I like to have one for breakfast and feel full, knowing that it is healthy for me. It is harder to think that I am really getting all that fruit in one bottle when it is watery. And honestly, the taste suffers tremendously. Thanks for making something healthy that tastes great.

Jennifer

From Dan:

Jennifer:

We're sorry that the consistency of Naked Juice hasn't been, well, consistent. We monitor the consistency when we make our small batches, however, we do not control it. We let Mother Nature decide how thick or thin the juice will be.

Since this is causing you some stress, we'd like you to send us your mailing address. Once we get it, we'll send full value coupons you can use on your future purchases.

We'll also share your feedback with our Blenders and our Marketing Teams. We'll keep your comments in mind as we refine our blending process in the future. Thank you for your cooperation, your business, and your interest in Naked Juice.

Dan

From the consumer:

Dan:

Thank you for addressing my issue personally and not with some generic, impersonal, form e-mail. That makes me think even better of your company! :) I was not imagining coupons for concerns, however, I can't say no to free Naked. Thank you again. I wonder if I can send an e-mail to Mother Nature?

Jennifer

Active Language: For clearer communications and happier consumers

Often, we use passive language in the emails we write to consumers. Phrases like "The exact composition of our Natural Flavors is considered proprietary" or "Your point of view has been shared with management" make emails unnecessarily long and confusing for readers.

Writing in the active voice, instead, can shore up your emails (i.e., we consider the exact composition of our natural flavors proprietary" or "we've shared your viewpoint with management"). Using it helps consumers avoid confusion and inspires them to keep reading, making your communications overall clearer and more interesting.

So what is the active voice exactly? In a nutshell:

- The active voice refers to sentences where the subject performs the action of the verb instead of receiving it. "I threw the ball."
- The passive voice refers to sentences where the subject is still the main character of the sentence, but something else is performing the action. "I was thrown by the horse."

To distinguish active from passive, simply identify the relationship between the subject and verb of the sentence.

- If the subject performs the action of the verb, the sentence is active.
- If the subject just sits there while something else (either named or unnamed) performs an action on it, the sentence is passive.

Take a look at a few examples:

- Passive: If enough cases are not ordered by stores on a weekly basis, the supplier will discontinue stocking the product.
- Active: If the stores don't order enough cases each week, the supplier won't stock the product.

- Passive: From time to time the packaging of our products is re-evaluated.
- Active: We re-evaluate our product packaging from time to time.

As you can see, using the active voice makes sentences not only easier to read, but shorter. These are just a few of the reasons why it's preferable to the passive.

Now, that's not to say you should discard the passive voice altogether, since there may be those times when you'll have to use it, like when you don't know who or what performed an action (e.g., "Leah's car was stolen last night."). As a general rule, however, never use the passive voice where the active voice is possible.

With that in mind, take a look at these three passive phrases and see if you can make them active. Check your work against answers at the bottom of the newsletter when you're done. Good luck!

- The sacrifices that are being made by the troops are not going unnoticed.
- Any bits of hull that might remain are usually eliminated by screen procedures before packaging.
- All consumer feedback and suggestions are greatly appreciated.

Can this Email be Saved: Evaluating the details

Writing is hard, ask anybody who does it. Combine having to write well with the lofty task of meeting the needs of consumers, and it's a wonder anybody ever sends an email. And yet, you collectively send hundreds a day. And you do it well.

Still, in all of my years as a writer, I have never met a communication that cannot be improved. Take a look at the evolution of this one.

From the consumer:

"I've wondered why some of the special types of Gatorade have see-through plastic wrap. Thank you Gatorade."

The original version from Gatorade consumer response:

"Patrick,

Thank you for taking the time to contact us about the new Gatorade Labels. The clear labels are from our new design of labels. You should be seeing more of the clear labels through the summer.

We appreciate your business, Patrick.

Jane

Consumer Response"

Here are my thoughts on how this email can be saved:

- "Labels" needs to be lowercased, since it is not a brand name or name of any kind.
- The writer uses the word "labels" too many times. Instead, I recommend coming up with more creative (and still clear) ways to convey the point. This is the essence of good writing.
- While this response provides the consumer with some information, it does not answer the consumer's question, which is essentially "Why do you use the clear plastic wrap on certain Gatorade bottles?"
- The response is abrupt. There is no transition from one paragraph to the next, no flow, and no clean or clear organization to support at least one primary thought. By now, the consumer's question is still out there—unanswered. Also, the ending needs more information (i.e., where to go for more information, a conveyed desire to have been a help, etc.).

Now take a look at my revised version:

"Patrick,

Thanks for your question about the new Gatorade labels. The clear wrap you mention is part of our new packaging. It allows the color to stand out, making it easy to distinguish between flavors and product lines (i.e., like Fierce, Frost, and X-Factor, etc.).

You may also notice as part of this new design:

- A more contemporary Gatorade bolt to signify energy and motion.
- Easy-to-find information on both the front and back panels, including our ingredients, nutritional information, and web site address.

Finally, Patrick, I hope this explanation helps. For more about our products, we invite you to visit www.gatorade.com. We certainly appreciate your interest and thank you for your business.

Jane

Consumer Response”

Best in Show: Consumers appreciate the personal touch

Consumers appreciate your going the extra mile to not only respond quickly and accurately, but with a human touch. Like the one displayed in the following example. Thanks to Consumer Response Rep Vicki Kennedy at Pepsi, for sharing it with us.

From the consumer:

“I’m currently a soldier in the United States army and have been in Iraq for about a month and haven’t been able to find your Amp energy drink anywhere. I love them and have been having withdrawal. Is there any chance I could get some sent out here to me please?” Joshua

From PepsiCo consumer response:

“Joshua,

Thank you for contacting us here at the Pepsi-Cola Company regarding the availability of AMP energy drink overseas. We are sorry this product is so hard to find.

Unfortunately, shipping and customs restrictions prevent us from shipping our products directly to you. Please know that we are working very hard with the Army/Air Force and Navy exchange systems to ship Pepsi products to both Iraq and Afghanistan.

I’ve checked with our military sales department and have been advised that we’re currently shipping energy drinks through AAFES into these Mid-East locations. They may be temporarily out of supply. We will forward your request to AAFES as an FYI so that they may increase order quantities.

In the meantime, I’d like to send a small care package of promotional items to you. Unfortunately, your APO mailing address did not come through correctly, so if you could please reply to this email with your correct mailing address, that would be great.

I would like to take this time to pass along our sincere thanks to you and all of the brave men and women who are protecting our freedom. The sacrifices that are being made by the troops, as well as their families, are not going unnoticed. We wish you a safe and swift return home to your loved ones.”

From the consumer:

“I appreciate everything you do ma’am, I was honestly expecting an automated email back saying thanks for my concern, but I guess Pepsi really does care about its consumers and thank you for the support.”

Usage: A little vowel goes a long way in what you mean to say

It’s amazing how, in the English language, one vowel can change everything. To help navigate this and other issues regarding proper usage, I recommend keeping a good set of reference guides handy (like Strunk and White’s “Elements of Style” and Webster’s Dictionary, etc.). And using them frequently.

In the meantime, here’s a snapshot of a few commonly used and confused words and how to approach them.

Affect versus effect

- Affect, used as a verb, means “to influence.”

An example: “Ellen’s delayed flight affected her ability to get to Telerx to lead a workshop.”

- Effect, used as a noun, means “result.”

An example: “The effect of her delayed flight meant she had to reschedule the workshop.”

- Sometimes, effect can also be used to mean “bring about.”

An example: “Try as she might, Ellen could not effect real change to the team’s writing style without formalizing a learning program.”

Then versus than

- Than is a conjunction that’s used to compare things.

An example: “Shipping the product to our distribution center is easier than shipping it directly to our consumers.”

- Then is an adverb that’s used with descriptions of time.

An example: “Then, we ship the product to our distribution center, where it is delivered to grocers.”

Except versus accept

- Except is a preposition that means “aside from.”

An example: “You can use this coupon everywhere except on the web site.”

- Accept is a verb that means “to receive.”

An example: “Please accept this coupon as our way of saying thanks for your business.”

Less versus fewer

- If you can’t count it, use less.

An example: “Gatorade has less sodium than Pedialyte.”

- If you can count it, use fewer.

An example: “Gatorade has fewer milligrams of sodium than Pedialyte.”

Finally, when you use these words and others like it, remember to proofread -always -for spelling and context. (And please, go beyond “Spellcheck.”) If necessary, check your work at www.sparknotes.com. It’s a user-friendly site with several permutations of words and guidelines. Just look under “usage” and search for terms alphabetically.

Being the Consumer: How we compare to our competitors

As many of you know from being in my workshops, one of the first exercises I have you do is write to a consumer brand company so we can evaluate its response. I am essentially putting you in the shoes of your consumers by asking you to be one yourself.

For Susan Wallace at Telerx, this was an eye-opening exercise (as you tell me it is for many of you). She sent a note to Hillshire Farms that said, “I believe the date on the package refers to when I should use product if it’s unopened. How long do I have after I open the lunchmeat to use it?”

She received an automated acknowledgement of her inquiry on that same day and this more tailored response five days later:

“Hello Susan,

Thank you for taking the time to contact Sara Lee.

We always appreciate hearing from our customers. Sara Lee takes quality products and customer care very seriously. If the product was frozen before the date, it would be a good 6 months after the “use by” date. If the product is not opened or even opened by the “use by” date, we do not suggest consuming the product. We will send a replacement coupon, via the mail.

We thank you for your interest in Sara Lee.

Jaime

Sara Lee Consumer Affairs Representative

I have lots of issues with this response, as did Susan and others in our class. Do I think it can be improved? Absolutely. Here’s how:

- Susan’s interest was not in Sara Lee, but Hillshire Farms. So if a consumer writes in about Quaker Oats, should we thank them for their interest in PepsiCo or Tropicana? I think not. They don’t need to know what goes on behind the curtain -or about the parent company unless it’s related to their inquiry. When consumers write to a particular brand, that’s who should send them a response.
- No need for a paragraph break between the first and second sentence.
- Where’s the answer to her question? The sentence about Sara Lee taking quality products and customer care seriously belongs at the end.
- The number “6” should be spelled out to read “six months.” (Remember the rule, anything under 10 is spelled out and anything over 10 isn’t.)
- If the “product is not opened or even opened” what does that mean?
- “Consuming” is not real speak. She could have used a better word.
- Bullets would have been a nice way to break up this copy.
- No need for a comma in the last sentence about sending a replacement coupon. It’s confusing and unnecessarily breaks up the sentence and the thought.
- In her email, Susan didn’t convey a problem or ask for a replacement coupon. She simply asked a question. So, it’s obvious this person didn’t read her email. And even if she had conveyed displeasure with the product and a coupon was called for, this sentence should’ve been much higher up in the note.

Now that you’ve read these tips, send me a rewrite for good practice at streetcarcomm@aol.com. Tell me how you would have made this one better. The best rewrite will be featured as “Best in Show” in our next newsletter.

And then (not than), congratulate yourselves. As evidenced by this example and so many others, you remain head and shoulders above your competition.

Answers to active versus passive exercise

- We recognize the troop’s sacrifices.
- Screen procedures eliminate remaining bits of hull before packaging.
- We appreciate your feedback and suggestions.



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