

## E-mail Responses to Customers

E-mail lets you answer a lot more questions than you could handle on the phone or by regular mail. You have a few moments to think, and you can write a reasonably personal response without having to dial, wait, go through an extension, interrupt the consumer at work, exchange pleasantries about the weather, and listen to a long historical narrative leading slowly up to the problem itself. So invite e-mail questions from your guests.

### **Provide detailed contacts with names and pictures, not faceless forms**

Invite people to call, e-mail, or write you a letter. Putting up real names and pictures with e-mail addresses, snail mail addresses, and (most daring of all) phone numbers will make people feel as if they actually have a chance of reaching a human being, not some robotic autoresponder.

Plus, if your organization can stand it, you can carve up responsibility for answering customer e-mails, and suggest that if the question deals with printers, this person is the one to write to, but if people are having a problem with a scanner, they should try this other person. You can filter a lot of questions right on the Web site, rather than depending on expensive software to analyze incoming traffic. If you don't dare admit who you are on the site, then spend the money to route the e-mail to the right respondent, within seconds, so e-mails don't end up in the hands of idiots or people who could care less about the issue.

### **Set up guidelines for responses**

Set up an auto-responder to reply within a minute, saying, "Thanks for your message. I'll get back to you within 24 hours." People suspect their e-mail will go wrong. So getting an immediate response is reassuring, even if the text is boilerplate. (Of course, you ought to put your full name, address, and phone in there, too, as evidence of your good faith).

*Write as though Mom were reading.*

—Nancy Flynn,  
*The ePolicy Handbook*

Then beat their expectations by responding within 6 hours. Don't let a day go by without a response.

You must set some kind of deadline for replies. The sign of a mature site is absolute determination to reply within a few hours. Beginning sites often neglect this little touch, making thousands of customers mad enough to vow never to return.

Set some limits on what respondents can say, too. You can't preannounce products or services, promise repairs that may not materialize, swear that if the reader just follows your advice everything will work like a well-oiled machine.

Develop a styleguide just for e-mail. Define the exact capitalization, spelling, punctuation of product names, departments, technical terms, so you are consistent within your message, and if anyone else writes to the same customer, the text looks as if it comes from the same company. You'll probably want to ban e-mail abbreviations like BTW ("by the way"), and THX ("Thanks") because some people imagine those are airports, or car models.

## Make the subject line mean something

You don't want the customer deleting your message, thinking it is just another pitch for working at home, winning a sweepstake, losing weight, spying on people, or getting a diploma without taking a course. Use at least one word from the customer's description of the problem.

What's the point? You have a purpose: articulate that in your subject line.

If the customer wrote a particular subject line, repeat it. Don't go generic.

## Start off recognizing what they said

Your consumer is still a bit suspicious. To capture attention right away, begin your message by writing a sentence that includes the language the customer used. Don't just quote them—that's too mechanical. Think about what they said and apologize for the difficulty, taking care to show you have actually listened to their representation of the problem.

If the customers have sent nasty, snotty, vicious, or stupid mes-

*The subject line is your friend.*

—Jim Sterne,

*Customer Service on the Internet*

sages, make the effort to put yourself in their position. Try to understand how your site could have provoked such a reaction. Of course, some folks are just jerks, and no amount of empathy will make you respect them. And if you have some smart-aleck comment, tell your neighbor, but resist typing it into your response. Snappy put-downs have a way of turning an irritated customer into a militant adversary.

### **Deliberately express sympathy and interest**

Your job's to help, not poke a customer with a stick. So, within the constraints of diplomacy and your job, dare to say that you are sorry, that you are concerned, that you care.

Even if you are talking about a technical subject, indulge in a little enthusiasm if you can manage it, but don't just throw in a few exclamation points. Real interest shows in nouns and verbs—not smarmy adjectives, and oily adverbs. And never, never go ALL CAPS. That's shouting in your reader's ear. Alas, most businesses discourage the use of emoticons, that wonderful iconic language indicating the tone of voice.

### **Encourage your feminine side**

Gender differences show up in conversations via e-mail, according to some recent research. If the subject is technical, the tradition is male.

*Women tend to use the electronic medium as an extension of the way they talk—lavishly and intimately, to connect with people and build rapport.*

—Joyce Cohen,  
*He-Mails, She-Mails,*  
*New York Times*

Men come online to give information or give an answer, and in essence, stop the conversation.

(David Silver, Resource Center for Cyber Culture Studies)

Men tend to make strong assertions. (Susan Herring, Indiana University at Bloomington, Information Sciences and Linguistics)

Male-pattern e-mail seems to be abrupt, informational, and aggressive. Men tend to start or contribute eagerly to flame wars, but otherwise aim to limit the amount of interaction.

Useful, practical, to the point—that's the masculine style. But

it's a bit off-putting in an e-mail to a puzzled, upset, angry, or anxious consumer.

The feminine approach to e-mail is to soften most assertions, raise questions, make offers, give suggestions, and throw in a lot of polite comments, to support the other person. In all these ways, women encourage others to engage, according to professors Herring and Silver.

For guys, this style can mean slowing down, indulging in a little thought about the other person, making an effort to be agreeable, and weakening any assertions about what the customer may have done or thought.

Of course, you're writing in public, to someone you don't know. You can be polite without being fake, and you can keep your language gender neutral by talking about "you" not "he" or "she."

## Drop in boilerplate answers to common questions

You don't have time to answer the same question a hundred different ways. Settle on a pretty good response, and drop that into the e-mail after you have made a personal connection and expressed your feelings. The boilerplate version should be a very simple, very plain analysis of the problem, with clear steps to remedy it.

Just make sure your boilerplate doesn't give you away. If the standard chunk sounds completely unlike your opening, or refers to an illustration "above," your cover will be blown. Best bet—re-read the material in context and make a few edits, to keep the tone and content relevant.

*Expression is the act of the whole man, that our speech may be vascular. The intellect is powerless to express thought without the aid of the heart and liver and of every member.*

—Henry Thoreau, *Journal*

## Add a signature block

Let them get hold of you. Put as much of an address as you can stand. Put a favorite quote, if your firm allows it.

Sign your name. What a simple way to personalize a message!

## Iron out the wrinkles

Run the spell checker and grammar checker, will you? Don't assume that because so many e-mails look like the senders typed them with their toes, you can get away with typos, left-out words, repeated words, messed-up punctuation.

Open up the page, too. Break up the text into a lot of short paragraphs, put extra white space around headings, and use asterisks for bullets (the dingbats, circles, and squares may not survive e-mail hell). Set your e-mail program to break lines after 65 characters, so, with luck, the reader can see your whole text without having to scroll horizontally, or choose Word Wrap, just to figure out what you are saying.

You don't want irritating little wrinkles to distract the reader from your message, so turn on the iron and apply the steam.

### **Don't send attachments**

You don't know what software the recipient has, so you have no guarantee that the document will appear as you formatted it; in fact, it may just show up as boxes and hexadecimal numbers. Plus, if you have any virus, you can spread it fast with the attachments—not a confidence builder. Some organizations refuse attachments for this reason.

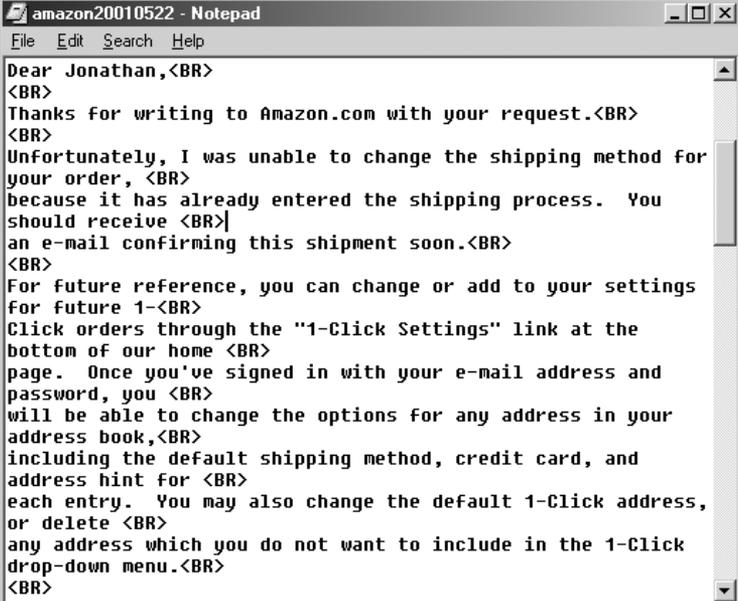
Better to copy and paste. Put the relevant parts of the document into your message.

*Many of the problems, and most of the lawsuits, that result from employee use of computers in the workplace revolve around electronic mail.*

—Michael R. Overly, *e-Policy*

**See:** Cohen (2001), Flynn (2001), Hartman and Nantz (1996), Herring (1996), Korenman (1999), Overly (1999), Silver (1997, 2000), Sterne (1996).

## Case Study: E-mail Responses from Amazon.com

A screenshot of a Notepad window titled "amazon20010522 - Notepad". The window contains the following text:

```
Dear Jonathan,<BR>
<BR>
Thanks for writing to Amazon.com with your request.<BR>
<BR>
Unfortunately, I was unable to change the shipping method for
your order, <BR>
because it has already entered the shipping process. You
should receive <BR>
an e-mail confirming this shipment soon.<BR>
<BR>
For future reference, you can change or add to your settings
for future 1-<BR>
Click orders through the "1-Click Settings" link at the
bottom of our home <BR>
page. Once you've signed in with your e-mail address and
password, you <BR>
will be able to change the options for any address in your
address book,<BR>
including the default shipping method, credit card, and
address hint for <BR>
each entry. You may also change the default 1-Click address,
or delete <BR>
any address which you do not want to include in the 1-Click
drop-down menu.<BR>
<BR>
```

So I was shopping for a book, and I chose the famous patented 1-Click® order, and then I realized I would need the book faster than usual, so I went to My Account and changed the shipping options. Or so I thought. Turns out—I figured out after an hour of fiddling—once you start a 1-Click® order, you cannot change the settings for that order. Any changes only apply to the next order. What I now realize I should have done is cancel that order and start over. But I was too stupid to do that. (Not that the labels warned me that changing my shipping options didn't really change my shipping options right away).

When I got the confirming e-mail for my order, I discovered that I was going to be getting the order at the usual pace (three to five business days, which turns out to be fairly cheap). I immediately e-mailed them—long before the warehouse got around to packing

up the order. I asked them to change the shipping option for that order, and I told them my sad story.

I got an answer back right away. The speed was great. But the customer support person had just copied and pasted the instructions for changing my shipping options in my account. I knew how to do that. I had already said I had done that. It just didn't work—or at least, it didn't work right away, the way I thought it would.

So I wrote back, with a longer version of my tale, apologizing for not having explained my situation very clearly, and begging, yes, begging them to speed up the order.

I got back a very friendly refusal. Gosh, this writer really cared. She wanted me to know she was upset that she just couldn't help, because the order was underway, and, well, there was nothing she could do. She signed her real name, and invited me to write her if there was anything else she could help me with.

I replied. Within a few hours, I got a note thanking me for writing, and apologizing for the difficulty.

I've passed your message along to the appropriate people in our company—I know they will want to hear about your experience. We truly value customer feedback such as yours, as it helps us continue to improve the service we provide.

Well, having seen how well Amazon.com adapts itself to customer demands, morphing this way and that, I can believe that “the appropriate people” do actually listen, despite the slightly smarmy tone.

Then the writer issued another apology:

I am really truly sorry that we were not able to fulfill your expectations for this level of service. I hope that you will honor us with another opportunity to prove the quality of our service to you in the future.

Well, OK. I am mollified. I like all those apologies, and I like the fact that the writer is not just stonewalling, or acting like I am an idiot. At least the writer makes an effort to pretend to care. I particularly like the “really truly” part.

But then the writer copied and pasted instructions on adding items, changing quantities, and canceling a 1-Click® order—none of which I had asked about. I wonder why. Perhaps the writer just wanted to be helpful, and thought these boilerplate paragraphs were the closest to my situation. Perhaps the writer didn’t read my e-mail very carefully. I was left with mixed feelings—pleased at the speed and volume of response, vertutzt that the responses never addressed the problem I had raised.

Turns out the package arrived within three days, which was fine. I couldn’t have read the book when I originally planned to. The crisis turned out to be nothing special, so my anger faded, and I have no reason to nurse a grudge. In fact, what stays with me was the “really truly” emotion that the three different writers put into their e-mails. I had made contact, even though at an odd angle. That’s what sticks with me: despite the weird balkiness of one part of their software, I feel an even deeper connection with the folks at Amazon.

POST |

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