Lecture 20

Writing Bad-News Messages

In this lecture you will learn to

• Choose correctly between indirect and direct approaches to a bad-news
• Establish the proper tone from the beginning of your message
• Use neutral lead-ins to put your audience in an accepting mood
• Present bad news in a reasonable and understandable way
• Write message that motivate your audience to take constructive action
• Close messages so that your audience is willing to continue a business
  relationship with your firm

Organizing bad-news messages

• It’s important that you realize that some people interpret being rejected as a
  personal failure; being turned down for a job or for credit, or even being rejected in
  less sensitive areas, usually complicate people’s lives.
• Business decisions should not be made solely to avoid hurting someone’s feelings,
  but mixing bad news with consideration for your reader’s needs helps your
  audience understand that the unfavorable decision is based on a business
  judgment, not on a personal one.
• As with direct requests and routine, good-news, and goodwill messages, bad-
  news messages are best communicated across cultures by using the tone,
  organization, and other cultural conventions that your audience expects.
• People in Germany tend to be more direct with bad news, but in Japan bad news
  can be presented so positively that a U.S. businessperson may not detect it at all.
• Your tone contributes to your message’s effectiveness by supporting
  three specific goals:
    – Helping your audience understand that your bad-news message represents
      a firm decision
    – Helping your audience understand that under the circumstances, your
      decision was fair and reasonable.
    – Helping your audience remain will disposed toward your business and
      possibly toward you
• With the right tone, you can make an unwelcome point while preserving your
  audience’s ego.
• One key is to make liberal use of the “you” attitude, for example, by pointing
  out how your decision might actually further your audience’s goals.
• Another key is to convey concern by looking for the best in your audience; assume your audience is interested in being fair, even when they are at fault.
• Finally, you can ease disappointment by using positive words rather than negative ones.
• The two basic strategies described are
  – The indirect plan, which presents supporting data before the main idea
  – The direct plan, which presents the main idea before the supporting data

**Indirect Plan**

• Instead of beginning a business message with a blunt no, which might keep your audience from reading or listening to your reasons, use the indirect plan to ease your audience into the part of your message that demonstrates how you’re fair-minded and eager to do business on some other terms.
• The indirect plan consists of four parts
  – A buffer
  – Reasons supporting the negative decision
  – A clear, diplomatic statement of the negative decision
  – A helpful, friendly, and positive close
• By presenting the reasons for your decision before the bad news itself, you gradually prepare the audience for disappointment.
• In most cases, this approach is more appropriate than an abrupt statement of the bad news.

**Buffer**

• The first step in using the indirect plan is to put the audience in an accepting mood by making a neutral, non-controversial statement closely related to the point of the message.
• If possible, base the buffer on statements made by the person you’re responding to, since using an unrelated buffer makes you seem to be “beating around the bush”; you appear unethical, so you lose your audience’s respect.
• When composing your buffer, avoid giving the impression that good news will follow.
• Building up the audience at the beginning only makes the subsequent letdown even more painful.
• Consider the example on the following slide:
Buffer – example

- Imagine your reaction if you were to get a letter from Schulz’s Creative Associates with this opening: “Your resume indicates that you would be well suited as a vendor for our Peanuts characters.”
- Now compare that opening with this: “Your resume shows very clearly why you are interested in becoming a vendor for our Peanuts characters.”
- The second opening emphasizes the applicant’s favorable interpretation of her or his qualifications rather than the company’s evaluation, so it’s less misleading while still being positive.

Buffer

- **Avoid saying no:** An audience encountering the unpleasant news right at the beginning will react negatively to the rest of the message, no matter how reasonable and well phrased it is.
- **Avoid using a know-it-all tone:** When you use phrases such as “you should be aware that,” the audience will expect your lecture to lead to a negative response and will therefore become resistant to the rest of your message.
- **Avoid wordy and irrelevant phrases and sentences:** Sentences such as “We have received your letter,” “This letter is in reply to your request,” and “We are writing in response to your request” are irrelevant; you make better use of the space by referring directly to the subject of the letter.
- **Avoid apologizing:** An apology weakens your explanation of the unfavorable decision.
- **Avoid writing a buffer that is too long:** The point is to identify briefly something that both you and the audience are interested in and agree on before proceeding in a businesslike way.
- **Agreement:** Find a point on which you and the reader share similar views.
  - For example “We both know how hard it is to make a profit in this industry.”
- **Appreciation:** Express sincere thanks for receiving something.
  - For example “Your check for $127.17 arrived yesterday. Thank you.”
- **Cooperation:** Convey your willingness to help in any way you realistically can.
  - For example “Employee Services is here to smooth the way for those who work to achieve the company’s goals.”
- **Good news:** Start with the part of your message that is favorable.
  - For example “A replacement knob for your range is on its way, shipped February 10 via UPS.”
• Fairness: Assure the reader that you’ve carefully examined and considered the problem or mention an appropriate action that has already been taken.
  – For example “For the past week, we have carefully monitored those using the photocopier to see whether we can detect any pattern of use to explain its frequent breakdowns.”

• Praise: Find an attribute or achievement to compliment
  – For example “Your resume shows an admirable breadth of experience, which should serve you well as you progress in your career.”

• Understanding: Demonstrate that you understand the reader’s goals and needs.
  – For example “So that you can more easily find the typewriter with the features you need, we are enclosing a brochure that describes all the Olsen typewriters currently available.”

• Resale: Favorably discuss the product or company related to the subject of the letter
  – For example “With the heavy-duty, full-suspension hardware and fine veneers, the desks and file cabinets in our Montclair line have become a hit with value-conscious professionals”

Reasons

• If you’ve done a good job of composing the buffer, the reasons will follow naturally.
• Cover the more positive points first; then move on to the less positive ones.
• Provide enough detail for the audience to understand your reasons, but be concise; a long roundabout explanation may make your audience impatient.
• It is more important to explain why you have reached your decision before you explain what that decision is.
• If you present your reasons effectively, they will help convince audience members that your decision is justified, fair, and logical.
• Present reasons to show that your decision is reasonable and fair.
• When giving your reasons, be tactful by highlighting the benefits of the decision to the audience, instead of focusing on the company.
• For example, when saying no to a credit request, show how your decision will keep the person from becoming overextended financially.
• As you explain your reasons, don’t try to cushion bad news by hiding behind a company policy.
• Although skilled and sympathetic communicators may sometimes quote company policy, they also briefly explain it so that the audience can try to meet the requirement at later time.
• Don’t apologize when giving your reasons, apologies are appropriate only when someone in your company has made a severe mistake or done something terribly wrong.
• If no one in the company is at fault, an apology gives the wrong impression.
• The tone of the language you use to explain your reasons greatly influences your audience’s reception of the bad news that follows, so avoid negative, counterproductive words like ‘error’, ‘dissatisfied’, ‘shocked’ etc.
• Don’t adopt an accusing tone.
• Product the audience’s pride by using language that conveys respect.
• Say “The appliance won’t work after being immersed in water” instead of “you shouldn’t have immersed the appliance in water.”
• When refusing the application of a management trainee, a tactfully worded letter might give these reasons for the decision not to hire:
  – Because these management trainee positions are quite challenging, our human relations department has researched the qualifications needed to succeed in them. The findings show that the two most important qualifications are a bachelor’s degree in business administration and two years’ supervisory experience.
• The paragraph does a good job of stating the reasons for the refusal:
  – It provides enough detail to make the reason for the refusal logically acceptable.
  – It implies that the applicant is better off avoiding a program in which he or she would probably fail, given the background of others who would be working alongside him or her.
  – It doesn't rest solely on company policy. A relevant policy exists but is presented as logical rather than rigid.
  – It offers no apology for the decision.
  – It avoids negative personal expressions (“You do not meet our requirements”).
• Although specific reasons help the audience accept bad news, reasons cannot always be given.
• When reasons involve confidential, excessively complicated, or purely negative information or when the reasons benefit only you or your firm (such as enhancing the company’s profits), don’t include them, instead move directly to the next section.
The Bad News

- When the bad news is a logical outcome of the reasons that come before it, the audience is psychologically prepared to receive it.
- However, the audience may still react emotionally if the bad news is handled carelessly.
- Here are some methods for deemphasizing the bad news:
  - Minimize the space or time devoted to it.
  - Subordinate it in a complex or compound sentence (“My department is already shorthanded, so I’ll need all my staff for at least the next two months”)
  - Embed it in the middle of a paragraph.
- Two other techniques are especially useful for saying no as clearly but painlessly as possible.
  - First, using a conditional (if or when) statement that implies the audience could possibly have received or might someday receive a favorable answer: “When you have more managerial experience, you are welcome to reapply”
  - The other technique is to tell the audience what you did do, can do, or will do rather than what you did not do, cannot do, or won’t do. Say “We sell exclusively through retailers, and the one nearest you that carries our merchandise is …” rather than “We are unable to serve you, so please call your nearest dealer.”
- A statement like this need not be followed by the explicit news that you won’t be hiring the reader.
- By focusing on the positive and only implying the bad news, you soften the blow.
- Of course, when implying bad news, be sure your audience understands the message – including the bad news.
- It would not be ethical to overemphasize the positive.
- Be sure to avoid blunt statements that are likely to cause pain and anger.
- The following phrases are likely to offend and should be avoided:
  - I must refuse we must deny
  - We cannot allow we must reject

Positive Close

- After giving the bad news, your job is to end the message on a more upbeat note.
- If you’ve asked someone to decide between alternatives or to take some action, make sure she or he knows what to do, when to do it, and how to do it with ease.
• Whatever type of close you choose, follow these guidelines:
  – Don’t refer to or repeat the bad news.
  – Don’t apologize for the decision or reveal any doubt that the reasons will be accepted (avoid statements such as “I trust our decision is satisfactory”)
  – Don’t urge additional communication (avoid saying anything like “IF you have further questions, please write”) unless you’re really to discuss your decision.
  – Don’t anticipate problems (avoid statements such as “Should you have further problems, please let us know”)
  – Don’t include clichés that are insincere in view of the bad news (avoid saying “If we can be of any help, please contact us”).
  – Don’t reveal any doubt that you will keep the person as a customer (avoid phrases such as “We hope you will continue to do business with us”).

Direct Plan
• A bad news message organized on the direct plan would start with a clear statement of the bad news, proceed to the reasons for the decision, and end with a courteous close.
• Stating the bad news at the beginning has two potential advantages:
  – It makes a shorter message possible
  – The audience needs less time to reach the main idea of the message, the bad news itself.
• Although the indirect approach is preferable in most bad news messages, you may sometimes want to move right to the point.
• Memos are often organized so that the bad news comes before the reasons.
• Some managers even expect all internal correspondence to be brief and direct, regardless of whether the message is positive or negative.
• Routine bad news messages to other companies often follow the direct plan, especially if they relay decisions that have little or no personal impact.
• The direct plan is also appropriate when you want to present an image of firmness and strength; for example, the last message in a collection series, just before the matter is turned over to an attorney, usually gets right to the point.

Conveying bad news about orders
• For several reasons, businesses must sometimes convey bad news concerning orders.
  – To work toward an eventual sale along the lines of the original order
  – To keep instructions or additional information as clear as possible
  – To maintain an optimistic, confident tone so that your reader won’t lose interest
• When you must back-order for a customer, you have one of the two types of bad news to convey
  – You’re able to send only part of the order
  – You’re able to send none of the order

Example 1

Sandra Wofford asked InfoTech to host graduation ceremonies for Whiddier Community College, but InfoTech’s facilities will be in use on the day of graduation. In the following letter, May Yee Kwan delivers the bad news in a helpful and supportive way.

March 5, 2000

Dr. Sandra Wofford, President
Whiddier College
230 Whiddier Avenue
Tulsa, Oklahoma 74155

Dear Dr. Wofford:

Because we appreciate Whiddier College and the many opportunities you have provided to deserving students over the years, we at InfoTech have supported the college in many ways. Thank you for considering our grounds for your graduation ceremony.

Our company-wide sales meetings will be held during the week of May 26th and June 3rd. We will host over 200 sales representatives and their families, and activities will take place at both our corporate campus and the Roskuda Renaissance. Therefore we will be unable to devote an adequate support staff for your graduation.

My assistant, Roberta Jacobsen, suggests you contact the Municipal Botanical Gardens as a possible graduation site. She recommends calling Jerry Xena, director of public relations. If we can help in any other way with graduation, please let us know.

Even though our annual meeting will most likely prohibit us from ever hosting graduation, we remain firm in our commitment to you, President Wofford, and to the fine students you represent. We will continue to be a corporate partner to Whiddier College and will support your efforts as you move into the twenty-first century.

Sincerely,

May Yee Kwan
Public Relations Director

cc
Example 2

For a customer whose order for a recliner and ottoman will be partly filled, your letter might read like this one.

September 9, 1999

Dr. Elizabeth Pownworth
2524 St. Georgen Common
Boston, MA 22390-2827

Dear Dr. Pownworth:

Thank you for your order of the special edition recliner and matching ottoman. The recliner with custom features will be shipped today. The leather trim you designated turned out beautifully, and we’re sure the recliner will make a handsome addition to your study.

The roll-around ottoman has proved to be one of our most popular items. Our plant manager reports that, even though he has almost doubled production this year, we are still experiencing some delays. We estimate that your ottoman will be shipped no later than November 15 to arrive by Thanksgiving.

Remember that all La-Z-Boy products carry a lifetime guarantee. We know you will enjoy your recliner and ottoman for many years. I’ve enclosed a catalog that includes our latest designs. Please call me at (615) 358-2899 if you’d like to talk about any of our special fabrics or custom designs. We look forward to serving you again in the future.

Cordially,

Susanne Godfrey
Manager, Custom Designs

Enclosure

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