1.0 USING THE THREE-STEP PROCESS FOR WRITING BAD NEWS MESSAGES

Communicating negative news is a fact of life for all business professionals, from rejecting job applicants to telling customers that shipments will be late to turning down speaking invitations.

Bad news messages are challenging to write because we know our readers will not be happy to receive the news. These messages say "no" to the reader:

- No, you will not get your loan
- No, you aren't being hired
- No, you didn't get the scholarship
- No, you aren't accepted into the college of business
- No, I can't give a donation
- No, I can't help you
- No.

Bad news means the reader will not be able to accomplish his/her goals. For example, without a loan, a student may have to postpone plans to graduate on time because now the person has to go to work to raise the money. The homeless shelter that doesn't get your donation now has to worry about how it's going to feed its clients.

But news can't always be good. In life, we do have to reject less-qualified applicants, we don't have unlimited funds to give money to every deserving charity, and we can't always fill a customer's request on time.

When we need to say "no" to our readers, we usually mean "not under these circumstances." "No" now isn't necessarily "no" forever. If the student were to get a co-signer, he/she might be able to get the loan after all. Perhaps we'll be able to send a donation to the homeless shelter next month, after we've paid our own bills first.

So how do we give bad news without destroying our business relationship? You can see in list at the top of this page that stating bad news directly can often be very damaging and unnecessarily hurtful. When you need to deliver bad news, you have five goals:

1. to convey the bad news
2. to gain acceptance for it
3. to maintain as much goodwill a possible with your audience
4. to maintain a good image for our organization
5. if appropriate, to reduce or eliminate the need for future correspondence on the matter.

Five goals are clearly a lot to accomplish in one message. However, by learning some simple techniques, you can develop negative messages that reduce the stress for everyone involved and improve the effectiveness of your communication efforts.

1.1 Step 1: Plan Your Message

When planning your message, you can't avoid the fact that your audience does not want to hear what you have to say. To minimize the damage to business relationships and to encourage the acceptance of your message, analyze the situation carefully to better understand the context in which the recipient will process your message.

Be sure to consider your purpose thoroughly – whether it's straightforward (such as rejecting a job application) or more complicated (such as creating a negative performance review, in which you not only give the employee feedback on past performance but also help the person develop a plan to improve future performance.) Similarly, your audience profile can be simple and obvious in some situations (such as rejecting a credit request) and far more complex in others (such as telling a business partner that you've decided to terminate the partnership.)

With a clear purpose and your audience's needs in mind, identify and gather the information your audience will need in order to understand and accept your message. Negative messages can be intensely personal to the recipient, and in many cases recipients have a right to expect a thorough explanation of your answer. Empty clichés such as “Due to circumstances beyond our control” are vague because they don't tell the reader anything of substance.

Selecting the right medium is critical when delivering negative messages. For example, you might badly damage a business relationship if you use voice mail to reject a long-time employee's request for a promotion. Since the employee would surely have some important questions to ask, and you would certainly want to soothe hurt feelings, a face-to-face meeting would be the best choice for this situation. However, if your company received 10,000 credit applications a month, you can't afford to engage every rejected applicant in a one-on-one conversation. A well written form letter that limits response options from your readers – so that you don't have to explain the reasons for your decision already covered in your letter – is a better choice.

1.2 Step 2: Write Your Message

When adapting a negative message to your audience, every aspect of effective, diplomatic writing is amplified; after all, our audience does not want to hear a negative message and might disagree strongly with you. Be sure to maintain the you-attitude, and strive for polite language that emphasizes the positive whenever appropriate.

If your credibility hasn't already been established with an audience, lay out your qualifications for making the decision in question. Recipients of negative messages who don't think you are credible are more likely to challenge your decision. That's why, for example, messages related to late payments are often signed by a higher executive. And as always, projecting and protecting
your company's image is a prime concern. If you're not careful, a negative answer could spin out of control into negative feelings about your company.

When you use language that conveys respect and avoids an accusing tone, you protect your audience's pride. In addition, you can ease the sense of disappointment by using positive words rather than negative, counterproductive ones (see Fig. 1 below.)

Chances are you'll spend more time on word, sentence, and paragraph choices for negative messages than for any other type of business writing. People who receive bad news often look for subtle shares of meaning, seeking flaws in your reasoning or other ways to challenge the decision. By writing clearly and sensitively, you can take some of the sting out of bad news and help your reader to accept your decision and to move on.

### 1.3 Step 3: Complete Your Message

Your need for careful attention to detail continues as you complete your message. Revise your content to make sure everything is clear, complete, and concise – bearing in mind that even small flaws are magnified as readers react to your negative news. Produce clear, professional documents, and proofread carefully to eliminate mistakes. Finally, be especially sure that your negative messages are delivered promptly and successfully. Waiting for bad news is hard enough without wondering whether a message was lost.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig. 1 Choosing Positive Words</th>
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<td><strong>Examples of Negative Phrasings</strong></td>
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<td>The <em>damage</em> won't be fixed for a week.</td>
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<td>Although it wasn't our <em>fault</em>, there will be an <em>unavoidable delay</em> in your order.</td>
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<td><em>Due to unforeseen circumstances,</em> I won't be able to attend your meeting.</td>
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<td>I <em>regret</em> the misunderstanding.</td>
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<td>I was <em>shocked</em> to learn that you're unhappy.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Unfortunately,</em> we haven't received your payment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employees <em>cannot</em> park in the customer parking lot.</td>
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<td>The enclosed statement is <em>wrong.</em></td>
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### 2.0 DEVELOPING NEGATIVE MESSAGES

Effective bad news messages convey the negative information the customer must receive with an eye toward keeping future business.

Without even thinking about it, you've probably been using both the direct and indirect approaches to deliver bad news your entire life. When you come right out and tell somebody
some bad news, you're using a direct approach. When you try to soften the impact by easing your way into the conversation before delivering the bad news, you're using an indirect approach. Chances are you've already developed an instinctive feel for which approach to use in many situations. In your business writing, you'll need to make a similar choice whenever you deliver bad news; however, there are no clear guidelines to help you choose in every case.

Most bad news messages will be better accepted by our readers if we use the indirect approach. The care we take to soften the blow will result in effective messages that consider the readers' feelings and keeping their business.

2.1 The Indirect Approach for Negative Messages

The indirect approach helps readers prepare for the bad news by presenting the reasons for the bad news first. When done right, it doesn't obscure bad news, delay it, or limits your responsibility. Rather, the indirect approach eases the blow and help readers accept the situation. When done well, the indirect approach is a good example of reader-centered writing crafted with attention to both ethics and etiquette.

2.1.1 Open with a Buffer    The first step in using the indirect approach is to write a buffer, a neutral, non-controversial statement that is closely related to the point of the message. A buffer establishes common ground with your reader; moreover, if you're responding to a request, a buffer validates that request. Some critics believe that using a buffer is manipulative and unethical, even dishonest. However, buffers are unethical only if they're insincere or deceptive. Showing consideration for the feelings of others is never dishonest.

A poorly written buffer might trivialize the reader's concerns, divert attention from the problem with insincere flattery or irrelevant material, or mislead the reader into thinking your message actually contains good news. A good buffer, on the other hand, can express your appreciation for being considered (if you're responding to a request), assure your reader of your attention to the request, or indicate your understanding of the reader's needs. A good buffer also needs to be relevant and sincere.

Here are several types of effective buffers you could use to tactfully open a negative message.

**Appreciation**  Thank you for applying for a Barklay's line of credit.

**Agreement**  We both know how hard it is to make a profit in this industry.

**Cooperation**  *Barklay’s is here to smooth the way for restaurants at the cutting edge of gourmet dining.*

**Understanding**  So that you can more easily find the seasonings you need, enclosed is our brochure.

**Praise**
The China House Restaurant clearly has an impressive record of accomplishment in creating the quality dishes they want. We at Barklays…

Given the damage that a poorly composed buffer can do, consider each one carefully before you send it. Is it respectful? Is it relevant? Is it neutral, implying neither yes nor no? Does it provide a smooth transition to the reasons that follow? If you can answer yes to every question, you can proceed confidently to the next section of your message. However, if that little voice inside your head tells you that your buffer sounds insincere or misleading, it probably is, in which case you'll need to rewrite it.

2.1.2 Provide Reasons and Additional Information An effective buffer serves as a stepping stone to the next part of your message, in which you build up the explanations and information that will culminate in your negative news. The nature of the information you provide is similar to that of the direct approach—it depends on the audience and the situation—but the way you portray this information differs from any portrayal in a direct message because your reader doesn't know your conclusion yet.

An ideal explanation section leads readers to your conclusion before you come right out and say it. In other words, before you actually say no, the reader has followed your line of reasoning and is ready for the answer. By giving your reasons effectively, you help maintain focus on the issues at hand and defuse the emotions that always accompany significantly bad news.

As you lay out your reasons, guide your readers' responses by starting with the most positive points first and moving forward to increasingly negative ones. Provide enough detail for the audience to understand your reasons, but be concise; a long, roundabout explanation will just make your audience impatient. Your reasons need to convince your audience that your decision is justified, fair, and logical.

If appropriate, you can use the explanation section to suggest how the negative news might in fact benefit your reader. Suppose you work for a multinational company that wants to hire an advertising agency to support your offices in a dozen different countries, and you receive a proposal from an agency that has offices in only one of those countries. In your list of reasons, you could indicate that you don't want to impose undue hardship on the agency by requiring significant amounts of international travel. However, use this technique with care; it's easy to insult readers by implying that they shouldn't be asking for the benefits or opportunities they were seeking in the first place.

Avoid hiding behind company policy to cushion your bad news. If you say, "Company policy forbids our hiring anyone who does not have two years' supervisory experience," you imply that you won't consider anyone on his or her individual merits. Skilled and sympathetic communicators explain company policy (without referring to it as "policy") so that the audience can try to meet the requirements at later time. Consider this response to an employee:

Because these management positions are quite challenging, the 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 year's supervisory experience.

The paragraph above does a good job of stating reasons for the refusal:
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- It provides enough detail to logically support the refusal.
- It implies that the applicant is better off avoiding a program in which he or she might fail.
- It explains the company's policy as logical rather than arbitrary.
- It offers no apology for the decision because no one is at fault.
- It avoids negative personal expressions (such as "You do not meet our requirements")

Even valid, well-thought-out reasons won't convince every reader in every situation, but if you've done a good job of laying out your reasoning, then you've done everything you can to prepare the reader for the main idea, which is the negative news itself.

2.1.3 Continue with a Clear Statement of the Bad News  Now that you've laid out your reasons thoughtfully and logically, and now that readers are psychologically prepared to receive the bad news, your audience may still reject your message if the bad news is handled carelessly. Three techniques are especially useful for saying no as clear and as kindly as possible.

First, de-emphasize the bad news:
- Minimize the space or time devoted to the bad news—without trivializing it or withholding any important information.
- Subordinate bad news 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") This construction pushes the bad news into the middle of the sentence, the point of least emphasis.
- Embed bad news in the middle of a paragraph or use parenthetical expression ("Our profits, which are down, are only part of the picture").

However, keep in mind that it's possible to abuse de-emphasis. For instance, if the primary point of your message is that profits are down, it would be inappropriate to marginalize that news by burying it in the middle of a sentence. State the negative news clearly, then make a smooth transition to any positive news that might balance the story.

Second, use a conditional (if or when) statement to imply that the audience could have received, or might someday receive, a favorable answer ("When you have more managerial experience, you are welcome to reapply"). Such a statement could motivate applicants to improve their qualifications.

Third, emphasize what you can do or have done, rather than what you cannot 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." Also, by implying the bad news, you may not need to actually state it ("The five positions currently open have been filled with people whose qualification match those uncovered in our research"). By focusing on the positive and implying the bad news, you make the impact less personal.

When implying bad news, be sure your audience understands the entire message - including the bad news. Withholding negative information or overemphasizing positive information is unethical and unfair to your reader. If an implied message might lead to uncertainty, state your decision in direct terms. Just be sure to avoid overly blunt statements that are likely to cause pain and anger:
### Instead of This | Use This
--- | ---
I must refuse your request. | I will be out of town on the day you need me.
We must deny your application. | The position has been filled.
I am unable to grant your request. | Contact use again when you have established...
We cannot afford to continue the program. | The program will conclude on May 1.
Much as I would like to attend… | Our budget meeting ends too late for me to attend.
We must reject your proposal. | We've accepted the proposal from AAA Builders.
We must turn down your extension request. | Please send in your payment by June 15.

### 2.1.4 Close on a Positive Note

As with the direct approach, the conclusion of the indirect approach is your opportunity to emphasize your respect for your audience, even though you've just delivered unpleasant news. Express best wishes without ending on a falsely upbeat note. If you can find a positive angle that's meaningful to your audience, by all means consider adding it to your conclusion. However, don't try to pretend that the negative news didn't happen or that it won't affect the reader. Suggest alternative solutions if such information is available. In a message to a customer or potential customer, an ending that includes resale information or sales promotion may also be appropriate. If you've asked readers to decide between alternatives or to take some action, make sure that they know what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. Whatever type of conclusion you use, follow these guidelines:

- Avoid a negative or uncertain conclusion. Don't refer to, repeat, or apologize for the bad news, and refrain from expressing any doubt that your reasons will be accepted (avoid statements such as "I trust our decision is satisfactory").
- Limit future correspondence. Encourage additional communication only if you're willing to discuss your decision further (if you're not, avoid wording such as "If you have further questions, please write").
- Be optimistic about the future. Don't anticipate problems (avoid statements such as "Should you have further problems, please let us know").
- Be sincere. Steer clear of cliches that are insincere in view of the bad news (if you can't help, don't say, "If we can be of any help, please contact us").
- Be confident. Don't show any doubt, about keeping the person as a customer (avoid phrases such as "We hope you will continue to do business with us").

Finally, keep in mind that the closing is the last thing the audience has to remember you by. Try to make the memory a positive one.

### 2.2 Adapting to Your Audience

Even more than other business messages, negative messages require that you maintain your audience focus and be as sensitive as possible to audience needs. Therefore you may need to
adapt your message to cultural differences or to the difference between internal and external audiences.

2.2.1 Cultural Variations  Even though bad news is unwelcome in any language, the conventions for passing it on to business associates can vary considerably from country to country. For instance, French business letters are traditionally quite formal and writer oriented, often without reference to audience needs or benefits. Moreover, when the news is bad, French writers take a direct approach. They open with a reference to the problem or previous correspondence and then state the bad news clearly. While they don't refer to the audience's needs, they often do apologize and express regret for the problem.

In contrast, Japanese letters traditionally open with remarks about the season, business prosperity, or health. When the news is bad, these opening formalities serve as the buffer. Explanations and apologies follow, and then comes the bad news or refusal. Japanese writers protect their reader's feelings by wording the bad news ambiguously. Western readers may even misinterpret this vague language as a condition of acceptance rather than as the refusal it actually is.

In short, if you are communicating across cultures, you'll want to use the tone, organization, and other cultural conventions that your audience expects. Only then can you avoid the inappropriate or even offensive approaches that could jeopardize your business relationship.

2.2.2 Internal Versus External Audiences  You'll want to adapt your negative message according to whether your audience is inside or outside the organization. Recipients inside your company frequently have expectations for negative messages that differ from those of recipients outside the company. For example, employees will react negatively to news of an impending layoff, but company shareholders might welcome the news as evidence that management is trying to control costs. Most employees will not only expect more detail but will also expect to be informed before the general public is told.

Plus, after several years of seemingly endless upheavals and bad news, from market collapses to financial scandals, many employees are less inclined to believe what they hear from management. Cynicism and distrust are rampant today, and employees are tired of discussing change. They want to know more than how changes will help the company; they want to know how changes are going to affect them personally. Managers can rebuild trust only by communicating openly, honestly and quickly in both good times and bad.

Of course, negative news must also flow upward in an organization, from lower level employees to higher-level managers. Even when employees are not at fault, the reluctance to give bad news to superiors can be strong. In corporate cultures that don't encourage open communication, employees who fear retribution may go to great lengths to avoid sending bad news messages. In such a dysfunctional environment, failure breeds still more failure because decision makers don't get the honest, objective information they need to make wise choices. In contrast, managers in open culture expect their employees to bring them bad news whenever it happens so that corrective action can be taken. Whatever the case, if you do need to transmit bad news up the chain of command, don't try to pin the blame on anyone in particular. Simply emphasize the nature of the problem—and a solution, if possible. This tactic will help you earn a reputation as an alert problem solver, rather than as just a complainer.

Negative messages to outside audiences require attention to the diverse nature of your audience and the concern for confidentiality of internal information. A single message might have a half dozen separate audiences, all with differing opinions and agenda. You
may not be able to explain things to the level of detail that some of these people want if doing so would release proprietary information such as future product

2.3 Maintaining High Standards of Ethics and Etiquette

Sending and receiving negative messages leads to a natural human tendency to delay, downplay, or distort the bad news. Unfortunately doing so may be unethical, if not illegal. In recent years, numerous companies have been sued by shareholders, consumers, employees, and government regulators for allegedly withholding or delaying negative information in such areas as company finances, environmental hazards, and product safety. The stock brokerage firm Morgan Stanley was recently fined $2.2 million for being late in filing required complaint and misconduct reports 67 percent of the time. The pharmaceutical industry, under pressure for years to disclose the results of failed drug trials, began to publish some results to a public website (www.clinicalstudyresults.org) in 2004. When an organization has negative information that affects the well-being of others, it has an ethical obligation to communicate that information quickly, clearly, and completely.

This ethical obligation to communicate the facts also brings with it the responsibility to do so promptly. Bad news often means that people need to make other plans, whether it's an employee who needs to find a new job, consumers who need to stop using an unsafe product, or a community that needs to find safe drinking water when its supply has become polluted. The longer you wait to deliver bad news, the harder you make it for recipients to react and respond.

Some negative news scenarios will also test your self-control and sense of etiquette. An employee who lets you down, a supplier whose faulty parts damage your company's reputation, a business partner who violates the terms of your contract—such situations may tempt you to respond with a personal attack. Keep in mind that negative messages can have a lasting impact on both the people who receive them and the people who send them. As a communicator, it's your responsibility to minimize the negative impact of your negative messages through careful planning and sensitive, objective writing. As much as possible, focus on the actions or conditions that led to the negative news, not on personal shortcomings or character issues. This is how you can develop a reputation as a professional who can handle the toughest situations with dignity.

3.0 EXPLORING COMMON EXAMPLES OF NEGATIVE MESSAGES

In the course of your business career, you might write a wide variety of negative messages, from announcing declines in revenue to giving negative performance reviews. The following sections offer examples of the most common negative messages, dealing with topics such as routine business matters, organizational news, and employment messages.

3.1 Sending Negative Messages on Routine Business Matters

Most companies receive numerous requests for information and donations or invitations to join community or industry organizations. As you progress in your career and become more visible in your industry and community, you will receive a wide variety of personal invitations to speak at private or public functions or to volunteer your time for a variety of organizations. In addition, routine business matters such as credit applications and requests for adjustment will often require
negative responses. Neither you nor your company will be able to say yes to every request. So crafting negative responses quickly and graciously is an important skill for many professionals.

**3.1.1 Refusing Routine Requests**  
Routine requests may come both from groups and from individuals outside the company, as well as from colleagues inside the organization. When you aren’t able to meet the request, your primary communication challenge is to give a clear negative response without generating negative feelings or damaging either your personal reputation or the company's. As simple as these messages may appear to be, they can test your skills as a communicator because you often need to deliver negative information while maintaining a positive relationship with the other party.

Saying no is a routine part of business and shouldn't reflect negatively on you. If you said yes to every request that crossed your desk, you'd never get any work done. The direct approach will work best for most routine negative responses. It not only helps your audience get your answer quickly and move on to other possibilities but also helps you save time, since the direct approach is often easier to write.

The indirect approach works best when the stakes are high for you or for your receiver, when you or your company has an established relationship with the person making the request, or when you're forced to decline a request that you might have said yes to in the past.

Consider the following points as you develop your routine negative messages:

- **Manage your time carefully.** Ironically, as you move upward in your career, you'll receive more and more requests—and have less and less time to answer them. Focus your limited time on the most-important relationships and requests, then get in the habit of crafting quick standard responses for less important situations.

- **If the matter is closed, don't imply that it's still open.** If your answer is truly no, don't use phrases such as "Let me think about it and get back to you" as a way to delay saying no. Such delays waste time for you and the other party.

- **Offer alternative ideas if you can.** For example, if you need to turn down a speaking invitation, you might offer the name of someone else who might be willing to speak in your place. However, remember to use your time wisely in such matters. Unless the relationship is vital to your company, you probably shouldn't spend time researching alternatives for the other person.

- **Don't imply that other assistance or information might be available if it isn't.** Don't close your negative message with a cheery but insincere "Please contact us if we can offer any additional assistance." An empty attempt to mollify hostile feelings could simply lead to another request you'll have to refuse.

**3.1.2 Handling Bad News About Transactions**  
For any number of reasons, businesses must sometimes convey bad news concerning the sale and delivery of products and services. Bad news about transactions is always unwelcome and usually unexpected. These messages have three goals:

1. to modify the customer's expectation regarding the transaction,
2. to explain how you plan to resolve the situation, and
3. to repair whatever damage might've been done to the business relationship.
The specific content and tone of each message can vary widely, depending on the nature of the transaction and your relationship with the customer. Telling an individual consumer that her new sweater will be arriving a week later than you promised is a much simpler task than telling General Motors that 30,000 transmission parts will be a week late, especially since you know the company will be forced to idle a multimillion-dollar production facility as a result. Negative messages concerning professional services can be particularly tricky since the person writing such a message is often the same person who performs the service; as a result, these messages can have an uncomfortably personal aspect to them.

Negative messages about transactions come in two basic flavors. If you haven't done anything specific to set the customer's expectations—such as promising deliver within 24 hours—the message simply needs to inform the customer, with little or no emphasis on apologies. (Bear in mind, though, in this age of online ordering and overnight delivery, customers have been conditioned to expect instantaneous fulfillment of nearly every transaction, even if you haven't promised anything.) If the customer wasn't promised delivery by a certain date, you can simply inform the customer when to expect the rest of the order. You end the message with words that encourage future business.

If you did set the customer's expectations and now find you can't meet them, you task is more complicated. In addition to resetting the customer's expectations and explaining how you'll resolve the problem, you may need to include an element of apology. The scope of the apology depends on the magnitude of the mistake. For the customer who ordered the sweater, a simple apology, followed by a clear statement of when the sweater will arrive, would probably be sufficient. An explanation is usually not required, although if a meaningful reason exists, and if stating it will help smooth over the situation without sounding like a feeble excuse, by all means include it. For example, if a storm closed the highways and prevented your receiving necessary material, say so; however, if you simply received more orders than you expected and promised more than you could deliver, the customer will be less sympathetic. For larger business-to-business transactions, the customer may want an explanation of what went wrong in order to determine whether you'll be able to perform as you promise in the future.

To help repair the damage to the relationship and encourage repeat business, many companies offer discounts on future purchases, free merchandise, or other considerations. Even modest efforts can go a long way to rebuilding the customer's confidence in your company. However, you don't always have a choice. Business-to-business purchasing contracts often include performance clauses that legally entitle the customer to discounts or other restitution in the event of late delivery. Construction contracts sometime specify penalties for every day the project extends past the original completion date. In such cases, a simple apology is clearly inadequate.

3.1.3 Refusing Claims and Requests for Adjustment  Almost every customer who makes a claim or requests an adjustment is emotionally involved; therefore, the indirect method is usually the best approach for a refusal. Your job as a writer is to avoid accepting responsibility for the unfortunate situation and yet avoid blaming or accusing the customer. To steer clear of these pitfalls, pay special attention to the tone of your letter.

A tactful and courteous letter can build goodwill even while denying the claim. For example, Village Electronics recently received a letter from Daniel Lindmeier, who purchased a digital video camera a year ago. He wrote to say that the unit doesn't work correctly and to inquire about the warranty. Lindmeier believes that the warranty covers one year, when it actually covers only three months:
Dear Mr. Lindmeir,

Thank you for your letter about the battery release switch on your JVC digital camera. Village Electronics believes, as you do, that electronic equipment should be built to last. That's why we stand behind our products with a 90-day warranty.

Even though your JVC camera is a year old and therefore out of warranty, we can still help. Please package your camera carefully and ship it to our store in Hannover. Include your name, address, phone number, and a brief description of the malfunction, along with a check for $35 for an initial examination. After assessing the unit, we will give you a written estimate of the needed parts and labor. Then just let us know whether you want us to make the repairs – either by phone or by filling out the prepaid card we'll send you with the estimate.

If you choose to repair the unit, the $35 will be applied toward your bill, the balance of which is payable by check or credit card. JVC also has service centers available in your area. If you prefer to take the unit to one of them, please see the enclosed list.

Thanks again for inquiring about our service. I've also enclosed a catalog of our latest cameras and accessories, in which you'll find information about JVC's "Trade-Up Special." If you're ready to move up to one of the newest cameras, JVC will offer a generous trade-in allowance on your current model.

Sincerely,

Walter Brodie, Customer Service Manager

When refusing a claim, avoid language that might have a negative impact on the reader. Instead, demonstrate that you understand and have considered the complaint carefully. Then, even if the claim is unreasonable, rationally explain why you are refusing the request. Remember, don't apologize and don't hide behind "company policy." End the letter on a respectful and action-oriented note.

If you deal with enough customers over a long enough period, chances are you'll get a request that is particularly outrageous. You may even be positive that the person is being dishonest. You must resist the temptation to call the person a liar, crook, swindler, or an incompetent. If you don't, you could be sued for defamation, a false statement that tends to damage someone's character or reputation. (Written defamation is called libel; spoken defamation is called slander.) Someone suing for defamation must prove

1. that the statement is false,
2. that the language is injurious to the person's reputation, and
3. that the statement has been published for others to see.

If you can prove that your accusations are true, you haven't defamed the person. The courts are likely to give you the benefit of the doubt because our society believe that ordinary business communication should not be hampered by fear of lawsuit. However, beware of the irate letter intended to let off steam: If the message has no necessary business purpose and is expressed in abusive language that hints of malice you'll lose the case. To avoid being accused of defamation, follow these guidelines:

- Avoid using any kind of abusive language or terms that could be considered defamatory.
- If you wish to express your own personal opinions about a sensitive matter, use your own stationery (not company letterhead), and don't include your job title or
position. Just be aware that by doing so, you take responsibility for your own opinions, you are no longer acting within the scope of your duties with the company, and you are personally liable for any resulting legal action.

- Provide accurate information and stick to the facts.
- Never let anger or malice motivate your messages.
- Consult your company's legal department or an attorney whenever you think message might have legal consequences.
- Communicate honestly, and make sure that what you're saying is what you believe to be true.
- Emphasize a desire for a good relationship in the future.

Most important, remember that nothing positive can come out of antagonizing a customer, even a customer who has verbally abused you or your colleagues. Reject the claim and move on to the next challenge.

3.2 Sending Negative Organizational News

In addition to routine matters involving individual customers and other parties, you may encounter special cases that require you to issue negative announcement regarding some aspect of your products, services, or operations. Most of these scenarios have unique challenges that must be addressed on a case-by-case basis, but the general advice offered here applies to all of them. One key difference among these messages is whether you have time to plan the announcement. The following section addresses those negative messages that you do have time to plan for, the "Communicating in a Crisis" offers advice on communication during emergencies.

3.2.1 Communicating Under Normal Circumstances  Even the best-run companies stumble on occasion, sometimes through their own actions and sometimes through the actions of someone else. At other times, the company needs to make decisions that are unpopular with customers (price increases, product cancellation, product recalls), with employees (layoffs, benefit reductions, plant closings), or with other groups (relocating to a new community, replacing a board member, canceling contract with a supplier). The common characteristic of all these messages is the need to send negative announcements to one or more groups of people, rather than to a specific individual. Because you're using a single announcement to reach a variety of people, each of whom may react differently, these messages need to be planned with great care. A relatively simple announcement, such as a price increase, needs to be communicated to both customers on the outside and your sales force on the inside, neither of whom is likely to welcome the news.

A more significant event, such as a plant closing, can affect thousands of people in dozens of organizations. Employees need to find new jobs or get training in new skills. School districts may have to adjust budgets and staffing levels if many of your employees plan to move in search of new jobs. Your customers need to find new suppliers. Your suppliers may need to find other customers of their own. Government agencies may need to react to everything from a decrease in tax revenues to an influx of people seeking unemployment benefits.

When making negative announcements, follow these guidelines:

- **Match your approach to the situation.** A modest price increase won't shock most customers, so the direct approach is fine. However, canceling a product that people count on is another matter, so building up to the news via the indirect approach might be better.
Consider the unique needs of each group. As the plant closing example illustrates, various people have different information needs.

Give each audience enough time to react as needed. Most organizations operate on quarterly or annual budgeting cycles and need time to react to news. Employees, particularly higher-level executives, may need as much as six months or more to find new jobs.

Plan the sequence of multiple announcements. In addition to giving each group enough time, some groups will expect to be informed before others. For instance, if employees hear about a plant closing on the evening news or from a real estate agent, their trust in management will likely be destroyed. Tell insiders and the most-affected groups first.

Give yourself enough time to plan and manage a response. Chances are you're going to be hit with complaints, questions, or product returns after you make your announcement, so make sure you're ready with answers and additional follow-up information.

Look for positive angles but don't exude false optimism. Laying off 10,000 people does not give them "an opportunity to explore new horizons." It's a traumatic event that can affect employees, their families, and their communities for years. Phony optimism would only make a bad situation worse. The best you may be able to do is to thank people for their past support and to wish them well in the future. On the other hand, if eliminating a seldom-used employee benefit means the company doesn't have to deduct additional money from paychecks every month, by all means promote that positive angle.

Minimize the element of surprise whenever possible. This step can require considerable judgment on your part, but if you recognize that current trends are pointing toward negative results sometime in the near future, it's often better to let your audience know ahead of time. For instance, a common complaint in many shareholder lawsuits is a claim that the company didn't let investors know business was deteriorating until it was too late.

Seek expert advice if you're not sure. Many significant negative announcements have important technical, financial, or legal elements that require the expertise of lawyers, accountants, or other specialists. If you're not sure how to handle every aspect of the announcement, ask.

Negative situations will test your skills both as a communicator and as a leader. People may turn to you and ask, "OK, so things are bad; now what do we do?" Inspirational leaders try to seize such opportunities as a chance to reshape or reinvigorate the organization, and they offer encouragement to those around them.

3.2.2 Communicating in a Crisis  Some of the most critical instances of business communication occur during internal or external crises, which range from incident of product tampering to industrial accidents, crimes or scandals involving company employees, on-site hostage situations, or terrorist attacks. During a crisis, employees, their families, the surrounding community, and others will demand information plus, rumors can spread unpredictably and uncontrollably. You can also expect the news media to descend quickly, asking questions of anyone they can find.

Although you can't predict these events, you can prepare for them. Companies that respond quickly with the information people need tend to fare much better in these circumstances than those who go into hiding or release bits and pieces of uncoordinated or inconsistent information. Companies such as Johnson & Johnson (in a Tylenol-tampering incident) emerged from crisis with renewed respect for their decisive action and responsive communication. In contrast, Exxon continues to be cited as a classic example of how not to communicate in a crisis-more than a
quarter century after one of its tankers spilled 250,000 barrels of oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound. The company frustrated the media and the public with sketchy, inconsistent information and an adamant refusal to accept responsibility for the full extent of the environmental disaster. The company's CEO didn't talk to the media for nearly a week; other executives made contradictory statements, which further undermined public trust. The mistakes had a lasting impact on the company's reputation and consumers' willingness to buy its products.

The key to successful communication efforts during a crisis is having a **crisis management plan**. In addition to defining operational procedures to deal with the crisis itself, the plan also outlines communication tasks and responsibilities, which can include everything from media contacts to news release templates. The plan should clearly specify which people are authorized to speak for the company, contact information for all key executives, and a list of the media outlets and technologies that will be used to disseminate information. At Baptist Hospital in hurricane-prone Pensacola, Florida, human resources director Celeste Norris and her colleagues plan for every contingency. For instance, the walkie-talkies they keep on hand became the only communication link throughout the facility when Hurricane Ivan took out both electrical power and cell phone towers. Many companies now go one step further by regularly testing crisis communications in realistic practice drills lasting a full day or more. Anticipation and planning are key to successful communication in a crisis.

### 3.3 Sending Negative Employment Messages

Most managers must convey bad news about individual employees from time to time. You can use the direct approach when writing to job applicants or when communicating with other companies to send a negative reference to a prospective employer. But it's best to use the indirect approach when giving negative performance reviews to employees; they will most certainly be emotionally involved. In addition, choose the media you use for these messages with care. E-mail and other written forms let you control the message and avoid personal confrontation, but one-on-one conversations are more sensitive and facilitate questions and answers.

#### 3.3.1 Refusing Requests for Recommendation Letters

Even though many states have passed laws to protect employers who provide open and honest job references for former employees, legal hazards persist. That's why many former employers still refuse to write recommendation letters—especially for people whose job performance has been unsatisfactory. When sending refusals to prospective employers, your message may be brief and direct:

> Our human resources department has authorized me to confirm that Yolanda Johnson worked for Tandy, Inc., for three years, from June 2003 to July 2007. Best of luck as you interview administrative applicants.

This message doesn't need to say, "We cannot comply with your request." It simply gets down to the business of giving readers the information that is allowable. Refusing an applicant's direct request for a recommendation letter is another matter. Any refusal to cooperate may seem a personal slight and a threat to the applicant's future. Diplomacy and preparation help readers...
accept your refusal:

Thank you for letting me know about your job opportunity with Coca-Cola. Your internship there and the MBA you've worked so hard to earn should place you in an excellent position to land the marketing job.

Although we do not send out formal recommendations here at PepsiCo, I can certainly send Coca-Cola a confirmation of your employment dates. And if you haven't considered this already, be sure to ask several of your professors to write evaluations of your marketing skills. Best of luck to you in your career.

This letter deftly and tactfully avoids hurting the reader's feelings, because it makes positive comments about the reader's recent activities, implies the refusal, suggests an alternative, and uses a polite close.

3.3.2 Rejecting Job Applications  
Tactfully telling job applicants that you won't be offering them employment is another frequent communication challenge. But don't let the difficulty stop you from communicating the bad news. Failing to respond to applications is a shoddy business practice that will harm your company's reputation. At the same time, poorly written rejection letters have negative consequences, ranging from the loss of qualified candidates for future openings to the loss of potential customers (not only the rejected applicants but also their friends and family). Poorly phrased rejection letters can even invite legal troubles. When delivering bad news to job applicants, follow three guidelines:

- **Choose your approach carefully.** Experts disagree on whether a direct or an indirect approach is best for rejection letters. On the one hand, job applicants know they won't get many of the positions they apply for, so negative news during a job search is not generally a shock. On the other hand, people put their hopes and dreams on the line when they apply for work, so job applicants have a deep emotional investment in the process, which is one of the factors to consider in using an indirect approach. If you opt for a direct approach, try not to be brutally blunt in the opening. Tell your reader that the position has been filled, rather than saying, "Your application has been rejected." If you opt for an indirect approach, be careful not to mislead the reader or delay the bad news for more than a sentence or two. A simple "Thank you for considering ABC as the place to start your career" is a quick, courteous buffer that shows your company is flattered to be considered. Don't mislead the reader in your buffer by praising his or her qualifications in a way that could suggest good news is soon to follow.

- **Clearly state why the applicant was not selected.** Make your rejection less personal by stating that you hired someone with more experience or whose qualifications match the position requirements more closely.

- **Close by suggesting alternatives.** If you believe the applicant is qualified, mention other openings within your company. You might suggest professional organizations that could help the applicant find employment. Or you might simply mention that the applicant's resume will be considered for future openings. Any of these positive suggestions may help the applicant be less disappointed and view your company more positively.
A rejection letter need not be long. Remember, sending a well-written form letter that follows these three guidelines is better than not sending one at all. After all, the applicant wants to know only one thing: Did I land the job? Your brief message conveys the information clearly and with tactful consideration for the applicant's feelings. After Carol DeCicco interviewed with Bradley Jackson, she was hopeful about receiving job offer. Everything went well, and her resume was in good shape. The e-mail below was drafted by Marvin Fichter to communicate the bad news to DeCicco. The e-mail helps DeCicco understand that (1) she would have been hired if she'd had more tax experience and (2) she shouldn't be discouraged.

Dear Ms. DeCicco:

Thanks for considering Bradley Jackson as the place to launch your career in accounting.

In light of the reporting complexities now imposed on the accounting profession by Sarbanes-Oxley and other recent legislation, the executive team has decided it would be wise to bolster our skill base with someone who has extensive industry experience. We have therefore filled the position with a more experienced candidate.

Your resume and credentials show you to be a deserving candidate for entry level positions. Your academic record and previous work experience certainly indicate your willingness to work hard. Those of us who had the opportunity to talk with you believe that your ability to communicate will certainly help you achieve an excellent position in a recognized accounting firm.

In the meantime, we would like to keep your information on file for six months, in case a position requiring less experience opens up in the future.

I wish you the best of luck as you begin your new career.

Sincerely,

Marvin R. Fichter
Human Resources Director

3.3.3 Giving Negative Performance Reviews  A performance review is a manager's evaluation of an employee and may be formal or informal. Few other communication tasks require such a broad range of skills and strategy as those needed for performance reviews. The main purpose of these reviews is to improve employee performance by (1) emphasizing and clarifying job requirements, (2) giving employees feedback on their efforts toward fulfilling those requirements, and (3) guiding continued efforts by developing a plan of action, which includes rewards and opportunities. In addition to improving employee performance, performance reviews help companies set organizational standards and communicate organizational values.

Positive and negative performance reviews share several characteristics: The tone is objective and unbiased, the language is nonjudgmental, and the focus is problem resolution. Also, to increase objectivity, more organizations are giving their employees feedback from multiple sources. In these "360-degree reviews," employees get feedback from all directions in the organization: above, below, and horizontally.

It's difficult to criticize employees face to face, and it's just as hard to include criticism in written performance evaluations. Nevertheless, if you fire an employee for incompetence and the performance evaluations are all positive, the employee can sue your company, maintaining you had no cause to terminate employment. Also, your company could be sued for negligence if an
injury is caused by an employee who received a negative evaluation but received no corrective action (such as retraining). So as difficult as it may be, make sure your performance evaluations are well balanced and honest.

When you need to give a negative performance review, follow these guidelines:

- **Confront the problem right away.** Avoiding performance problems only makes them worse. Moreover, if you don't document problems when they occur, you may make it more difficult to terminate employment later on, if the situation comes to that.

- **Plan your message.** Be clear about your concerns, and include examples of the employee's specific actions. Think about any possible biases you may have, and get feedback from others. Collect and verify all relevant facts (both strengths and weaknesses).

- **Deliver the message in private.** Whether in writing or in person, be sure to address the performance problem privately. Don't send performance reviews by e-mail or fax. If you're reviewing an employee's performance face to face, conduct that review in a meeting arranged expressly for that purpose, and consider holding that meeting in a conference room, the employee's office, or some other neutral area.

- **Focus on the problem.** Discuss the problems caused by the employee's behavior (without attacking the employee). Compare the employee's performance with what's expected, with company goals, or with job requirements (not with the performance of other employees). Identify the consequences of continuing poor performance, and show that you're committed to helping solve the problem.

- **Ask for a commitment from the employee.** Help the employee understand that planning for and making improvements are the employee's responsibility. However, finalize decisions jointly so that you can be sure any action to be taken is achievable. Set a schedule for improvement and for following up with evaluations of that improvement.

Even if your employee's performance has been disappointing, you would do well to begin by mentioning some good points in your performance review. Then clearly and tactfully state how the employee can better meet the responsibilities of the job. If the performance review is to be effective, be sure to suggest ways that the employee can improve. For example, instead of only telling an employee that he damaged some expensive machinery, suggest that he take a refresher course in the correct operation of that machinery. The goal is to help the employee succeed.

### 3.3.4 Terminating Employment

When writing a termination letter, you have three goals: (1) present the reasons for this difficult action, (2) avoid statements that might expose the company to a wrongful termination lawsuit, and (3) leave the relationship between the terminated employee and the firm as favorable as possible. For both legal and personal reasons, present specific justification for asking the employee to leave. If the employee is working under contract, your company's lawyers will be able to tell you whether the employee's performance is legal grounds for termination.

Make sure that all your reasons are accurate and verifiable. Avoid words that are open to interpretation, such as *untidy* and *difficult*. Make sure the employee leaves with feelings that are as positive as the circumstances allow. You can do so by telling the truth about the termination and by helping as much as you can to make the employee's transition as smooth as possible.