

## **How to Respond to a Negative Business Letter**

A negative business letter often takes the form of a complaint about your organization's service, the actions of an employee or the quality of its products. Although you might find it difficult to think of a negative business letter as an opportunity for improvement, when a customer identifies a problem with some aspect of your organization, it provides a different perspective. Customers will often not complain, but will simply take their business elsewhere. A customer who is willing to tell you about problems can help you improve your service or product.

### **Response Options and Goals**

You have several options when responding to a negative business letter. You can call the complainant directly or even make a face-to-face contact. You can send a written response in the form of an email, a form letter or a personally written business letter. Before you make contact, you should have several goals in mind: assure the customer that his concerns have been heard, apologize or make restitution if appropriate, and ensure that the problem does not occur in the future. Your response can have an impact on whether you retain or lose a customer. In fact, your response can also have an impact on whether you gain new customers, as dissatisfied customers are more likely to tell other people about the problems they have experienced with your company.

### **The Basic Steps in a Response**

One advantage of a personal call is the ability to let the customer know that you understand exactly what the issue is. Use phrases that indicate you recognize their specific issues. Ask questions and listen carefully to the responses. Paraphrase what the customer tells you and ask for confirmation. If you choose to send an email or business letter in response to a negative business letter, use some of the same steps that you would use in a personal call. Describe the problem as you understand it. Offer an apology and state what you plan to do to correct the problem. If appropriate, propose a solution, send a new product or send a refund. If the problem is service, don't say anything specific about an individual employee or whether corrective action has been taken, but let the customer know that you will or have already followed up on the issue.

### **When the Customer Is Wrong**

In some cases, the issue the customer brings to you may be completely out of your control; in other instances the customer's perception of the issue can be so distorted that she is being unreasonable. Express your regret that she is dissatisfied and politely reject responsibility, while noting the reasons for the rejection. If the real problem is with another organization, such as the shipper who damaged the product in transit, include contact information so the customer can follow through.

### **Say Thank You**

Always thank the customer for bringing a problem to your attention, whether in a personal call or a written communication. Conclude with a

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statement intended to express goodwill and the expectation that you will maintain a business relationship. In some cases, skillful handling of a problem can result in very high customer satisfaction, because people usually recognize that problems and errors can occur. They want to know you will handle the situation well when mistakes happen and that you will prevent the problems from happening again.

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