

CHAPTER

# 11

## Negative Messages

### Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will know:

- 1 Different ways to organize negative messages.
- 2 Ways to construct the different parts of negative messages.
- 3 How to improve the tone of negative messages.
- 4 Ways to construct different kinds of negative messages.

## IN THE NEWS

# Averting Crisis: Conveying the Right Message at the Right Time



JetBlue's infamous weather problems in the winter of 2007 illustrate how communication problems can exacerbate negative events.

On February 14, 2007, JetBlue, an airline with a reputation built on exceptional customer service, followed their normally aggressive customer service strategy by attempting to continue operations during an ice storm along parts of the East Coast. While other airlines canceled flights out of John F. Kennedy International airport in New York, JetBlue boarded passengers and rolled planes to runways for de-icing, betting that the planes eventually would be able to take off as the storm subsided.

The weather did not clear.

Other planes were subsequently parked at terminal gates, preventing JetBlue planes from returning to the gates to unload passengers. Hundreds of passengers were held aboard planes, some for as long as 11 hours. Thousands more passengers and mounds of baggage were stranded inside JFK airport and at airports in other cities. Reports of JetBlue's problems were flashed around the country by news media.

Weather-related delays and cancellations are an unwelcome, but not unusual, situation for airlines and their passengers. In this case, however, JetBlue's problems were exacerbated by the company's failure to communicate critical messages at critical times.

- Posting flight delays rather than cancellations kept passengers waiting in airports for hours before the flights were finally canceled.
- Passengers stranded on planes reported they were not given information about their status because the flight crews were not being informed.
- JetBlue delayed asking for buses to evacuate passengers from the loaded planes.
- Discussions between airline agents and passengers became argumentative.
- The JetBlue phone number was overloaded. Callers experienced lengthy holds, and many could not get through at all.

- The airline's computer system and crew-scheduling software were inadequate for the task of scheduling crews after the storm, slowing the return to full service.

JetBlue issued a public apology and offered refunds, vouchers for free flights, and penalty-free

rebooking services. Besides the damage to the company's reputation, estimated costs of the storm to JetBlue included \$14 million in customer refunds, \$16 million in travel vouchers, and \$4 million in staff overtime. In addition, JetBlue created a Customer Bill of Rights and vowed to develop a recovery plan to prevent a recurrence of the ice storm crisis.

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*JetBlue's problems were exacerbated by the company's failure to communicate critical messages at critical times.*

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Sources: Allan Sloan, with Temma Ehrenfeld, "Skies Were Cloudy Before Jet Blew It," *Newsweek*, March 5, 2007, 26; Jesus Sanchez and Alana Semuels, "JetBlue Struggles to Get Past Last Week's Fiasco," *Chicago Tribune*, February 19, 2007; WABC-TV Eyewitness News Team, 2007, "JetBlue Trying to Make Up for Storm Fiasco," in *7Online.com: New York City and Metro Area Traffic on WABC-TV*, <http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/story?section=traffic&id=5037072> (accessed March 15, 2007).

## Chapter Outline

### Organizing Negative Messages

- Giving Bad News to Clients and Customers
- Giving Bad News to Superiors
- Giving Bad News to Peers and Subordinates

### The Parts of a Negative Message

- Subject Lines
- Buffers
- Reasons
- Refusals
- Alternatives
- Endings

### Apologies

### Tone in Negative Messages

### Alternative Strategies for Negative Situations

- Recasting the Situation as a Positive Message
- Recasting the Situation as a Persuasive Message

### Varieties of Negative Messages

- Rejections and Refusals
- Disciplinary Notices and Negative Performance Appraisals
- Layoffs and Firings

### Solving a Sample Problem

- Problem
- Analysis of the Problem
- Discussion of the Sample Solutions

### Summary of Key Points

In a **negative message**, the basic information we have to convey is negative; we expect the audience to be disappointed or angry.

For many business people, negative communications are among those they most love to hate. You just read “In the News” telling how miscommunications greatly worsened a negative situation for JetBlue. A medical study found that cardiac care units with nurses with negative attitudes had a death rate four times higher than that of comparable units.<sup>1</sup> One Silicon Valley company calculated the costs of negative communications from a sales person known for negative interpersonal skills and e-mails. Their costs included managerial time, HR time, anger management training and counseling, among others, and came to \$160,000 for just one year. The company also deducted 60% of that cost from the employee’s bonus. A British study estimated the costs of bullying in firms with 1,000 employees to be about \$2 million a year per firm.<sup>2</sup>

The other side of the coin, and a classic illustration of how to handle negatives, is the Tylenol case. When Johnson and Johnson learned that seven people in the Chicago area had died from cyanide-laced Tylenol capsules, they immediately communicated their knowledge. They ordered the entire supply withdrawn from store shelves, and they offered to replace Tylenol capsules in people’s homes with tablets. This decision cost the company tens of millions of dollars. But it was the right decision. When Tylenol was released again several

months later in new, tamper-resistant containers, it recovered its market share. The company's forthright communications of the situation confirmed its integrity.<sup>3</sup> This chapter will follow the Tylenol path and look at some of the preferred ways to convey negative messages.

Negative messages include rejections and refusals, announcements of policy changes that do not benefit the audience, requests the audience will see as insulting or intrusive, negative performance appraisals, disciplinary notices, and product recalls or notices of defects.

A negative message always has several purposes:

#### Primary purposes:

- To give the audience the bad news.
- To have the audience read, understand, and accept the message.
- To maintain as much goodwill as possible.

#### Secondary purposes:

- To maintain, as much as possible, a good image of the communicator and the communicator's organization.
- To reduce or eliminate future communication on the same subject so the message doesn't create more work for the sender.

In many negative situations, the communicator and audience will continue to deal with each other. Even when further interaction is unlikely (for example, when a company rejects a job applicant or refuses to renew a customer's insurance), the firm wants anything the audience may say about the company to be positive or neutral rather than negative.

Some messages that at first appear to be negative can be structured to create a positive feeling. Even when it is not possible to make the audience happy with the news we must convey, we still want the audience to feel that

- They have been taken seriously.
- Our decision is fair and reasonable.
- If they were in our shoes, they would make the same decision.

## Organizing Negative Messages

The best way to organize a negative message depends on your audience and on the severity of the negative information.

### Giving Bad News to Clients and Customers

When you must give bad news to clients and customers, you need to be clear, but you also need to maintain goodwill. Compromises or alternatives can help you achieve both goals. See the first column in Figure 11.1.

Figure 11.2 illustrates one basic pattern for negative messages. This letter omits the reason, probably because the change benefits the company, not the customer. Putting the bad news first (though pairing it immediately with an alternative) makes it more likely that the recipient will read the letter. If this letter seemed to be just a routine renewal, or if it opened with the good news that the premium was lower, few recipients would read the letter carefully, and many would not read it at all. Then, if they had accidents and found that their coverage was reduced, they'd blame the company for not communicating clearly. Emphasizing the negative here is both good ethics and good business.



#### Listen!

Businesses often think they are listening to customers when they really aren't. Norm Brodsky is an entrepreneur with six businesses. His document destruction business received notification from an office manager that she was canceling their services. When Brodsky sent salespeople to see her, they "quickly realized that they had missed the real problem. Maybe they hadn't listened closely enough the first time or maybe she hadn't explained herself clearly and they hadn't asked enough questions. In any case, it turned out that the office manager didn't have complaints. Two other people did, and they'd taken their complaints to her. The complaints were fairly minor, and the other 48 people in the office were satisfied with our service, but the office manager didn't want to hear any complaints at all."

After resolving this issue, Brodsky writes how he "realized there were undoubtedly other accounts with similar issues. We had to understand that, when we signed up an office with 50 people in it, we had 50 customers not one." So Brodsky created a new position, service coordinator, who makes sure all customers, not just the office manager, can reach the company.

Adapted and quoted from Norm Brodsky, "We All Like to Think We Listen to Our Customers—But Do We Really Hear Them?" *Inc.*, July 2006, 56.

**Figure 11.1** How to Organize Negative Messages

Negative messages to clients and customers	Negative messages to superiors	Negative messages to peers and subordinates
<p>1. <b>When you have a reason that the audience will understand and accept, give the reason before the refusal.</b> A good reason prepares the audience to expect the refusal.</p> <p>2. <b>Give the negative information or refusal just once, clearly.</b> Inconspicuous refusals can be missed altogether, making it necessary to say <i>no</i> a second time.</p> <p>3. <b>Present an alternative or compromise, if one is available.</b> An alternative not only gives the audience another way to get what they want but also suggests that you care about them and helping them meet their needs.</p> <p>4. <b>End with a positive, forward-looking statement.</b></p>	<p>1. <b>Describe the problem.</b> Tell what's wrong, clearly and unemotionally.</p> <p>2. <b>Tell how it happened.</b> Provide the background. What underlying factors led to this specific problem?</p> <p>3. <b>Describe the options for fixing it.</b> If one option is clearly best, you may need to discuss only one. But if your superiors will think of other options, or if different people will judge the options differently, describe all the options, giving their advantages and disadvantages.</p> <p>4. <b>Recommend a solution and ask for action.</b> Ask for approval so that you can go ahead to make the necessary changes to fix the problem.</p>	<p>1. <b>Describe the problem.</b> Tell what's wrong, clearly and unemotionally.</p> <p>2. <b>Present an alternative or compromise, if one is available.</b> An alternative not only gives the audience another way to get what they want but also suggests that you care about them and helping them meet their needs.</p> <p>3. <b>If possible, ask for input or action.</b> People in the audience may be able to suggest solutions. And workers who help make a decision are far more likely to accept the consequences.</p>

### Giving Bad News to Superiors

Your superior expects you to solve minor problems by yourself. But sometimes, solving a problem requires more authority or resources than you have. When you give bad news to a superior, also recommend a way to deal with the problem. Turn the negative message into a persuasive one. See the middle column in Figure 11.1.

### Giving Bad News to Peers and Subordinates

When you must pass along serious bad news to peers and subordinates, use the variation in the last column in Figure 11.1.

No serious negative (such as being downsized or laid off) should come as a complete surprise, nor should it be delivered by e-mail. Researchers Timmerman and Harrison suggest that managers may be inclined to use electronic forms of communication to deliver bad news, but they should resist the temptation in most situations. Their study outlines four factors that should be considered when choosing a medium for delivering bad news: the severity of the message, the complexity of the explanation, the type of explanation, and the relationship between the superior and subordinates. Timmerman and Harrison suggest managers must always juggle the efficiency of delivering the message with its impact on receivers. Typically, managers who deliver bad news in face-to-face settings are more appreciated and accepted by employees.<sup>4</sup>

Managers can prepare for possible negatives by giving full information as it becomes available. It is also possible to let the people who will be affected by a decision participate in setting the criteria. Someone who has bought into the criteria for retaining workers is more likely to accept decisions using such criteria.

Figure 11.2 A Negative Letter

**Vickers**  
Insurance Company

3373 Forbes Avenue  
Rosemont, PA 19010  
(215) 572-0100

**Liability Coverage  
Is Being Discontinued—  
Here's How to Replace It!**

Dear Policyholder:

When your auto insurance is renewed, it will no longer include liability coverage unless you select the new Assurance Plan. Here's why.

Liability coverage is being discontinued. It, and the part of the premium which paid for it, will be dropped from all policies when they are renewed.

This change could leave a gap in your protection. But you can replace the old Liability Coverage with Vickers' new Assurance Plan.

With the new Assurance Plan, you receive benefits for litigation or awards arising from an accident—regardless of who's at fault. The cost for the Assurance Plan at any level is based on the ages of drivers, where you live, your driving record, and other factors. If these change before your policy is renewed, the cost of your Assurance Plan may also change. The actual cost will be listed in your renewal statement.

To sign up for the Assurance Plan, just check the level of coverage you want on the enclosed form and return it in the postage-paid envelope within 14 days. You'll be assured of the coverage you select.

Sincerely,  
*C. J. Morgan*  
C. J. Morgan  
President

P.S. The Assurance Plan protects you against possible legal costs arising from an accident. Sign up for the Plan today and receive full coverage from Vickers.

*Negative information highlighted so reader won't ignore message*

*Negative Alternative*

*Negative*

*Positive information underlined for emphasis*

*No reason is given. The change probably benefits the company rather than the reader, so it is omitted.*

*Forward-looking ending emphasizes reader's choice*

*Alternative*

And in some cases, the synergism of groups may make possible ideas that management didn't think of or rejected as "unacceptable." Some workplaces incorporate employee suggestion systems to help reduce excess costs and improve organizational effectiveness. In fact, a study by the Employee Involvement Agency showed that in 2003, ideas from employees saved organizations more than \$624 million dollars.<sup>5</sup>

When the bad news is less serious, as in Figure 11.3, use the pattern in the first column of Figure 11.1 unless your knowledge of the audience suggests that another pattern will be more effective. The audience’s reaction is influenced by the following factors:

- Do you and the audience have a good relationship?
- Does the organization treat people well?
- Has the audience been warned of possible negatives?
- Has the audience bought into the criteria for the decision?
- Do communications after the negative decision build goodwill?

Some organizations use “open book management,” which provides employees with financial information of the organization in the hopes that open communication will foster ideas to improve productivity and cut costs. For example, Springfield Manufacturing, which was financially suffering, used

**Figure 11.3** A Negative Memo to Subordinates

**FIRSTBANK**  
Great Plains, Nebraska

**Memo**

Date: January 10, 2008  
 To: All Employees  
 From: Floyd E. Mattson *FEM*

Subject: Limited Options for Group Dental Insurance

First Bank has always sought to provide employees with a competitive benefits package that meets the needs of our diverse workforce. At the same time, the costs of many benefits have risen rapidly, so at present we cannot offer as many benefits as we’d like. In the case of dental insurance, the company has concluded that at this time, we cannot expand the available coverage.

In response to many requests, the Human Resource Department solicited bids for expanded dental coverage. None of the responses from insurers serving our area met our specifications. We continue to negotiate, but with costs rising at 20% per year, we don’t see a high probability of success. Other banks in the area are in a similar situation, so our benefits package matches or exceeds what they offer.

First Bank continues to offer enrollment in an employee-funded group plan with ABC Dental. The coverage includes 37 dentists in our county and pays 50 percent of allowable fees. Many of our employees have found this coverage helpful. Employees also may use a medical savings account for dental care. Consider one of these options for the present, and First Bank will continue to investigate new opportunities for expanded coverage.

*Reason*

*Alternatives considered but unavailable*

*Positive*

*Alternatives*

*Goodwill ending*

this approach to reduce a \$3 million dollar debt and improve the state of the organization and lives of employees.<sup>6</sup>

## The Parts of a Negative Message

This section provides more information about wording each part of a negative message.

### Subject Lines

Many negative messages put the topic, but not the specific negative, in the subject line.

Subject: Status of Conversion Table Program

Other negative message subject lines focus on solving the problem.

Subject: Improving Our Subscription Letter

Use a negative subject line in messages when you think readers may ignore what they think is a routine message. Also use a negative subject line when the reader needs the information to make a decision or to act.

Subject: Elevator to Be Out Friday, June 17

Many people do not read all their messages, and a neutral subject line may lead them to ignore the message.

### Buffers

Traditionally, textbooks recommended that negative messages open with buffers. A **buffer** is a neutral or positive statement that allows you to delay the negative. Recent research suggests that buffers do not make readers respond more positively,<sup>7</sup> and good buffers are very hard to write. However, in special situations, you may want to use a buffer.

To be effective, a buffer must put the reader in a good frame of mind, not give the bad news but not imply a positive answer either, and provide a natural transition to the body of the letter. The kinds of statements most often used as buffers are good news, facts and chronologies of events, references to enclosures, thanks, and statements of principle.

#### 1. Start with any good news or positive elements the letter contains.

Starting Thursday, June 26, you'll have access to your money 24 hours a day at First National Bank.

Letter announcing that the drive-up windows will be closed for two days while automatic teller machines are installed

#### 2. State a fact or provide a chronology of events.

As a result of the new graduated dues schedule—determined by vote of the Delegate Assembly last December and subsequently endorsed by the Executive Council—members are now asked to establish their own dues rate and to calculate the total amount of their remittance.



#### Do You Have a Bad Boss?

A study from the Florida State University's College of Business found that many employees think they have a bad boss. More than 700 workers in various fields were asked how their bosses treat them. The study cites these findings:

- 39% of workers said their supervisor failed to keep promises.
- 37% said their supervisor failed to give credit when due.
- 31% said their supervisor gave them the "silent treatment" in the past year.
- 27% said their supervisor made negative comments about them to other employees or managers.
- 23% said their supervisors blamed others to cover up mistakes or to minimize embarrassment.

Employees who are not happy with their work environment are less productive, less concerned with the overall well-being of the organization, and more likely to look for other employment. The study recommends that workers stay optimistic in negative employment situations, since supervisor-subordinate relationships typically have a high turnover rate.

Adapted and quoted from Brent Kallestad, "Study: 2 in 5 Bosses Don't Keep Word," in *ABCNews.com*, n.d., <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/print?id=2764148> (accessed January 2, 2007).





**Medical Students Learn How To Deliver Bad News**

Oncologists, doctors who specialize in treating cancer, have one of the toughest jobs when it comes to delivering bad news. These doctors often inform patients that they have a difficult battle to face or that there is almost no hope and death may be imminent.

Recently, some medical schools have begun to insist that medical students learn how to deliver bad news to patients, particularly those suffering from cancer. These medical programs are adding classes where students can learn to give the negative news not only through verbal but also nonverbal forms of communication. Some studies suggest that the manner in which bad news is presented to a patient has significant effects on their overall health. "Patients are more satisfied, better retain information about their disease, and cope and adjust better with the illness when physicians have good communication skills," says Dr. Walter Baile.

Overall, the new emphasis on approaches to delivering bad news is a trend in medicine that puts patients and their needs first. Approximately 29 medical schools reported in 2007 that they teach their graduates the importance of presenting bad news. Some of these schools use role playing with patient-actors. The medical students have to inform the actors of an unwanted diagnosis and appropriately deal with the actor's response.

Adapted and quoted from Dawn Sagario, "Doctors Learn to Convey Facts in Appropriate, Thoughtful Way," *Des Moines Register*, October 17, 2006, E1, E2.

Announcement of a new dues structure that will raise most members' dues

**3. Refer to enclosures in the letter.**

Enclosed is a new sticker for your car. You may pick up additional ones in the office if needed.

Letter announcing increase in parking rental rates

**4. Thank the reader for something he or she has done.**

Thank you for scheduling appointments for me with so many senior people at First National Bank. My visit there March 14 was very informative.

Letter refusing a job offer

**5. State a general principle.**

Good drivers should pay substantially less for their auto insurance. The Good Driver Plan was created to reward good drivers (those with five-year accident-free records) with our lowest available rates. A change in the plan, effective January 1, will help keep those rates low.

Letter announcing that the company will now count traffic tickets, not just accidents, in calculating insurance rates—a change that will raise many people's premiums

Some audiences will feel betrayed by messages whose positive openers delay the central negative point. Therefore, use a buffer only when the audience (individually or culturally) values harmony or when the buffer serves another purpose. For example, when you must thank the reader somewhere in the letter, putting the "thank you" in the first paragraph allows you to start on a positive note.

Buffers are hard to write. Even if you think the reader would prefer to be let down easily, use a buffer only when you can write a good one.

**Reasons**

Research shows that audiences who described themselves as "totally surprised" by negative news had many more negative feelings and described their feelings as being stronger than did those who expected the negative.<sup>8</sup> A clear and convincing reason prepares the audience for the negative, resulting in people who more easily accept it.

The following reason is inadequate.

Weak reason: The goal of the Knoxville CHARGE-ALL Center is to provide our customers faster, more personalized service. Since you now live outside the Knoxville CHARGE-ALL service area, we can no longer offer you the advantages of a local CHARGE-ALL Center.

If the reader says, "I don't care if my bills are slow and impersonal," will the company let the reader keep the card? No. The real reason for the negative is that the bank's franchise allows it to have cardholders only in a given geographical region.

Real reason: Each local CHARGE-ALL center is permitted to offer accounts to customers in a several-state area. The Knoxville CHARGE-ALL center serves customers east of the Mississippi. You can continue to use your current card until it expires. When that happens, you'll need to open an account with a CHARGE-ALL center that serves Texas.

Don't hide behind "company policy": your audience will assume the policy is designed to benefit you at their expense. If possible, show how your audience benefits from the policy. If they do not benefit, don't mention policy at all.

Weak reason: I cannot write an insurance policy for you because company policy does not allow me to do so.

Better reason: Gorham insures cars only when they are normally garaged at night. Standard insurance policies cover a wider variety of risks and charge higher fees. Limiting the policies we write gives Gorham customers the lowest possible rates for auto insurance.

Avoid saying that you *cannot* do something. Most negative messages exist because the communicator or company has chosen certain policies or cutoff points. In the example above, the company could choose to insure a wider variety of customers if it wanted to do so.

Often you as a middle manager will enforce policies that you did not design and announce decisions that you did not make. Don't pass the buck by saying, "This was a terrible decision." In the first place, carelessly criticizing your superiors is never a good idea. In the second place, if you really think a policy is bad, try to persuade your superiors to change it. If you can't think of convincing reasons to change the policy, maybe it isn't so bad after all.

If you have several reasons for saying *no*, use only those that are strong and watertight. If you give five reasons and readers dismiss two of them, readers may feel that they've won and should get the request.

Weak reason: You cannot store large bulky items in the dormitory over the summer because moving them into and out of storage would tie up the stairs and the elevators just at the busiest times when people are moving in and out.

Way to dismiss the reason: We'll move large items before or after the two days when most people are moving in or out.

If you do not have a good reason, omit the reason rather than use a weak one. Even if you have a strong reason, omit it if it makes the company look bad.

Reason that hurts company: Our company is not hiring at the present time because profits are down. In fact, the downturn has prompted top management to reduce the salaried staff by 5% just this month, with perhaps more reductions to come.

Better: Our company does not have any openings now.



### Straight Talk with Employees

Employees say they want organizations to be honest and open about bad news. In a survey by human resource specialists Towers Perrin, more than 90 percent of employees said they want the plain facts about their organization's performance and their jobs. They respect organizations for communicating honestly. Half said they think their employer tends to overdo putting a positive spin on the facts.

Adapted from Institute of Management & Administration (IMA), "The Best Policy Now: Less 'Spin' and More Honesty," *HR Focus* 81, no. 4 (2004): 4; and IMA, "Need to Deliver Bad News? How & Why to Tell It Like It Is," *HR Focus* 80, no. 11 (2003): 3.

## Refusals

Deemphasize the refusal by putting it in the same paragraph as the reason, rather than in a paragraph by itself.

Sometimes you may be able to imply the refusal rather than stating it directly.

Direct refusal: You cannot get insurance for just one month.

Implied refusal: The shortest term for an insurance policy is six months.

Be sure the implication is crystal clear. Any message can be misunderstood, but an optimistic or desperate reader is particularly unlikely to understand a negative message. One of your purposes in a negative message is to close the door on the subject. You do not want to have to write a second letter saying that the real answer is *no*.



### Profitable Alternatives

Over two decades ago, when Jim Harbour published his first Harbour Report detailing the shortcomings of the US auto industry, executives at the carmakers were furious. It appeared to them that the report was pummeling domestic companies when they were already reeling from a heightened level of foreign competition. Today, in contrast, Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler welcome visitors from Harbour and Associates into their factories to research the annual Harbour Report.

What made the difference is that although the Harbour Report delivers bad news when companies are operating inefficiently, it also offers profitable alternatives. Companies can study the report to see how their plants compare with one another and with the competition, and they can identify best practices that improve quality and efficiency. Ron Harbour, the company's president and the founder's son, explains that automakers don't always want to disclose detailed data about themselves, but they realized that disclosure helps them learn valuable lessons about themselves and their industry.

Adapted from Chuck Salter, "The Truth Shall Set You Free," *Fast Company*, May 2004, 78, 82.

## Alternatives

Giving your audience an alternative or a compromise, if one is available, is a good idea for several reasons:

- It offers the audience another way to get what they want.
- It suggests that you really care about your audience and about helping to meet their needs.
- It enables your audience to reestablish the psychological freedom you limited when you said *no*.
- It allows you to end on a positive note and to present yourself and your organization as positive, friendly, and helpful.

When you give an alternative, give your audience all the information they need to act on it, but don't take the necessary steps. Let your audience decide whether to try the alternative.

Negative messages limit your audience's freedom. People may respond to a limitation of freedom by asserting their freedom in some other arena. Sharon and Jack W. Brehm calls this phenomenon **psychological reactance**.<sup>9</sup> Psychological reactance is at work when a customer who has been denied credit no longer buys even on a cash basis, a subordinate who has been passed over for a promotion gets back at the company by deliberately doing a poor job, or someone who has been laid off sabotages the company's computers.

An alternative allows your audience to react in a way that doesn't hurt you. By letting your audience decide for themselves whether they want the alternative, you allow them to reestablish their sense of psychological freedom.

The specific alternative will vary depending on the circumstances. In Figure 11.4, the company suggests using a different part. In different circumstances, the writer might offer different alternatives.

## Endings

If you have a good alternative, refer to it in your ending: "Let me know if you can use A515 grade 70."

The best endings look to the future.

Wherever you have your account, you'll continue to get all the service you've learned to expect from CHARGE-ALL, and the convenience of charging items at over a million stores, restaurants, and hotels in the United States and abroad—and in Knoxville, too, whenever you come back to visit!

Letter refusing to continue charge account for a customer who has moved

Avoid endings that seem insincere.


We are happy to have been of service, and should we be able to assist you in the future, please contact us.

This ending lacks you-attitude and would not be good even in a positive message. In a situation where the company has just refused to help, it's likely to sound sarcastic or sadistic.

## Apologies

Not all negative messages need to include apologies. In business documents, apologize only when you are at fault. If you need to apologize, do it early,

**Figure 11.4** A Refusal with an Alternative



“Serving the needs of America since 1890”  
 1800 Olney Avenue • Philadelphia, PA 19140 • 215•555•7800 • Fax: 215•555•9803

April 27, 2008

Mr. H. J. Moody  
 Canton Corporation  
 2407 North Avenue  
 Kearney, NE 68847

Subject: Bid Number 5853, Part Number D-40040

Dear Mr. Moody:

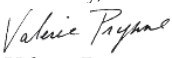
*Buffer* Thank you for requesting our quotation on your Part No. D-40040.

*Reason* Your blueprints call for flame-cut rings 1/2" thick A516 grade 70. To use that grade, we'd have to grind down from 1" thick material. However, if you can use A515 grade 70, which we stock in 1/2" thick, you can cut the price by more than half.

Quantity	Description	Gross Weight	Price/Each
75	Rings Drawing D-40040, A516 Grade 70 1" thick x 6" O.D. x 2.8" I.D. ground to .5" thick.	12 lbs.	\$15.08
75	Rings Drawing D-40040, A515 Grade 70 1/2" thick x 6" O.D. x 2.8" I.D.	6 lbs.	\$6.91

*Alternative (Depending on circumstances, different alternatives may exist.)*

If you can use A515 grade 70, let me know. *Leaves decision up to reader to re-establish psychological freedom*

Sincerely,  
  
 Valerie Prynne

VP:wc

briefly, and sincerely. Do so only once, early in the message. Do not dwell on the bad things that have happened. The reader already knows this negative information. Instead, focus on what you have done to correct the situation.

- **No explicit apology is necessary if the error is small and if you are correcting the mistake.**

Negative: We're sorry we got the nutrition facts wrong in the recipe.

Better: You're right. We're glad you made us aware of this. The correct amounts are 2 grams of fat and 4 grams of protein.



**Blogging Errors**

The Internet has provided everyone with a way to anonymously confess their mistakes, and David H. Freedman suggests that businesses should take the cue. He proposes that businesses create blogs for their employees to encourage them to confess their mistakes, which he believes will have a big impact on an organization's culture. Blogs are a cheap and easy way to open up communication about mistakes because they're intimate and conversational.

Some organizations are already on board. For example, the Mayo Clinic offers residents a way to report patient errors. All internal employees have access to the database blog and can learn to correct previous mistakes and spot emerging error trends.

Freedman warns the hardest part of blogging is our society's engrained fears about confessing our mistakes. Managers will have to agree not to fire employees if they confess their mistakes on a blog. Instead, they should treat the negative news as a way to learn and improve the overall organization.

What do you think? Can corporate blogging help improve organizations? Would you confess a mistake on a blog at your workplace?

Adapted from David H. Freedman, "When Your Company Screws Up, Don't Hide It. Blog about It. And Let Everyone Learn from the Error," *Inc.*, October 2006, 65-66.

- **Do not apologize when you are not at fault.** The phrase "I'm sorry" is generally interpreted to mean the sorry person is accepting blame or responsibility. When you have done everything you can and when a delay or problem is due to circumstances beyond your control, you aren't at fault and don't need to apologize. It may, however, be appropriate to include an explanation so the reader knows you weren't negligent. In the previous example of a magazine's acknowledging an error, the editor might indicate the source of the error (such as a reference book or a government Web site the magazine uses for fact checking). If the news is bad, put the explanation first. If you have good news for the reader, put it before your explanation.

Negative: I'm sorry that I could not answer your question sooner. I had to wait until the sales figures for the second quarter were in.

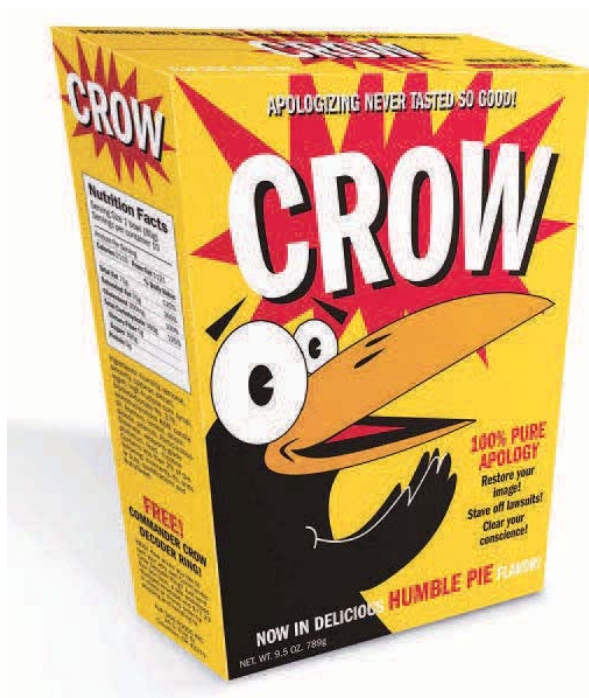
Better (neutral or bad news): We needed the sales figures for the second quarter to answer your question. Now that they're in, I can tell you that . . .

Better (good news): The new advertising campaign is a success. The sales figures for the second quarter are finally in, and they show that . . .

If the delay or problem is long or large, it is good you-attitude to ask the reader whether he or she wants to confirm the original plan or make different arrangements.

Negative: I'm sorry that the chairs will not be ready by August 25 as promised.

Better: Due to a strike against the manufacturer, the desk chairs you ordered will not be ready until November. Do you want to keep that order, or would you like to look at the models available from other suppliers?



There is an accelerating trend for apologies in the workplace. This cereal box mocks the genre of public apologies.  
 Source: The Denver Post and The Flip Side Staff, "Eating Crow," *Columbus Dispatch*, September 8, 2004, F8.

**Figure 11.5** Avoid These Phrases in Negative Messages

Phrase	Because
I am afraid that we cannot	You aren't fearful. Don't hide behind empty phrases.
I am sorry that we are unable	You probably <i>are able</i> to grant the request; you simply choose not to. If you are so sorry about saying <i>no</i> , why don't you change your policy and say <i>yes</i> ?
I am sure you will agree that	Don't assume that you can read the reader's mind.
Unfortunately	<i>Unfortunately</i> is negative in itself. It also signals that a refusal is coming.

Sometimes you will be in a fortunate position where you can pair your apology with a small appropriate benefit. Commercial Web sites offer good examples. After their site closed, Gap offered customers a 10% discount on their next purchase for a day.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, when the Hallmark Flowers Web site stopped taking orders the week before Mother's Day, Hallmark sent an e-mail asking customers to try again and offering free shipping for a day.<sup>11</sup>

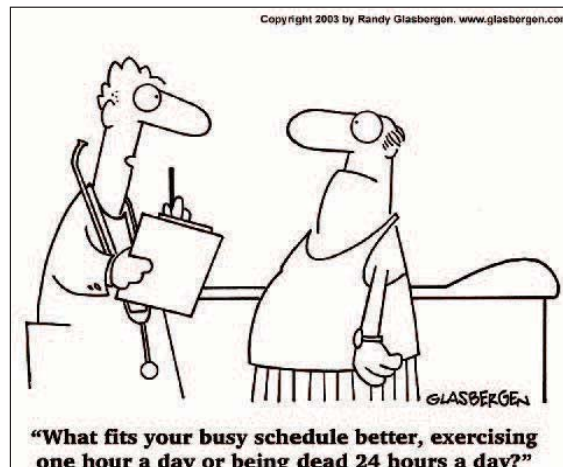
Sincere apologies go hand in hand with efforts to rectify the problem.

## Tone in Negative Messages

**Tone**—the implied attitude of the author toward the reader and the subject—is particularly important when you want readers to feel that you have taken their requests seriously. Check your draft carefully for positive emphasis (◀ p. 80) and you-attitude (◀ p. 76), both at the level of individual words and at the level of ideas.

Figure 11.5 lists some of the phrases to avoid in negative messages.

Even the physical appearance and timing of a letter can convey tone. An obvious form rejection letter suggests that the writer has not given much consideration to the reader's application. An immediate negative suggests that the rejection didn't need any thought. A negative delivered just before a major holiday seems especially unfeeling.



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### Workplace Violence

An increasing number of people respond violently to bad news. In February of 2007, a gunman killed three executives, wounded another, and killed himself during a board meeting at a Philadelphia company. The shooter was unhappy with the company's recent decisions.

This workplace incident is only one of many that routinely occur in businesses. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2005, 564 workers nationwide were homicide victims. Typically, workplace violence ensues when a person feels mistreated or betrayed by an organization. Many businesses now have formal workplace procedures to cope with these incidents.

Adapted from Bob Fernandez, "Violence on the Job," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 14, 2007; and Safety Online: A VertMarkets Marketplace of Industry Professionals, "Philadelphia Board Room Killings Raise Awareness of Workplace Violence," in *VertMarkets*, <http://www.safetyonline.com/content/news/article.asp?DocID=%7B756446EF-AB95-482D-8583-8E8B04853A2D> (accessed February 18, 2007).

## Alternative Strategies for Negative Situations

Whenever you face a negative situation, consider recasting it as a positive or persuasive message. Southwest Airlines, the low-cost airline, is famous for saying no to its customers. It says no to such common perks as reserve seats, meals, and interairline baggage transfers. But it recasts all those negatives into its two biggest positives, low-cost fares and conveniently scheduled frequent flights.<sup>12</sup>

### Recasting the Situation as a Positive Message

If the negative information will directly lead to a benefit that you know readers want, use the pattern of organization for informative and positive messages:

Situation:	Your airline has been mailing out quarterly statements of frequent-flier miles earned. To save money, you are going to stop mailing statements and ask customers to look up that information at your Web site.
Negative:	Important Notice: This is your last Preferred Passenger paper statement.
Positive emphasis:	New, convenient online statements will replace this quarterly mailing. Now you can get up-to-the-minute statements of your miles earned. Choose e-mail updates or round-the-clock access to your statement at our Web site, <a href="http://www.aaaair.com">www.aaaair.com</a> . It's faster, easier, and more convenient.

### Recasting the Situation as a Persuasive Message

Often a negative situation can be recast as a persuasive message. If your organization has a problem, ask readers to help solve it. A solution that workers have created will be much easier to implement.

When the Association for Business Communication raised dues, the Executive Director wrote a persuasive letter urging members to send in renewals early so they could beat the increase. The letter shared some of the qualities of any persuasive letter: using an attention-getting opener, offsetting the negative by setting it against the benefits of membership, telling the reader what to do, and ending with a picture of the benefit the reader received by acting. More recent increases, however, have been announced directly.

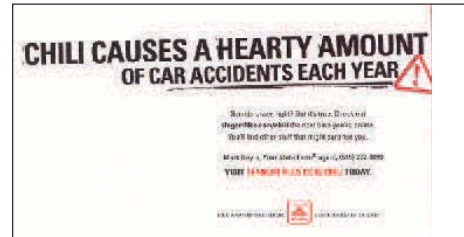
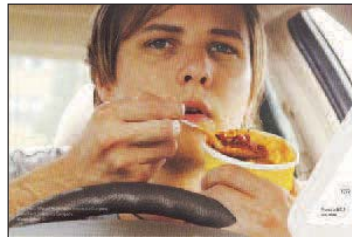
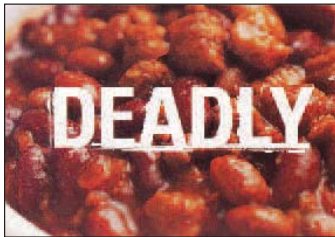
If you are criticizing someone, your real purpose may be to persuade the reader to act differently. Chapter 12 offers patterns for direct requests and problem-solving persuasive messages.

## Varieties of Negative Messages

Three of the most difficult kinds of negative messages to write are rejections and refusals, disciplinary notices and negative performance appraisals, and layoffs and firings.

### Rejections and Refusals

When you refuse requests from people outside your organization, try to use a buffer. Give an alternative if one is available. For example, if you are denying credit, it may still be possible for the reader to put an expensive item on layaway.



State Farm uses the unexpected to promote driving safety. Warnings like this are yet another form of delivering negative news. Third photo reads in part “ Sounds Crazy, right? But it’s true. Check out [sfagentfiles.com/chili](http://sfagentfiles.com/chili) the next time you’re online. You’ll find other stuff that might surprise you.”

Politeness and length help. In two different studies, job applicants preferred rejection letters that said something specific about their good qualities, that phrased the refusal indirectly, that offered a clear explanation of the procedures for making a hiring decision, that offered an alternative (such as another position the applicant might be qualified for), and that were longer.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, businesses that follow this pattern of organization for rejection letters will retain applicants who still view the organization favorably, who will recommend the organization to others interested in applying there, and who will not file law suits.<sup>14</sup>

Double-check the words in a refusal to be sure the reason can’t backfire if it is applied to other contexts. As Elizabeth McCord has shown, the statement that a plant is too dangerous for a group tour could be used as evidence against the company in a worker’s compensation claim.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, writing resignation letters for a variety of reasons—leaving a job, stepping down from a committee, opting out of a fellowship—can be a delicate practice and can have serious future implications. As Shaun Fawcett has shown, a negative and poorly worded resignation letter can impact your chances for receiving a positive recommendation or reference in the future.<sup>16</sup>

When you refuse requests within your organization, use your knowledge of the organization’s culture and of the specific individual to craft your message. In some organizations, it may be appropriate to use company slogans, offer whatever help already-established departments can give, and refer to the individual’s good work (if you indeed know that it is good). In other, less personal organizations, a simple negative without embellishment may be more appropriate.

## Disciplinary Notices and Negative Performance Appraisals

Performance appraisals are discussed in detail in Chapter 12. Performance appraisals will be positive when they are designed to help a basically good employee improve. But when an employee violates a company rule or fails to improve after repeated negative appraisals, the company may discipline the employee or build a dossier to support firing him or her.

Present disciplinary notices and negative performance appraisals directly, with no buffer. A buffer might encourage the recipient to minimize the message’s importance—and might even become evidence in a court case that the employee had not been told to shape up “or else.” Cite quantifiable observations of the employee’s behavior, rather than generalizations or inferences based on it.



### International Firing

“When doing business in another country, it is often easy to assume that things there are the same as in your country. . . . It is wise to know the proper way to dismiss an employee when working with other cultures. This is a difficult task to perform in a familiar territory but it is especially tricky when one is in a foreign country and does not always fully understand the local culture. An American manager stationed in Indonesia reportedly discovered this when he tried to fire an oilrig employee. Rather than notifying the employee privately of this dismissal, the manager publicly told the timekeeper to send the man ‘packing.’ In Indonesia, this public dismissal was considered unacceptable ‘loss of face’ which offended both the dismissed man and his friends. So, rather than leave quietly, the man grabbed fire axes and ran after the American manager. Reportedly, the American was barely rescued in time. Obviously, it is dangerous to ignore local management practices and customs!”

Quoted from David A. Ricks, *Blunders in International Business*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 105.





**Legal Rejections**

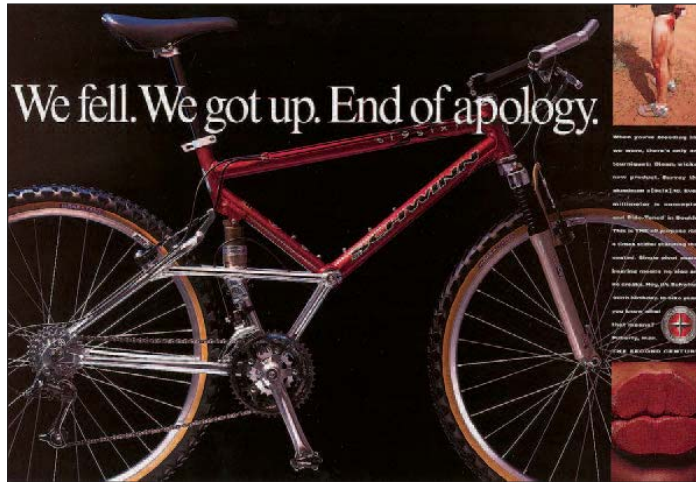
Rejecting job applicants is tricky because various antidiscrimination laws limit the available reasons for rejecting a candidate. For example, organizations may not reject applicants based on race, sex, or physical disabilities. Rejection decisions and rejection letters must be careful to use legal reasons.

A recent Supreme Court case involving a technician in Tucson found that a missile plant acted legally when it refused to rehire the technician based on its policy of not rehiring people who had been fired for violating company policies. Based on its policy, the company had fired the man because he had tested positive for cocaine use. After completing a rehabilitation program, the technician applied to get his job back. In its rejection, the company cited its policy against rehiring anyone terminated for violating its code of conduct.

The technician sued the company on the grounds it had discriminated against him because of a disability (cocaine addiction), but the Supreme Court upheld the employer's action.

Do you agree or disagree with the Supreme Court's decision? Should a cocaine addiction count as a disability?

Adapted from Jess McCuan, "When an Addict Seeks a Job," *Inc.*, March 1, 2004, 30.



Schwinn needed a new product line to attract sophisticated cyclists. This apology for its old, boring line moves quickly to a discussion of its new technology. By evoking an experience every cyclist has had, the headline also suggests that falling is a minor event.

- Weak: Lee is apathetic about work.
- Better: Lee was absent 15 days and late by one hour 6 days in the quarter beginning January 1.
- Weak: Vasu is careless with her written documents.
- Better: Vasu had multiple spelling errors in her last three client letters; a fourth letter omitted the date of the mandatory federal training seminar.

If an employee is disciplined by being laid off without pay, specify the length of the suspension.

Not all disciplinary notices are as formal as performance appraisals. Blanchard and Johnson, of *One Minute Manager* fame, present what they call the One Minute Reprimand. Much of the effectiveness of these reprimands comes from the fact that supervisors tell their employees from the beginning, before any reprimands are needed, that there will be explicit communication about both positive and negative performances. The reprimand itself is to come immediately after negative behavior and specify exactly what is wrong. It distinguishes between positive feelings for the employee and negative feelings for his or her performance in the specific situation.<sup>17</sup>

**Layoffs and Firings**

If a company is in financial trouble, management needs to communicate the problem clearly. Sharing information and enlisting everyone's help in finding solutions may make it possible to save jobs. Sharing information also means that layoff notices, if they become necessary, will be a formality; they should not be new information to employees.

Give the employee an honest reason for the layoff or firing. Based on guidance from your organization's human resource experts, state the reasons in a way that is clear but does not expose the organization to legal liabilities. A study by researchers at the University of Florida found that employees are more cooperative and less likely to retaliate if bad news is excused in a way that is believable and indicates that the decision maker had no alternatives. They are more likely to criticize the decision if the message tries to justify it by showing it was the best decision in terms of some greater good.<sup>18</sup>



RadioShack made headlines when it fired 400 employees with a two-sentence e-mail.

Source: Tara Weiss, "You've Got Mail: You're Fired," in *Forbes.com*, [http://www.forbes.com/leadership/2006/08/31/leadership-radio-shack-management-cx\\_tw\\_0831layoffs.html](http://www.forbes.com/leadership/2006/08/31/leadership-radio-shack-management-cx_tw_0831layoffs.html) (accessed February 20, 2007).

Information about layoffs and firings is normally delivered orally but accompanied by a written statement explaining severance pay or unemployment benefits that may be available.

## Solving a Sample Problem

Solving negative problems requires careful analysis. The checklist at the end of the chapter, on p. 355, can help you evaluate your draft.

### Problem

You're Director of Employee Benefits for a Fortune 500 company. Today, you received the following memo:

From: Michelle Jagtiani  
Subject: Getting My Retirement Benefits

Next Friday will be my last day here. I am leaving [name of company] to take a position at another firm.

Please process a check for my retirement benefits, including both the deductions from my salary and the company's contributions for the last six and a half years. I would like to receive the check by next Friday if possible.

You have bad news for Michelle. Although the company does contribute an amount to the retirement fund equal to the amount deducted for retirement from the employee's paycheck, employees who leave with less than seven years of employment get only their own contributions. Michelle will get back only the money that has been deducted from her own pay, plus 4 ½% interest



### Dumpster Diving Anyone?

Northwest Airlines, which filed for bankruptcy and underwent reorganization, sent out a handbook for employees who might lose their job. The handbook, titled "Ground Operations Restructuring Q&A and Employee Support," offered employees some useful information about retirement benefits and résumé assistance. However, the handbook also offered some unconventional assistance, such as a listing of "101 Ways to Save Money."

Here are a few of the tips: (quoted list)

- Buy spare parts for your car at the junkyard
- Get hand-me-down clothes and toys for your kids from family and friends
- Buy old furniture at yard sales and refinish it yourself
- Hang clothes out to dry
- Borrow a dress for a big night out or go to a consignment shop
- Don't be shy about pulling something you like out of a dumpster

Northwest employees were appalled by this list of outrageous suggestions. The vice-president for ground operations quickly apologized, and the chief executive officer sent a letter of apology to the affected employees who received the handbook.

Adapted and quoted from Michelle Singletary, "Dumpster-Diving Advice Doesn't Fly," *Washington Post*, August 24, 2006, D2.



[www.useit.com/alertbox/20000123.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20000123.html)

General guidelines for saying no can be applied to specific situations. Computer expert Jakob Nielsen explains how to tell users that your Web site can't do what they want. Nielsen suggests telling users "no" upfront when your Web site cannot do something. Otherwise, users will spend too much time looking for the desired feature, and in the process will develop negative feelings for the site.

He also suggests if your site cannot meet a user's needs, that you direct them to another site that will. This referral builds goodwill and will make your site the starting point for the customer's next search. If an item will be available reasonably soon, you can allow customers to preorder or provide their e-mail for notification when the product or service becomes available. Log onto Nielsen's site and read the rest of his advice for telling users no. Can you think of other ways to tell Web site users no that Nielsen hasn't suggested?

compounded quarterly. Her payments and interest come to just over \$17,200; the amount could be higher depending on the amount of her last paycheck, which will include compensation for any unused vacation days and sick leave. Furthermore, since the amounts deducted were not considered taxable income, she will have to pay income tax on the money she will receive.

You cannot process the check until after her resignation is effective, so you will mail it to her. You have her home address on file; if she's moving, she needs to let you know where to send the check. Processing the check may take two to three weeks.

Write a memo to Michelle.

### Analysis of the Problem

Use the analysis questions in the first chapter to help you solve the problem.

1. Who is (are) your audience(s)? What characteristics are relevant to this particular message? If you are writing to more than one reader, how do the readers differ?

Michelle Jagtiani. Unless she's a personal friend, I probably wouldn't know why she's leaving and where she's going.

There's a lot I don't know. She may or may not know much about taxes; she may or may not be able to take advantage of tax-reduction strategies. I can't assume the answers because I wouldn't have them in real life.

2. What are your purposes in writing?

To tell her that she will get only her own contributions, plus 4 ½% interest compounded quarterly; that the check will be mailed to her home address two to three weeks after her last day on the job; and that the money will be taxable as income.

To build goodwill so that she feels that she has been treated fairly and consistently. To minimize negative feelings she may have.

To close the door on this subject.

3. What information must your message include?

When the check will come. The facts that her check will be based on her contributions, not the employer's, and that the money will be taxable income. How lump-sum retirement benefits are calculated. The fact that we have her current address on file but need a new address if she's moving.

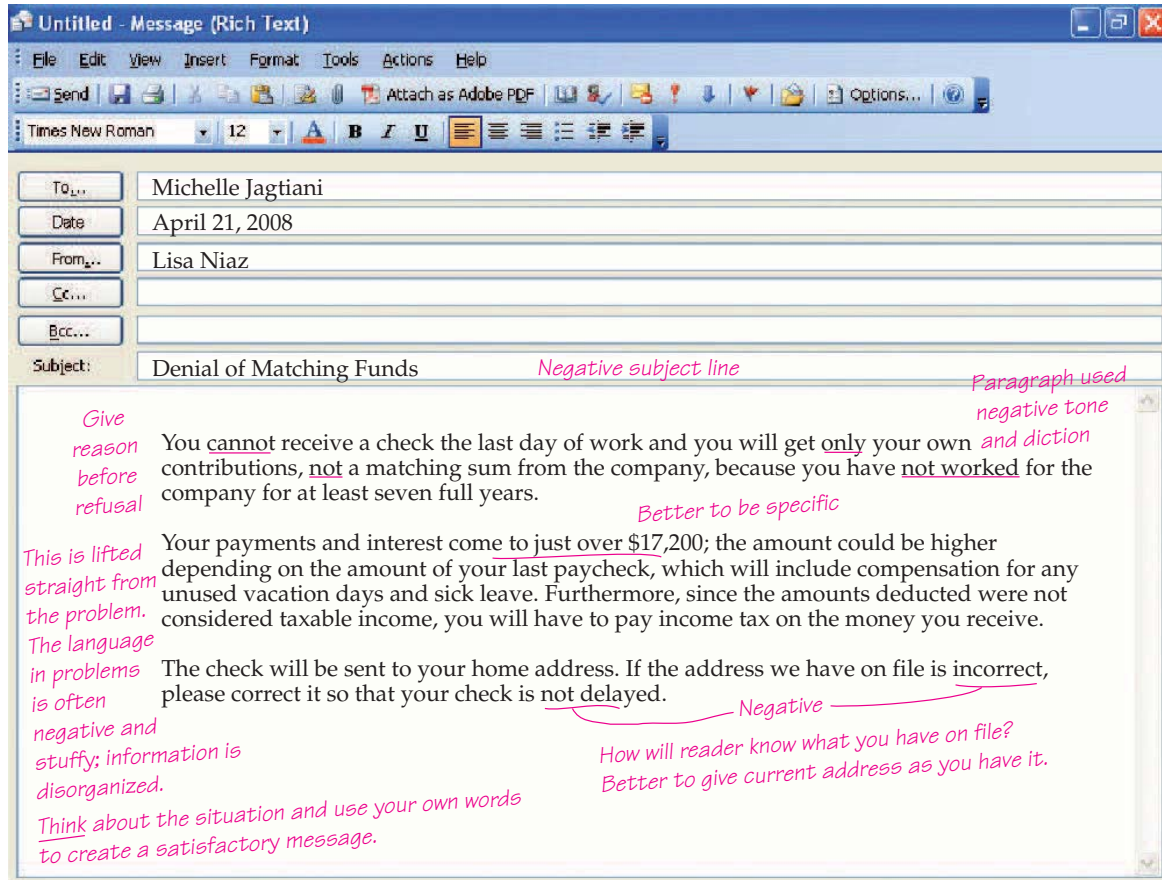
4. How can you build support for your position? What reasons or benefits will your reader find convincing?

Giving the amount currently in her account may make her feel that she is getting a significant sum of money. Suggesting someone who can give free tax advice (if the company offers this as a fringe benefit) reminds her of the benefits of working with the company. Wishing her luck with her new job is a nice touch.

5. What objection(s) can you expect your reader(s) to have? What negative elements of your message must you deemphasize or overcome?

She is getting about half the amount she expected, since she gets no matching funds. She might have been able to earn more than 4 ½% interest if she had invested the money in the stock market. Depending on her personal tax situation she may pay more tax on the money as a lump sum than would have been due had she paid it each year as she earned the money.

**Figure 11.6** An Unacceptable Solution to the Sample Problem



## Discussion of the Sample Solutions

The solution in Figure 11.6 is not acceptable. The subject line gives a bald negative with no reason or alternative. The first sentence has a condescending tone that is particularly offensive in negative messages; it also focuses on what is being taken away rather than what remains. Paragraph 2 lacks you-attitude and is vague. The memo ends with a negative. There is nothing anywhere in the memo to build goodwill.

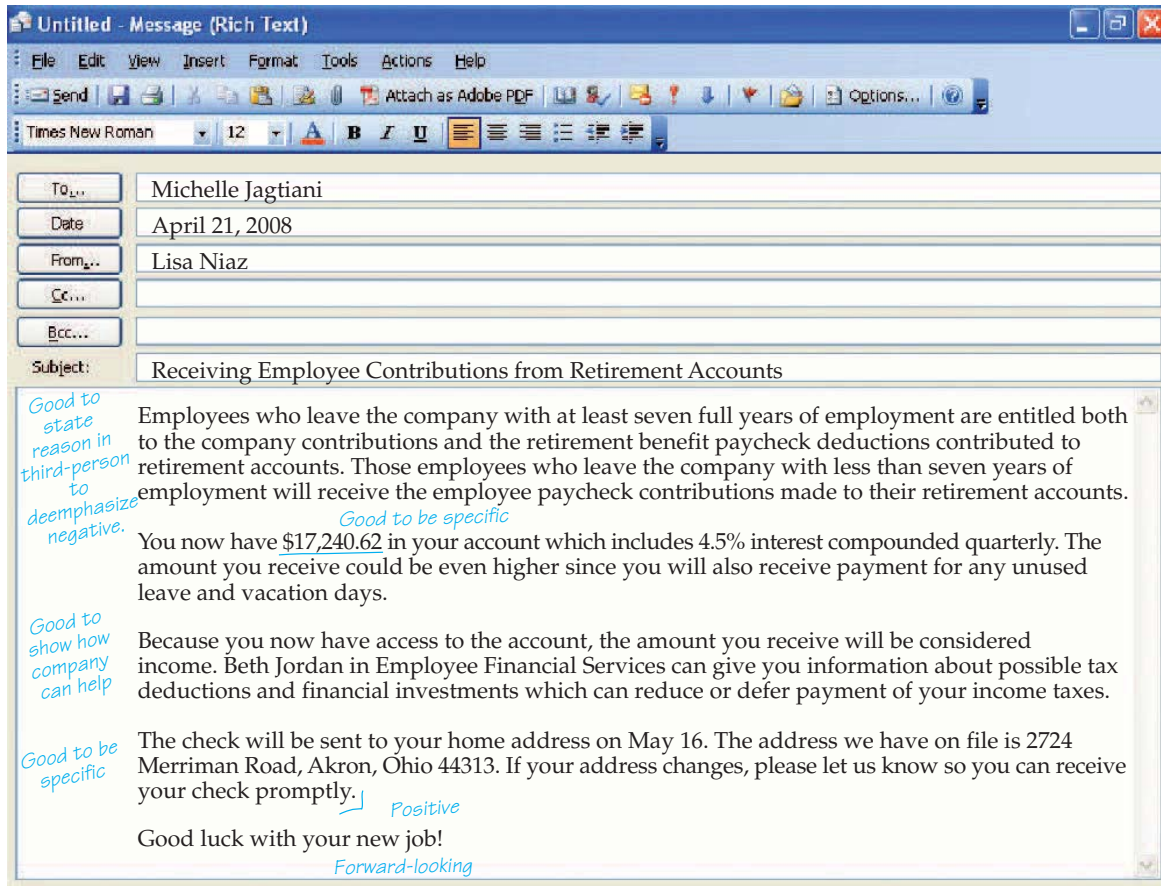
The solution in Figure 11.7, in contrast, is very good. The policy serves as a buffer and explanation. The negative is stated clearly but is buried in the paragraph to avoid overemphasizing it. Paragraph 2 emphasizes the positive by specifying the amount in the account and the fact that the sum might be even higher.

Paragraph 3 contains the additional negative information that the amount will be taxable but offers the alternative that it may be possible to reduce taxes. The writer builds goodwill by suggesting a specific person the reader could contact.

Paragraph 4 tells the reader what address is in the company files (Michelle may not know whether the files are up-to-date), asks that she update it if necessary, and ends with the reader's concern: getting her check promptly.

The final paragraph ends on a positive note. This generalized goodwill is appropriate when the writer does not know the reader well.

**Figure 11.7** A Good Solution to the Sample Problem



## Summary of Key Points

- In a negative message, the basic information is negative; we expect the audience to be disappointed or angry.
- A good negative message conveys the negative information clearly while maintaining as much goodwill as possible. The goal is to make the audience feel that they have been taken seriously, that the decision is fair and reasonable, and that they would have made the same decision. A secondary purpose is to reduce or eliminate future communication on the same subject so that the message doesn't create more work for the communicator.
- Organize negative messages to customers and clients in this way:
  1. Give the reason for the refusal before the refusal itself when you have a reason that the audience will understand and accept.
  2. Give the negative just once, clearly.
  3. Present an alternative or compromise, if one is available.
  4. End with a positive, forward-looking statement.
- Organize negative memos to superiors in this way:
  1. Describe the problem.
  2. Tell how it happened.

 **Checklist** Negative Messages

- Is the subject line appropriate?
- If a buffer is used, does it avoid suggesting either a positive or a negative response?
- Is the reason, if it is given, presented before the refusal? Is the reason watertight, with no loopholes?
- Is the negative information clear?
- Is an alternative given if a good one is available? Does the message provide all the information needed to act on the alternative but leave the choice up to the audience?
- Does the last paragraph avoid repeating the negative information?
- Is tone acceptable—not defensive, but not cold, preachy, or arrogant either?

**Originality in a negative message may come from**

- An effective buffer, if one is appropriate.
  - A clear, complete statement of the reason for the refusal.
  - A good alternative, clearly presented, which shows that you're thinking about what the audience really needs.
  - Adding details that show you're thinking about a specific organization and the specific people in that organization.
- 
3. Describe the options for fixing it.
  4. Recommend a solution and ask for action.
- When you must pass along serious bad news to peers and subordinates, use a variation of the pattern to superiors:
    1. Describe the problem.
    2. Present an alternative or compromise, if one is available.
    3. If possible, ask for input or action.
  - When the bad news is less serious, use the pattern for negative messages to clients and customers unless your knowledge of the audience suggests that another pattern will be more effective. Use a subject line appropriate for the pattern.
  - A **buffer** is a neutral or positive statement that allows you to bury the negative message. Buffers must put the reader in a good frame of mind, not give the bad news but not imply a positive answer either, and provide a natural transition to the body of the letter. Use a buffer only when the reader values harmony or when the buffer serves a purpose in addition to simply delaying the negative.
  - The kinds of statements most often used as buffers are (1) good news, (2) facts and chronologies of events, (3) references to enclosures, (4) thanks, and (5) statements of principle.
  - A good reason prepares the audience for the negative and must be watertight. Give several reasons only if all are watertight and are of comparable importance. Omit the reason for the refusal entirely if it is weak or if it makes your organization look bad. Do not hide behind company policy.
  - Make the refusal crystal clear.
  - Giving the audience an alternative or a compromise
    - Offers the audience another way to get what they want.
    - Suggests that you really care about the audience and about helping to meet their needs.
    - Allows you to end on a positive note and to present yourself and your organization as positive, friendly, and helpful.



**Effective Negative Letters**

Researcher Catherine Schryer asked writers

at an insurance company to evaluate the firm's letters denying claims. She found four differences between the letters judged effective and the letters judged ineffective:

- Good letters were easier to read. Poor letters contained more jargon; longer words and sentences; and stiff, awkward phrasing.
- Good letters gave fuller reasons for the rejection. Poor letters often used boilerplate and did not explain terms.
- Good letters were less likely to talk about the reader's emotions ("angry," "disappointed").
- Good letters were more likely to portray the writer and reader as active agents.

Adapted from Catherine Schryer, "Walking a Fine Line: Writing Negative Letters in an Insurance Company," *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 14 (October 2000): 445–97.

- When you give an alternative, give the audience all the information they need to act on it, but don't take the necessary steps for them. Letting the audience decide whether to try the alternative allows the audience to reestablish a sense of psychological freedom.
- Many negative situations can be redefined to use the patterns of organization for informative and positive or for persuasive messages.

## CHAPTER 11 Exercises and Problems

### 11.1 Reviewing the Chapter

1. What are the reasons behind the patterns of organization for negative messages in different situations (Figure 11.1)? (LO 1)
2. What are the parts of negative messages? How may those parts be changed for different contexts? (LO 2)
3. When should you not use a buffer? (LO 2)
4. When should you not apologize? (LO 2)
5. What are some ways you can maintain a caring tone in negative messages? (LO 3)
6. What are some different varieties of negative messages? What are some examples from the chapter text and sidebars? (LO 4)

### 11.2 Reviewing Grammar

Negative news is frequently placed in dependent clauses to help de-emphasize it. Unfortunately, some dependent clauses and phrases are dangling or misplaced modifiers.

Do the exercise from Appendix B on improving modifiers (B.6) to help you learn to recognize this error.

### 11.3 Letters for Discussion—Credit Refusal

As director of customer service at C'est Bon, an upscale furniture store, you manage the store's credit. Today you are going to reject an application from Frank Steele. Although his income is fairly high, his last two payments on his college loans were late, and he has three bank credit

cards, all charged to the upper limit, on which he's made just the minimum payment for the last three months.

The following letters are possible approaches to giving him the news. How well does each message meet the criteria in the checklist for negative messages?

1. Dear Mr. Steele:

Your request to have a C'est Bon charge account shows that you are a discriminating shopper. C'est Bon sells the finest merchandise available.

Although your income is acceptable, records indicate that you carry the maximum allowable balances on three bank credit cards. Moreover, two recent payments on your student loans have not been made in a timely fashion. If you were given a C'est Bon charge account, and if you charged a large amount on it, you might have difficulty paying the bill, particularly if you had other unforeseen expenses (car repair, moving, medical emergency) or if your income dropped suddenly. If you were unable to repay, with your other debt you would be in serious difficulty. We would not want you to be in such a situation, nor would you yourself desire it.

Please reapply in six months.

Sincerely,

2.

Dear Frank:

No, you can't have a C'est Bon credit card—at least not right now. Get your financial house in order and try again.

Fortunately for you, there's an alternative. Put what you want on layaway. The furniture you want will be held for you, and paying a bit each week or month will be good self-discipline.

Enjoy your C'est Bon furniture!

Sincerely,

3.

Dear Mr. Steele:

Over the years, we've found that the best credit risks are people who pay their bills promptly. Since two of your student loan payments have been late, we won't extend store credit to you right now. Come back with a record of six months of on-time payments of all bills, and you'll get a different answer.

You might like to put the furniture you want on layaway. A \$50 deposit holds any item you want. You have six months to pay, and you save interest charges.

You might also want to take advantage of one of our Saturday Seminars. On the first Saturday of each month at 11 AM, our associates explain one topic related to furniture and interior decorating. Upcoming topics are

How to Wallpaper a Room	February 5
Draperies Options	March 6
Persian Carpets	April 1

Sincerely,

### 11.4 E-Mails for Discussion—Saying *No* to a Colleague

A colleague in another state agency has e-mailed you asking if you would like to use the payroll software her agency developed. You wouldn't. Switching to a new program would take a lot of time, and what you have works well for you.

The following messages are possible approaches to giving her the news. How well does each message meet the criteria in the checklist for negative messages?

1.

Subject: Re: Use Our Software?

No.

2.

Subject: Re: Use Our Software?

Thanks for telling me about the payroll software your team developed. What we have works well for us. Like every other agency, we're operating on a bare-bones budget, and no one here wants to put time (that we really don't have) into learning a new program. So we'll say, no, thanks!



3.

Subject: Re: Use Our Software?

The payroll software your team developed sounds very good.

I might like to use it, but the people here are computer phobic. They HATE learning new programs. So, being a good little computer support person, I soldier on with the current stuff. (And people wonder why state government is SO INEFFICIENT! Boy, the stories I could tell!)

Anyway, thanks for the offer. Keep me posted on the next development—maybe it will be something so obviously superior that even the Neanderthals here can see its advantages!

## 11.5 Revising a Negative Message

Rewrite and reorganize the following negative message to make it more positive.

Account Number: 5555 5555 5555 5555

Dear Robert Jackson:

Due to the extended inactive status of your account, your credit card has not been reissued.

If you are interested in utilizing your account and would like to be considered for reissue, please contact us at the address listed above or the telephone number below.

Customer Service

1-888-555-6626

## 11.6 Firing Employees

In 2006, Radio Shack was having financial troubles and had closed about 500 of their stores. They also warned employees that more layoffs were probably on the horizon. Then, in August of 2006, Radio Shack sent layoff

notices to 400 employees who worked at their headquarters in Fort Worth, Texas. The notices were sent in an e-mail. The message reads as follows:

“The work force reduction notification is currently in progress. Unfortunately, your position is one that has been terminated.”

Based on your knowledge of negative messages, write a memo to your instructor which discusses why Radio Shack’s layoffs e-mail is not effective. You should also offer alternative suggestions on how the termination news might be better presented. How does e-mail stand as a mode of communication for delivering this type of

negative message? What are the disadvantages of firing employees in this way?

Adapted from Tara Weiss, “You’ve Got Mail: You’re Fired,” *Forbes.com*, August 31, 2006, [http://www.forbes.com/leadership/2006/08/31/leadership-radio-shack-management-cx\\_tw\\_0831layoffs.html](http://www.forbes.com/leadership/2006/08/31/leadership-radio-shack-management-cx_tw_0831layoffs.html) (accessed February 20, 2007).

## 11.7 Notifying Seniors That They May Not Graduate

State University asks students to file an application to graduate one term before they actually plan to graduate. The application lists the courses the student has already had and those he or she will take in the last two terms. Your office reviews the lists to see that the student will meet the requirements for total number of hours, hours in the major, and general education requirements. Some students have forgotten a requirement or not taken enough courses and cannot graduate unless they take more courses than those they have listed.

**As your instructor directs,**

Write form e-mail messages to the following audiences. Leave blanks for the proposed date of graduation

and specific information that must be merged into the message:

- Students who have not taken enough total hours.
- Students who have not fulfilled all the requirements for their majors.
- Students who are missing one or more general education courses.
- Advisers of students who do not meet the requirements for graduation.

## 11.8 Correcting a Mistake

Today, as you reviewed some cost figures, you realized they didn't fit with the last monthly report you filed. You had pulled the numbers together from several sources, and you're not sure what happened. Maybe you miscopied, or didn't save the final version after you'd checked all the numbers. But whatever the cause, you've found errors in three categories. You gave your boss the following totals:

Personnel	\$2,843,490
Office supplies	\$43,500
Telephone	\$186,240

E-mail your boss to correct the information.

**As your instructor directs,**

Write e-mail messages for the following situations:

- The correct numbers are
 

Personnel	\$2,845,490
Office supplies	\$34,500
Telephone	\$186,420

- The correct numbers are
 

Personnel	\$2,845,490
Office supplies	\$84,500
Telephone	\$468,240

Variations for each situation:

- Your boss has been out of the office; you know she hasn't seen the data yet.
- Your boss gave a report to the executive committee this morning using your data.

**Hints:**

- How serious is the mistake in each situation?
- In which situations, if any, should you apologize?
- Should you give the reason for the mistake? Why or why not?
- How do your options vary depending on whether your job title gives you responsibility for numbers and accounting?

## 11.9 Refusing to Pay an Out-of-Network Bill

Your employees' health insurance allows them to choose from one of three health maintenance organizations (HMOs). Once employees have selected an HMO, they must get all medical care (except for out-of-state emergency care) from the HMO. Employees receive a listing of the doctors and hospitals affiliated with each HMO when they join the company and pick an HMO and again each October when they have a one-month "open enrollment period" to change to another of the three HMOs if they choose.

As Director of Employee Benefits, you've received an angry e-mail from Alvin Reineke. Alvin had just received a statement from his HMO stating that it would not pay for the costs of his hernia operation two months ago at

St. Catherine's Hospital in your city. Alvin is furious: one of the reasons he accepted a job with your company six months ago was its excellent health care coverage. He feels the company lied to him and should pay for his (rather large) hospital bill since the HMO refuses to do so.

The HMO which Alvin had selected uses two hospitals, but not St. Catherine's. When Alvin joined the company six months ago, he (like all new employees) received a thick booklet explaining the HMO options. Perhaps he did not take the time to read it carefully. But that's not your fault. Alvin can change plans during the next open enrollment, but even if he switched to an HMO that included St. Catherine's, that HMO wouldn't pay for surgery performed before he joined that HMO.

Write an e-mail message to Alvin giving him the bad news.

**Hints:**

- What tone should you use? Should you be sympathetic? Should you remind him that this is his own fault?
- Is there any help you can give Alvin (e.g., information about credit-union short-term loans or even information about negotiating payment terms with the hospital)?
- What can you do to make Alvin feel that the company has not lied to him?

### 11.10 Announcing a Reduction in Benefits

In years past, your company has had a generous health insurance policy, fully funded by the employer. Employees pay only a \$10 copayment for doctor visits and a \$6 copayment for prescriptions. However, the cost of health insurance has risen much faster than the company's other expenses and much faster than the prices your company can charge its customers. Most other companies now expect their employees to contribute part of the cost of their health insurance through payroll deductions, and management has determined that your company must begin doing the same. For a group insurance policy similar to the one employees have received in the past, they will now have to pay \$50 per month, and the copayment for doctor visits will rise to \$15 per visit. The coverage for prescriptions will vary, with the

\$6 copayment applying only to generic drugs. For brand-name drugs, employees will have to pay more.

**As your instructor directs,**

Write an e-mail message to the employees of

- A large advertising agency in a big city. The agency's billings have fallen 30% in the last six months, and 10% of the staff have already been laid off.
- A manufacturing company. The company is still making a profit, but just barely. Unless the company saves money, layoffs may be necessary.
- A successful service business. The business is doing well, but most of the employees earn only the minimum wage. They do not own stock in the company.

### 11.11 Rejecting a Suggestion

Your company has a suggestion system that encourages workers to submit suggestions that will save the organization money or improve safety, customer service, or morale. If a suggestion is accepted that will save the company money, its proposer gets 10% of the estimated first year's savings. If a suggestion is accepted but will not save money, the proposer gets \$25. You chair the committee which makes the decisions.

Today, you must tell Wayne Andersen that the committee has rejected his suggestion to buy a second photocopying machine for the sales department. Wayne pointed out that the sales department occupies a whole floor yet has only one copier. Although the copier is in the center of the room (by the coffee and vending machines), some people have to walk quite a distance to get to it. Of course, they often stop to talk to the people they pass. Wayne calculated how much time people waste walking to the copier and talking to co-workers multiplied by annual salaries compared to the shorter time needed to walk to one of two copiers, each located to serve half the floor. He calculated that the company could save the cost of a \$10,000 machine in just six months, with a further \$10,000 savings by the end of the first year.

No one on the committee liked Wayne's idea:

"I don't trust his numbers. After all, lots of people combine trips to the copier with a trip to get a cup of coffee or a cola. They'd do even more walking if they had to make two trips."

"He talks about people waiting in line to use the copier, but I'm in sales, and I know the copier really isn't used that much. Sure, there are some bottlenecks—especially when reports are due—but lots of the time the machine just sits there."

"I'm worried about the economy. I don't think this is the time to spend money we don't have to spend."

"I guess his system would be more efficient. But the real savings comes not from less walking but from less talking. And I think we *want* people to talk to each other. Informal conversations are great for relieving stress, sharing ideas, and strengthening our loyalty to each other and to the company."

"I agree. I think our company is built on informal interchange and a sense that you don't have to account for every single minute. Our people are almost all on salary; they stay overtime without any extra pay. If someone wants to take a break and talk to someone, I think that's OK."

"Well, sometimes we do waste time talking. But his idea isn't really new. Lots of people think we could save money by buying more of every kind of equipment. Even if we get a copier, I don't think he should get any money."

You pointed out that even if a new copier didn't save as much money as Wayne predicted, it would shorten the lines when lots of people have copying to do. You suggested adopting his suggestion but reducing the estimated

savings and therefore the award. But the committee rejected your compromise and the suggestion. As chair of the committee, you vote only to break a tie.

Write an e-mail message to Wayne, reporting the committee's decision.

**Hints:**

- What reason(s) should you give for the committee's decision?

- Should you tell Wayne that you disagreed with the majority?
- How can you encourage Wayne to continue to submit suggestions?

### 11.12 E-Mailing Bad News about Lab Hours

You're the administrator of your university's computer labs. Many students have asked for longer lab hours, and you presented the request to your superiors. However, you've just been informed that, beginning next term, the hours for the computer labs are being reduced. The labs

will open one hour later each morning as a cost-saving measure.

Write an e-mail message, including subject line, to all students, informing them of this change.

### 11.13 Telling Employees to Remove Personal Web Sites

You're Director of Management and Information Systems (MIS) in your organization. At your monthly briefing for management, a vice president complained that some employees have posted personal Web pages on the company's Web server.

"It looks really unprofessional to have stuff about cats and children and musical instruments. How can people do this?"

You took the question literally. "Well, some people have authorization to post material—price changes, job listings, marketing information. Someone who has authorization could put up anything."

Another manager said, "I don't think it's so terrible—after all, there aren't any links from our official pages to these personal pages."

A third person said, "But we're paying for what's posted—so we pay for server space and connect time. Maybe it's not much right now, but as more and more people become Web-literate, the number of people putting up unauthorized pages could spread. We should put a stop to this now."

The vice president agreed. "The Web site is carefully designed to present an image of our organization. Personal

pages are dangerous. Can you imagine the flak we'd get if someone posted links to pornography?"

You said, "I don't think that's very likely. If it did happen, as system administrator, I could remove the page."

The third speaker said, "I think we should remove all the pages. Having any at all suggests that our people have so much extra time that they're playing on the Web. That suggests that our prices are too high and may make some people worry about quality. In fact, I think that we need a new policy prohibiting personal pages on the company's Web server. And any pages that are already up should be removed."

A majority of the managers agreed and told you to write a message to all employees. Create an e-mail message to tell employees that you will remove the personal pages already posted and that no more will be allowed.

**Hint:**

- Suggest other ways that people can post personal Web pages.
- Give only reasons that are watertight and make the company look good.

### 11.14 Refusing to Waive a Fee

As the Licensing Program Coordinator for your school, you evaluate proposals from vendors who want to make or sell merchandise with the school's name, logo, or mascot. If you find the product acceptable, the vendor pays a \$250 licensing fee and then 6.5% of the wholesale cost of the merchandise manufactured (whether or not it is sold). The licensing fee helps to support the cost of your

office; the 6.5% royalty goes into a student scholarship fund. At well-known universities or those with loyal students and alumni, the funds from such a program can add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

On your desk today is a proposal from a current student, Meg Winston.

I want to silk-screen and sell T-shirts printed with the name of the school, the mascot, and the words "We're Number One!" (A copy of the design I propose is enclosed.) I ask that you waive the \$250 licensing fee you normally require and limit the 6.5% royalty only to those T-shirts actually sold, not to all those made.

I am putting myself through school by using student loans and working 30 hours a week. I just don't have \$250. In my marketing class, we've done feasibility analyses, and I've determined that the shirts can be sold if the price is low enough. I hope to market these shirts in an independent study project with Professor Doulin, building on my marketing project earlier this term. However, my calculations show that I cannot price the shirts competitively if just one shirt must bear the 6.5% royalty for all the shirts produced in a batch. I will of course pay the 6.5% royalty on all shirts sold and not returned. I will produce the shirts in small batches (50–100 at a time). I am willing to donate any manufactured but unsold shirts to the athletic program so that you will know I'm not holding out on you.

By waiving this fee, you will show that this school really wants to help students get practical experience in business, as the catalog states. I will work hard to promote these shirts by getting the school president, the coaches, and campus leaders to endorse them, pointing out that the money goes to the scholarship fund. The shirts themselves will promote school loyalty, both now and later when we're alumni who can contribute to our alma mater.

I look forward to receiving the "go-ahead" to market these shirts.

The design and product are acceptable under your guidelines. However, you've always enforced the fee structure across the board, and you see no reason to make an exception now. Whether the person trying to sell merchandise is a student or not doesn't matter; your policy is designed to see that the school benefits whenever it is used to sell something. Students aren't the only ones whose cash flow is limited; many businesses would find it easier to get into the potentially lucrative business of selling clothing, school supplies, and other items with the school name or logo if they got the same deal Meg is

asking for. (The policy also lets the school control the kinds of items on which its name appears.) Just last week, your office confiscated about 400 T-shirts and shorts made by a company that had used the school name on them without permission; the company has paid the school \$7,500 in damages.

Write a letter to Meg rejecting her special requests. She can get a license to produce the T-shirts, but only if she pays the \$250 licensing fee and the royalty on all shirts made.

### 11.15 Correcting Misinformation

You're the director of the city's Division of Water. Your mail today contains this letter:

When we bought our pool, the salesman told us that you would give us a discount on the water bill when we fill the pool. Please start the discount immediately. I tried to call you three times and got nothing but busy signals.

Sincerely,

*Larry Shadburn-Butler*

Larry Shadburn-Butler

The salesperson was wrong. You don't provide discounts for pools (or anything else). At current rates, filling a pool with a garden hose costs from \$8.83 (for a 1,800-gallon pool) to \$124.67 (for 26,000 gallons) in the city. Filling a pool from any other water source would cost more. Rates are 30% higher in the suburbs and 50% higher in unincorporated rural areas. And you don't have enough people to answer phones. You tried a voicemail system but eliminated it when you found people didn't have time to process all the messages that were left. But the city budget doesn't allow you to hire more people.

**As your instructor directs,**

- a. Write a letter to Mr. Shadburn-Butler.
- b. Write a letter to all the stores that sell swimming pools, urging them to stop giving customers misinformation.
- c. Write a notice for the one-page newsletter that you include with quarterly water bills. Assume that you can have half a page for your information.

## 11.16 Analyzing Job Rejection Letters

1. Here are three rejection letters to an applicant who applied for an accounting position.

### Letter 1

We realize that the application process for the accounting position at AlphaBank required a substantial amount of thought, time, and effort on your part. Therefore, we would like to express our sincere appreciation for your willingness to participate in the search process.

The task of selecting a final candidate was difficult and challenging due to the quality of the applicant pool. We regret to inform you that we selected another candidate who we believe will best meet the needs of AlphaBank.

We thank you for your interest in employment at AlphaBank and extend our best wishes as you pursue your professional goals.

### Letter 2

Thank you for your interest in the accounting position at AlphaBank. I'm sorry to inform you that you were not one of the finalists. The position has now been filled.

The search committee and I wish you the best in your future employment searches.

### Letter 3

Thank you for your interest in the accounting position at AlphaBank.

I'm sorry to inform you that the search committee has decided to offer the position to another candidate. This was an extremely difficult decision for us to make. We were all impressed with your résumé and credentials.

Again, thank you for your interest in AlphaBank.

Analyze these three job rejection letters by answering the following questions:

- Do these letters use buffers? If so, how effective are they?
- What reasons do the letters give, if any?
- Does the letter attempt to build goodwill with the audience? If yes, how so?
- Do any of the letters offer an alternative?
- How do you think recipients will react to each of the letters? Which (if any) are more preferable?

**As your instructor directs,**

- a. Discuss your findings in a small group.
  - b. Present your findings orally to the class.
  - c. Present your findings in a memo to your instructor.
2. Collect job rejection letters mailed to seniors on your campus. Analyze the letters, answering the following questions:

- Do these letters use buffers? If so, how effective are they?
- What reasons do the letters give, if any?
- Do the letters attempt to build goodwill with the audience? If yes, how so?
- Do any of the letters offer an alternative?
- How do you think recipients will react to each of the letters? Which (if any) are more preferable?

**As your instructor directs,**

- a. Discuss your finding in a small group.
- b. Present your findings orally to the class.
- c. Present your findings in a memo to your instructor.
- d. Join with other students to write a report based on your findings.

### 11.17 Writing a Job Rejection Letter

After a job search at BAC Inc., your boss is pleased with the new candidate, Kimberly Lowery, selected for the Communications Coordinator position. There were over 75 well-qualified applicants, and it was an extremely difficult decision.

Today, your boss wants you to notify the other job candidates that they were not selected. He suggests that you “let them down easy. You never know when we might need these candidates again in the future.”

**As your instructor directs,**

- a. Write a form letter to the job applicants who were not hired for the position. Remember to maintain goodwill as much as possible so that applicants have a favorable opinion of BAC Inc.
- b. Write a memo to your instructor that focuses on the ethical choices you had to make while constructing the negative message.

### 11.18 Turning Down a Faithful Client

You are Midas Investment Services’ specialist in estate planning. You give talks to various groups during the year about estate planning. You ask nonprofit groups (churches, etc.) just to reimburse your expenses; you charge for-profit groups a fee plus expenses. These fees augment your income nicely, and the talks also are marvelous exposure for you and your company.

Every February for the last five years, Gardner Manufacturing Company has hired you to conduct an eight-hour workshop (two hours every Monday night for four weeks) on retirement and estate planning for its employees who are over 60 or who are thinking of taking early retirement. These workshops are popular and have generated clients for your company. The session last February went smoothly, as you have come to expect.

Today, out of the blue, you got a letter from Hope Goldberger, Director of Employee Benefits at Gardner, asking you to conduct the workshops every Tuesday evening *next* month at your usual fee. She didn’t say

whether this is an extra series or whether this will replace next February’s series.

You can’t do it. Your spouse, a microbiologist, is giving an invited paper at an international conference in Paris next month and the two of you are taking your children, ages 13 and 9, on a three-week trip to Europe. (You’ve made arrangements with school authorities to have the kids miss three weeks of classes.) Your spouse’s trip will be tax-deductible, and you’ve been looking forward to and planning the trip for the last eight months.

Unfortunately, Midas Investment Services is a small group, and the only other person who knows anything about estate planning is a terrible speaker. You could suggest a friend at another financial management company, but you don’t want Gardner to turn to someone else permanently; you enjoy doing the workshops and find them a good way to get leads.

Write the letter to Ms. Goldberger.

### 11.19 Pacifying Customers

Macy's, a New York-based department store and financier of the annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, launched a nationwide takeover of many long-standing department stores, such as Marshall Field's, Kauffmann's, and Meier & Frank. Beyond the name change, shoppers really began to notice when Macy's changed some long-standing holiday traditions.

For example in Portland, Oregon, the annual parade was shorter and the Santa Land monorail, a family tradition at Meier & Frank, was not in operation. In Chicago customers were disgruntled with losing their long-time Marshall Field's store; some customers refused to shop there during the holiday season. In fact, a survey by Deloitte & Touche suggested that 41% of Chicagoans were unhappy with the name change. Macy's is in a bind. Clearly, they want to keep loyal customers.

Take on the role of the Macy's Communication Department and write to angry Meier & Frank customers.

#### Hints:

- Remember to always maintain goodwill by analyzing how the audience feels about the situation.
- Point out the advantages of having a historically and nationally known department store take over smaller, less-known department stores.
- Keep in mind the monorail is only down for one year during the store renovation.
- Macy's also plans to add to the parade next year by including new inflatable characters for the kids and electrically powering the floats.

Based on Venessa O'Connell, "Macy's Brands the Holidays: As Marshall Field's, Kaufmann's, Others Take Chain's Name, Department Stores Try to Maintain Local Shoppers' Loyalty," *Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2006, B1, B2.

### 11.20 Sending Negative Messages to Real Audiences

As your instructor directs, write a negative letter that responds to one of the following scenarios:

- Write a letter to the owner of a restaurant where you received poor service.
- Write a letter to a company whose product unsatisfactorily met your expectations or needs.
- Identify a current political topic on which you disagree with your congressional representative. Write a letter that outlines your views for him/her and calls for change.
- Identify a television advertisement with which you disagree. Write a letter to the company explaining

your position and request that the advertisement be altered or taken off the air.

#### Hints:

- For all of these scenarios, your main goal should be to promote change.
- Express your complaint as positively as possible.
- Remember to consider your audience's needs; how can you build support for your position?

### 11.21 Getting Information from a Co-worker

Your boss has been pressuring you because you are weeks late turning in a termination report. However, you cannot begin your section of the report until your

colleague, Matt Churetta, finishes his section. Right now, he is the problem. Here is a series of e-mail exchanges between you and Matt:

7/25/2008

Matt,

The boss wants the termination report now. Send over your section as soon as you finish.

Thanks,



Matt's reply:

7/31/2008

My apologies about the report,

On another note, I'm waiting to see my oncology surgeon to see what the course of treatment will be for the esophageal cancer. I will keep you posted on the process.

Please let me know if there is anything else coming up.

Thanks,

8/15/2008

Matt,

I had no idea that you are dealing with esophageal cancer. Definitely keep me posted on your condition. Best wishes as you work through your treatment.

I need your section of the termination report as soon as you finish it. The boss has been waiting patiently for the finished version.

Thanks,

Matt's reply:

8/26/2008

Report is coming along. The last two weeks have been difficult dealing with all the tests, doctors' appointments, etc. I will beat this deal!!!

Take Care,

It is now September, and over a month has passed from the termination report's original due date. While you are sympathetic to Matt's situation, the boss is demanding the finished report.

**As your instructor directs,**

- a. Write an e-mail to Matt telling him you have to have his portion of the report as soon as possible. You are

concerned for your job security, as well as his, if this report is not finalized soon.

- b. Write a memo to your boss explaining the situation.
- c. Write a memo to your instructor that focuses on the ethical choices you had to make while constructing the two messages.

## 11.22 Mosaic Case

As the communications specialist for Mosaic's physical stores, Demetri received some bad news today from the Phoenix, Arizona, store. Apparently, shoppers have been complaining about the lousy customer service they have been receiving from the sales associates. These customers were so angry that they wrote their complaint letters to

the headquarters in Des Moines, instead of just contacting the manager of the Phoenix store. The letters were passed to the Communications Department to deal with the issues. Sadly, the complaints are not from just one or two customers. Demetri has a stack of letters piled up on his desk. He estimates there must be 30 or 40.

Demetri realized he had to take immediate and swift action. However, he wanted to run the idea past Sarah first.

He walked across the office and handed Sarah a few of the letters to skim.

Here is what one customer had to say—

I have been a loyal customer of Mosaic for the past ten years while I lived in Sacramento. I recently moved to the Phoenix area and was happy to learn there is a Mosaic just around the corner from my new house. However, I am appalled at the way the workers act in the store. While I was there, employees in two different parts of the store were verbally making fun of customers behind their backs.

No one seemed to be available to answer questions. When I asked one worker a question about a sale item, she looked at me and said, "I don't know; I don't work here!" even though she was wearing the Mosaic uniform. When I walked away, I heard her whisper to another person dressed in a Mosaic uniform some insulting comments about my clothes.

Although I have come to really like the products available at Mosaic, I question whether I can continue shopping in this unpleasant environment.

Here is what another customer wrote:

On June 27th, I was shopping at the Mosaic store in Phoenix and could not believe how unkind the workers were. I'm a 70-year-old man and asked for help getting a heavy item from a shelf that I couldn't quite reach. One of the workers I asked said—"I'm not your lackey old geezer."

The week before, my daughter was at Mosaic and overheard three workers, who were just standing around, having a contest for spotting the most unattractive customer.

I will never shop at Mosaic again and have told everyone I know to boycott the store as well.

"Wow!" said Sarah. "Are they all like this?"

"Yes," answered Demetri. "I really need to do some damage control. And fast! I think I'm going to respond to these customer complaints by sending out a general apology," Demetri told Sarah. "I'm also going to add in a coupon for 10% off their next shopping experience."

"Well, normally, I wouldn't recommend the 10% coupon because it's an extrinsic motivator. However, in this case, it could be a good idea. It's going to be difficult to re-establish goodwill with them. Thirty or forty unhappy customers is a big deal and could definitely tarnish the Mosaic name. I once read that every customer who has a bad experience is likely to tell between 15–25 people, more than they tell about a good experience. You need to do some serious troubleshooting before Yvonne finds out about this."

"I know, I know. So I'm going to write to the customers and apologize as soon as possible."

"But what about the sales associates who are rude or inappropriately behaving? If you don't do anything to

resolve the issue, the problem will still be there the next time the customers shop at Mosaic."

"Good point. I guess I'll also have to write a memo to managers at the Phoenix store to alert them about the customers' issues."

Take on the communication task of Demetri and write three correspondences.

- Write a letter to all of Mosaic's customers who wrote a letter about the Phoenix store. Make sure that you apologize for the sales associates' behaviors and let the customers know what is being done to correct the situation.
- Write a memo to the Phoenix Mosaic store manager, Lucas Pekelder, alerting him to the situation, as well as offering some alternatives on how to correct it.
- Write a memo to Yvonne. In the memo, explain the actions you took in writing the letter to customers and memo to Mr. Pekelder and how and why you said the things you did.