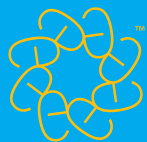




How to write with empathy

Transform your
customers' experience



emphasis[®]
www.writing-skills.com



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1 Why empathy?

Empathy's becoming a bit of a buzzword in business – and with good reason. It can be a great thing to embrace in many parts of your organisation, from sales to leadership style. But there's probably no more natural place to encourage it than in customer service.

You have to think about your customers' overall experience, and that comes in two parts: the practical side and the emotional side.

The practical side is the actual issue they're having – and how you're going to resolve it. And the emotional side? Well, if you work in customer service, you don't need to be told that customers often come to you in a state of high emotion – experiencing anger, irritation, frustration, disappointment, upset. After all, they wouldn't be getting in touch if something wasn't *wrong*.

The emotional side of your customer's experience directly affects how they'll think, feel and *talk* about your organisation.

The first part is easy enough: if you know enough about the product, service or system, you'll know the answer or steps you have to take. But the emotional side of your customers' experience is *at least as important* in determining how they'll feel and think – and *talk* – about you, your organisation and your brand afterwards. It will also directly affect their decision to stick with you or take their business elsewhere.

And this is where empathy comes in.

This ability to see or feel the world from someone else's perspective might seem like a nice-to-have, optional extra. But embracing it in your team, department or organisation not only makes for a nicer working experience for everyone, it also makes smart business sense. It can make a huge difference to:

- **customer satisfaction**
- **customer loyalty**
- **customer retention**
- **first-contact resolution**

and more.

In this busy world of increasing automation and artificial intelligence, many people crave a human response when they run into difficulty. And getting one can help drive customer satisfaction and loyalty, and lead to fewer escalated complaints, a better company reputation and even happier employees.

Sound worth trying? Let's look closer.

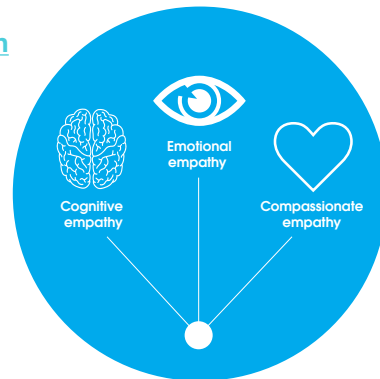


2 Taking a closer look at empathy

We've already noted that empathy is the ability to see or feel things as another person does. But there's a bit more to it than that. Understanding this will help you and your team work skilfully with empathy to transform your customers' experience.

Psychologist and author [Daniel Goleman](#) (drawing on the work of the psychologist [Dr Paul Ekman](#), an expert in emotions and expressions) outlines three types of empathy:

- **Cognitive empathy**
- **Emotional empathy**
- **Compassionate empathy**



Cognitive empathy

Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand what another person might be feeling and thinking. Sometimes called perspective-taking, it can help in negotiating, motivating, persuading and selling. As the name suggests, it's more thought-based than emotion-based.

Emotional empathy

Emotional empathy is not simply understanding another's perspective; it's recognising the emotion(s) that another person is feeling, and actually feeling them yourself.

Compassionate empathy

With compassionate empathy – sometimes called empathic concern – you don't just understand or feel the person's situation. You're moved, often spontaneously, to take action: to help, reassure and support the person.

Empathy at work

Truly great customer service relies on an adept balancing of these three types.

Cognitive empathy will give you a good basis for understanding of each customer's perspective, the best way to communicate with them and the kind of wording to use.

Emotional empathy can help you build rapport with customers and relate to their emotional experience. But there are some areas where unrestrained emotional empathy won't help the customer – for example, for agents responding on the phone in a crisis situation, like when a panicked parent calls a medical helpline. To do a good job, that agent needs to stay calm, not panic alongside the caller. Not only would they be less able to help, but you can imagine how this sort of emotional rollercoaster could lead to burnout for the agent.

Compassionate empathy (or empathic concern) will create an authentic human connection with each customer, and will be the fuel that motivates you to keep doing your job – to keep helping people.

And if you're in charge of a customer service team, you'll want to tap into all three types to understand, support, manage and motivate your people.

Emotional intelligence

In fact, Goleman identified empathy (in all its forms) as one of five elements that make up a person's emotional intelligence (or EI). The other four dimensions are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation and social skills. Together, these determine someone's ability to understand and handle their own and others' emotions, and to relate to other people. Again, the different parts work together – and your best customer service agents will be strong in all five areas.

Since Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence* was published in 1995, many businesses have realised the importance of EI, and it became a regular feature in leadership training.

But now organisations are coming round to the idea that EI also plays a crucial role elsewhere – notably the whole customer experience. That means seeking out staff with good emotional intelligence across the board, and offering training and support to fill any gaps.

'Because emotions are contagious, how your employees interact with your customers determines how the customer will feel about your company,' says Goleman. 'You want your employees to be using their emotional intelligence to get and stay in an upbeat, empathic space, and to relate to your customers from that state.'

Naturally, in the often-stressful world of customer service, the ability to skilfully manage emotions is extremely valuable. Strength in all the five EI areas means an agent will be able to understand but not get overwhelmed by a customer's anger or frustration. They'll be able to recognise their own reactions but manage negativity in order to get the best possible result, and they'll be happy to collaborate with the team.

If you're in charge of a team, you may want to look at making assessing emotional intelligence part of your hiring criteria. But it's also possible for anyone to develop their empathy and other EI skills through training and coaching.

'Because emotions are contagious, how your employees interact with your customers determines how the customer will feel about your company.'

DANIEL GOLEMAN



3 Writing with empathy

We've said that empathy is vital if you work in customer service. Here's how to make sure you show empathy in every reply you write to a customer.

Get started

Read carefully

It might sound obvious, but in order to write a reply that is both empathetic and solves the customer's problem, you have to have read their email or letter carefully.

With a full inbox and targets hanging over your head, it may be tempting to skim-read and rush to answer. But remember that if you write something that doesn't satisfy the customer, one of two things will happen. You're either going to hear from them again, and they'll be even less happy than before – or you'll never hear from them again, because they're taking their business elsewhere.

So, read closely. If there are multiple parts to the complaint or issue, note each one down so you can be sure to address them all. Check the chain of communication, if there is one: is this the first time they've been in touch? What have they received before?

And as you read, try to get a sense of how the writer *feels* (or is likely to feel) from what they're saying. Look at the problems themselves and anything else they mention. Think about how you might feel in their place. But remember too that not everyone has the same reaction in a situation: look for hints in the kind of language they use.

Consider the reader's perspective: questions to ask

It's best to avoid making any assumptions about anyone you write to. So, as you plan your reply, try asking yourself these simple but vital questions:

- **Who are you writing to?**
- **What is the subject?**
- **What are the issues they've raised?**
- **How do they seem to feel, or how are they likely to feel, about these issues? Which aspect of the problem seems most important to them?**
- **Considering what you know of them, how is your reply likely to make them feel?**
- **What do they already know about the subject? What more do they need to know?**
- **What response, if any, have they received so far?**
- **What will satisfy them?**



Remember your reader-focused objectives

We've mentioned quotas already: of course, they're often a big part of life in customer service. The trouble is, they can get in the way of recognising what your objectives should be. It's too easy to start seeing it as a numbers game and making your goal getting through the pile as quickly as possible.

But behind every email or letter is a person – quite possibly a stressed, irritated, angry or upset person. A person who might be like you, or like someone you know. Treating them like a number definitely won't help matters.

So think about what you want your written communication to achieve with that person at the front of your mind.

Here's a hint: how do you want them to *feel* by the time they've read your reply? Remember that a lot of customer behaviour is driven by emotion. And what do you want them to think, understand or do? These things should be your main focus.

Establish your key messages

You don't want your customer to get to the end of your reply without a clear idea of the main point it's trying to get across. Sometimes the key message gets lost in poorly structured or rambling writing. This can happen when you get too caught up in explaining processes the reader doesn't need the details of, or bury the main message near the end of your reply.

Don't give your customer another reason to be unhappy: before you start writing, make sure you know exactly what your main message to this recipient is. You could even try summing up the main message(s) (there could just be one, but certainly no more than three), using no more than 30 words for each.

Get writing

Apologise if you need to

If the situation warrants an apology, make it in your introductory paragraph. You might be in a hurry to get straight to the solution to the customer's problem, but when something's gone wrong, a 'sorry' can go a long way.

And make sure that it comes across in a genuine and sincere way. The best way to do this is to write it more or less as you'd say it. Accept responsibility if you can. Write something like, 'I'm sorry our service fell short,' not, 'If you feel you have been inconvenienced, we offer apologies.' (The second example is a classic non-apology, and is more likely to anger a customer than pacify them.)

Make sure your apology comes across in a genuine and sincere way. The best way to do this is to write it more or less as you'd say it.

In a longer reply dealing with a number of issues, you might apologise again towards the end. But, equally, you don't have to overdo the apologies. As a general rule, two are enough in a single reply.

And whether a full apology is necessary up front or not, think about how you can acknowledge the customer's feelings early on in your reply.

It's not my fault!

Saying 'sorry' when you're not directly responsible may well grate a little. However, just remember that you're not personally taking the blame but rather taking responsibility (in a very human way) on behalf of the organisation. You're sorry about the situation and the customer's unhappy experience, not for causing it. And a simple 'sorry' can help to change that experience for the better (and is often all it takes to turn a disgruntled customer back into a happy one).

What is empathetic language?

Writing empathetically means showing understanding of the reader's situation, reassuring them, and allaying any worries or concerns they may have. It also means coming across in a genuine and sincere way, showing integrity, and not making promises that can't be kept.

Try these linguistic techniques

Use 'I' and 'we' to take responsibility for the situation, but don't overdo the corporate 'we' that keeps the customer at a distance (and don't forget that it's about them, not about you).

On the whole, favour using [the active voice](#), which generally sounds more natural and avoids the blame-dodging effect of the passive voice. This means you'd write

we didn't deliver the package on time

not

the package was not delivered on time.

There are [a few exceptions to this rule](#) and it usually comes down to being tactful. For example, the passive 'the form was not filled in correctly' is more diplomatic than 'you made a mistake filling in the form'.

Find the right tone

Empathetic language is clear, natural, easy to understand, friendly and – where appropriate – conversational. It should put the reader at ease and be energetic and confident – but avoid being too informal or 'pally'.

Mirroring the customer's tone can be a good way to show empathy – think of it as speaking to them in their language. For example, if they've written in a casual and chatty tone, you could soften into a similar style (but keep it professional). Or if they start their email with 'Dear', rather than 'Hi', you could start your reply the same way.

There are exceptions, of course: don't reply in a cold, formal or sarcastic tone to someone just because they took that tone with you.

Be specific and get personal

When someone has a problem, it will often feel like a very big deal or personal matter for them. They might even be losing sleep over it. So if you write in very general terms about unspecified 'issues' or generic 'customers', you're likely to irritate them. A lot. So always refer to the specifics of the problems *they're* facing.

And think in a human way – for example, if they mention a friend, partner or even cat who's been affected by whatever it is that's gone wrong, you can refer to or ask after them too.

Keep it clear and concise

Clarity and conciseness in writing are important for creating empathy, as making things clear and waffle-free shows that you care enough about your reader to make their life as easy as possible.

This means using mostly short words rather than long – doing so will also help create a more natural and human tone, rather than a stilted and formal one. That means writing 'then' or 'next' rather than 'subsequently', and 'as soon as you can' not 'at your earliest convenience'.

Including legal, regulatory and other immovable information

Legal and regulatory information can be off-putting and hard to understand. If you've created a nice natural tone in the rest of your reply, the legal language can jar in contrast – but sometimes you may have to include it.

The basic rule to follow is that before you include this type of information, always explain why it's there and what it means. You can actually use this bit to connect with the reader by showing an understanding of how they're likely to perceive the information.

Mirroring the customer's tone can be a good way to show empathy – think of it as speaking to them in their language.

Leave out any jargon or technical terminology that isn't strictly necessary. And if you're referring to your company processes to explain what went awry, make sure to stick to only the parts the reader really needs to know.

Use a reader-friendly structure

For many responses, the formula SCRAP will help you write a reply that is logically structured and easy to follow. The acronym stands for:

Situation

Set the scene: thank them for their email or letter about the situation, and apologise or acknowledge their feelings.

Complication

Outline the problem they've brought to you briefly, to show you understand it.

Resolution

Give the solution, outcome, or answer to their issue or question.

Action

Explain clearly what you or the company are going to do or have done to sort things out – or any action the customer needs to take.

Politeness

Leave them with a good impression. The end is an opportunity to apologise again (if appropriate), to invite them to come back to you if they need more help and to finish with a courteous sign-off.

If you're writing something a little different, like letting a customer know if their formal complaint will be upheld, you could start with the main message – the yes or no. After that, you could go into a bit of detail about why this was the decision.



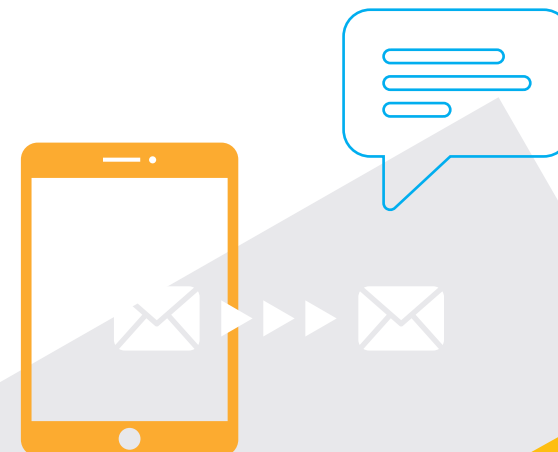


The opposite of empathy

Sometimes you get the sense that people were aiming at empathy but fell short of the target. Other times, they clearly weren't trying at all. Here are some things not to do.

Don't:

- ... use generic and clichéd language in an attempt to connect. This means anything along the lines of, 'We appreciate your business', 'Assuring you of our best attention', 'We welcome all customer feedback', 'All our customers are very important to us'.
- ... make no apology or a half-hearted apology when a sincere one is needed. This can include writing 'I'm sorry you feel that ...' when the issue is a matter of fact, not feeling.
- ... show a writer- or process-focus instead of a reader-focus, eg 'I hope you feel that this email has answered your query fully.' This amounts to saying, 'I hope you agree I've done my job properly.' Guess what: they don't care about that.



Some handy phrases

Truly empathetic writing is tough to script – that's because, most of the time, it will sound scripted. And feeling like you're reading template text is essentially the opposite of feeling heard and understood.

However, there are a few phrases that you can keep in mind and use as a jumping-off point for your empathetic replies.

'I can understand why you would be (insert appropriate feeling) about this.'

Use empathy to fill in the gap. What emotion do you think the customer is experiencing? Irritation? Disappointment? Frustration? Are they upset? Angry? Take the clues you can from what they've told you, how they've told you and how you might feel in their place. You don't have to dwell on the bad feelings, but show you've recognised them: [research suggests](#) one of customers' chief complaints with customer service is not having their feelings acknowledged.

Feeling like you're reading template text is essentially the opposite of feeling heard and understood.

'I have checked (your account/the records/with your account manager/other appropriate place) and...'

'I will make sure that...'

This isn't making it all about you. These sorts of phrases give the sense of an actual human taking responsibility and undertaking concrete actions to help: a comforting thought for any worried customer.

'Please let me know if you have any more questions or you need help with anything else.'

This is a great close that will reassure the customer that you're still there if they need you.



Before and after empathy

The customer's email

Subject: **Where is my rebate?**

Dear Sir/Madam

For the second time this year I find myself writing to complain about the poor customer service I've had from you. I've been waiting for over a month now for you to send me a rebate of excess charges.

The reason I'd incurred these excess charges in the first place is because you'd failed to put me on the capped rate when I switched my gas and electricity supply over to you last August. Instead I've been on the standard rate and paying more as a result.

You told me in your email of 1 March that you would be sending me a rebate of the extra amount I'd paid up to 28 February this year. I have yet to receive any rebate.

Since switching to Jeneric Electric and Gas, it's caused me nothing but problems. I can honestly say I wish I'd stuck with my previous supplier.

Yours in exasperation
Mrs P Jones

Read – then write

What does this customer feel? They've given plenty of clues: this is the second time they've had to get in touch, their tone sounds irritated, the events they describe sound frustrating – and they even tell you outright how they feel in their sign-off.

Let's look at the right way – and the wrong way – to reply to this complaint.

The wrong way: a reply without empathy

This is a cold and formal beginning – there's no sense of a human or personal touch.

We're not seeing any people taking responsibility here. And the passive 'you have been charged' feels like blame avoidance – who did the charging?

This focuses a little too much on the agent's process. But worse than that: it implies the customer's truthfulness was in question!

Subject: **Your query 87654**

Dear Mrs Jones

I write in reply to your email with regard to the confusion over the rates you have been charged.

Having conducted a full investigation into the concerns you have raised, I have confirmed that you were not sent a rebate for the excess amount we believed you had paid up to 28 February this year.

When you were told that you would receive a rebate, it was because we thought you were owed one. However, it was subsequently shown by the computer that you were better off paying the standard rate in these months rather than the capped rate. I am sure you will agree that it was better for us to leave matters as they were rather than apply the capped rate to your bill for this period and ask you to pay an additional amount.

This sentence is asking for trouble: it sounds irritable and almost sarcastic. The agent seems to be trying to turn the blame around and make the customer feel small.

I realise that you should have been informed that you would not be receiving any rebate and given an explanation as to why this was the case. I am sorry this did not happen.

Yours sincerely

The customer service team

Generic sign-offs do nothing to make the customer feel there's a real person on their side.

And here, at last, is the apology. Thrown in like this at the last moment, it doesn't sound particularly sincere, does it?

Another responsibility-ducking passive here: how about 'we should have told you'?

The right way: a reply with empathy

A subject line instantly sets the context (the 'Situation') clearly. And the first line reinforces it in a human way.

The customer's feelings are acknowledged with empathy.

This agent has recognised that there are **two** parts to the issue here, and acknowledges them both.

Subject: **Your email to us (ref. 87654)**

Dear Mrs Jones

Rebate of excess charges

Thank you for your email about the rebate of excess charges you were expecting. **I can understand why you are frustrated about not receiving the rebate and not being given the reason.**

Uses 'I' and 'we' and the active voice ('we told you' rather than 'you were told') to take responsibility.

I appreciate we told you that you would receive a rebate of the extra amount you paid up to 28 February this year. However, running the relevant figures through the computer showed that you were actually better off paying the standard rate rather than the capped rate up to this date and so no rebate was due to you.

The agent gives just the necessary details of the investigation and its findings, and explains it all in clear, natural language.

I can only say how sorry I am that we did not send an email explaining all this to you. I hope you will accept my assurances that we will make every effort not to repeat this mistake and to keep you informed in the future.

Please contact me on the freephone number in my signature if you have any further questions you would like to discuss.

This sounds like a genuine apology – the wording is much as you'd say it to someone in person. It also sounds sincere because the agent is apologising for the right thing – the failure in letting the customer know.

Yours sincerely

Ann Agent
01234 567890

This suggests an agent and company who care about their customers, without resorting to something generic and unconvincing like 'Our customers' experience and feedback is important to us.'

Signing off from the individual: more human and shows accountability.

Finally, the agent makes themselves available to help more if needed.



EMPATH: your path to empathetic responses

Writing with empathy will help you to connect with your customer and transform their experience. To ensure any email or letter you write is empathetic, you don't need the supernatural powers of the empaths in science fiction: you can just follow the **EMPATH**.



E M P A T H

ENGAGE WITH YOUR CUSTOMER

Read the customer's email or letter closely so you can connect with them in your reply. What can you gather about their feelings, circumstances and needs? How do you want them to feel by the end of your reply?

MAP OUT A RESPONSE

Identify the key message or messages for this particular reply. Are the messages written in a way that's clear and easy to understand? Are they logically structured and not buried near the end?

PERSONALISE THE MESSAGES

Check your draft response to make sure you've tailored the messages for this customer and acknowledged their feelings. Have you referred to the specifics of their problem? Can you ask after anyone else they've mentioned in their complaint? Can you adapt any template text if needed?

ANSWER THE QUERIES

Make sure your reply is concise, precise and actually addresses all the points raised by the customer. (Getting an incomplete response will not satisfy them.) Does it include the right level of detail? Have you let the customer know what they can expect now, without making any promises you can't keep?

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Always include an apology if one is needed and make the customer feel supported. Is your apology written more or less as you'd say it? Have you made yourself available if the customer needs more help? Can you sign off with your own name?

HUMANISE YOUR RESPONSE

Check that your use of language is clear and empathetic. Have you used the active voice and 'I'/'we'/'you' to sound natural and human? Can you cut any unnecessary jargon and generic phrasing? Have you created a positive, reassuring and appropriate tone?



4 Barriers to empathy (and how to knock them down)

Empathy barriers in customer service



Stress

It's no secret that life in customer service can be stressful at times. But as stress levels go up, our ability to empathise tends to go down.

High targets (and too much emphasis on quotas)

If agents are focusing more on hitting turnaround targets than on the customer's experience and genuinely solving problems, they're more likely to act on autopilot. This can mean failing to fully answer all the points raised, not noting previous contact the customer's had with the team, or carelessly using template text. The upshot is they lose sight of the real objective of each message: what they want the reader – the customer – to feel by the end.

Lack of engagement

If your team don't care, they're unlikely to do the best job they can – and again, they're probably going to be working on autopilot.

Overuse or careless use of template text

Standardised sections of text are a well-intentioned attempt to help agents deal with enquiries more quickly. But relying on them too much can result in replies that don't flow, don't fully answer the query or that irritate because they sound standardised.

What you can do



Stress less

Yes, customer contact departments can be stressful places. Acknowledging that is a good place to start – then look at how you can relieve it a bit. This might mean creating a nicer physical working space (think natural light, plants etc), offering support, looking at shift patterns, arranging team retreats or something else.

Review your targets

Take a look at your current targets. Are they realistic? Could you adjust them? Are there things you can do to reduce the number of emails coming in, like writing or optimising a knowledge base of articles to answer simple problems?

Use templates selectively

Try using templates less, and chiefly for uncomplicated or less emotive issues. Make it clear which parts can and should be tweaked to personalise the reply and fit the specifics of each case. Check your existing templates are written in human, empathetic language.

Empower your team

Encourage some level of autonomy and creative thinking in responses. Let agents take responsibility (for example, signing their own name to responses rather than having a generic sign-off).

Prioritise the empathy metric

Can you shift the department's priorities towards fostering the empathy 'metric'? Make it part of your hiring, strategy, training, coaching, and quality assurance processes. Reward creative thinking and empathy done well – and remember that focusing too much on turnaround quotas could be a false economy if you get more escalated complaints or customers simply leave.

5 Training and coaching empathy

Developing empathy

Everyone's born with a capacity for empathy (and other kinds of emotional intelligence), though research suggests some people have more of a capacity for it than others. It's also possible to build on your natural empathy skills.

You might decide to send your team on a training course on empathy or emotional intelligence, or you could choose to set up internal team activities that encourage empathy-building, like perspective-taking, active listening, communicating, and challenging prejudices.

Either way, make a point of identifying empathy as a key element in your department, and make it part of all your processes, quality assurance and coaching.

And, naturally, it all starts with leading with empathy! Set the tone for this in your team and you'll not only lead by example but create a great place to work too.

You might just find that caring more about their customers helps your team care more about their work.

Coaching empathy in your team

You can lay the groundwork for increased empathy in your team with training, but the best way to embed the skill is with ongoing coaching as part of your team members' development.

If you already have quality-monitoring processes in place, make reviewing and evaluating use of empathy part of it. Sit down regularly with each agent to reflect on responses they've written: ask them to imagine they're the customer in question. How would they feel about getting that reply? Would they feel understood? Would they be satisfied with the response? Should anything have been worded differently?

This kind of activity encourages your agents to practise seeing things from each customer's perspective and to tap into their feelings. Over time, this will help to build what we'll call their 'empathy muscle' – and their confidence too. Similarly, giving them some freedom and autonomy in crafting their replies can help to empower them.

And you might just find that caring more about their customers helps your team care more about their work.

Want to know more about how to apply these techniques at work, or how we can help your customer-service team craft better replies? Get in touch on +44 (0) 1273 732 888 or info@writing-skills.com



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