
Writing Customer-Focused E-Mail: *Top 10 Tips for Customer Service Agents (and Their Managers)*

Leslie O'Flahavan, E-WRITE
for High Tech High Touch Solutions - Teleseminar
May 4, 2010



The kind of e-mail that keeps contact center managers up at night ...

Customer's e-mail:

My (permanent) Maryland disability placard expired in March. How do I go about renewing it? The number of my placard is 12345678. Thanks, Jane Doe

Customer service agent's response:

JaneDoe,

In regards to your e-mail obtaining a current first-time update disable placard, one would need to complete a VR-123 (can be down load from the web, under forms) and taken to any full service MVA office, Monday - Friday ,8:30 - 4:30 p.m. , (If cannot get to the doctors, then the form will allow one 6 months to have the doctors to complete (still will received a placard) If cannot come in , one may give nortize power of attorney.



Presentation overview

- Seven tips for agents on how to write customer-focused e-mail
- Three tips for managers on how to help agents write customer-focused e-mail
- Discussion:
 - how to integrate “canned” answers and free text
 - how to screen prospective agents for writing skills
- E-Mail Quality Review Tool to use after this workshop



Top 7 tips for writing great e-mail to customers (for agents)

1. Provide a correct answer to the customer's question.
2. Provide a complete answer to the customer's question.
3. Write in a personal, professional tone.
4. Write at the appropriate level of complexity for the customer.
5. Use formatting to enable customers to scan.
6. Use correct punctuation, spelling, and grammar.
7. Offer other options for getting help.



1. Provide a correct answer to the customer's question.

- Incorrect info in an e-mail does more harm than in a phone call.
- It doesn't matter how well the e-mail is written if the answer is wrong.



2. Provide a complete answer to the customer's question.

- “One and done”
- Identify and answer all the questions the customer asked.
- Answer the questions the customer should have asked.



Did this e-mail provide a complete answer to the customer's question?

From: Charlie Barnstable
To: customerrelations@fedexkinkos.com
Subject: Problems with Print Online: "please select another delivery option"
Hello –

I am at <https://printonline.fedexkinkos.com/SubmitDelivery.do#> , trying to complete my online order. I have been trying for about 90 minutes. Here's the error message:

"Please correct the following error(s) to proceed: We're sorry. There is a problem with our system. To continue, please select another delivery option."

I have tried to select all the delivery options but I keep getting the same error message. Please contact me to let me know how to place this order.

Thanks -

Charlie



e-write.

Writing for online readers

Did this e-mail provide a complete answer to the customer's question?

From: customerrelations@fedexkinkos.com
To: Charlie Barnstable
Subject: RE: Problems with Print Online: "please select another delivery option"

Thank you for contacting FedEx Kinko's! Your comments are extremely important to us as they help us to improve our products and services. Every email we receive is reviewed and in most instances responded to within 48 hours. You may also contact one of our customer service professionals at 1-800-254-6567, 24-hours a day.

Please note if your email is regarding the change or cancellation of an online order we encourage you to contact us at our toll-free number listed above in order for us to provide you with immediate assistance.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact us, we sincerely appreciate your business.

Best regards,

FedEx Kinko's Customer Relations



e-write.

Writing for online readers

3. Write in a personal, professional tone.

- Use a tone that matches the purpose of the e-mail.
- Write a greeting and a closing
- Use personal pronouns: *I*, *you*, *we*
- Apologize only when at fault; be genuine



Evaluate the tone of this e-mail

From: Laura@aabbcc.com
To: Buy.com
Subject: Online Shopping Question

Hello -

I want to purchase Alex Toys Jungle Croquet --
<http://www.buy.com/prod/jungle-croquet/q/loc/20269/212990826.html> --
for my nephew who lives in Switzerland. Do you ship toys to
Switzerland? If so, how do I calculate shipping costs?

Thanks -

Laura



e-write.

Writing for online readers

The right tone?

From: support@customersupport.buy.com
To: Laura@aabbcc.com
Subject: Re: Placing an Order? (KMM4742775113900L0KM)

Dear Laura,

This is in response to your email about International Shipping. We are sorry, but Buy.com is currently unable to ship to Switzerland. We hope to be able to ship to you in the future. We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience.

Please do not reply to this message. It was sent from a notification-only address that cannot accept incoming email. If there is any additional information required for us to completely resolve your concern, please visit our help page by clicking on this link: www.buy.com/support. You may copy/paste relevant information from this email.

Sincerely,

Glenn
Buy.com Customer Service, www.buy.com



e-write.

Writing for online readers

Improve the tone of the reply to this customer's e-mail

From: Nelson Moyer
To: USPS Customer Service
Subject: Problem - duplicate charge for online postage

I have a problem with my account #: 2664176. Today I was ordering priority mail postage online when the USPS application froze. I assumed the Transaction Number: 31430623 DID NOT go through because my system froze and my printer didn't print the label. So I rebooted my machine and re-ordered the priority postage, thus generating Transaction Number: 31431913. Now I have been charged twice but I only printed one label. Please refund my account (listed as "Moyer VISA") for \$3.95. Please contact me to confirm my account has been refunded.

Thanks –
Nelson Moyer



4. Write at the appropriate level of complexity for the customer.

- Analyze the customer's question for clues to his level of sophistication
- Use synonyms for technical terms
- Provide examples
- Provide links to online help, glossary, etc.



What's the right level of complexity when answering this customer's question?

Subject: I bonds – name change

My name has changed - how do I cash in my bonds since it says they are non transferable?

Monica Williams



5. Use formatting to enable customers to scan.

- “Our customers just don’t read ...”
- White space
- Headings
- Vertical lists: bullets and numbers



How is this e-mail difficult to scan?

From: AT&T Customer Service
To: Arthur Novell
Subject: Re: Your Email to AT&T, E-Mail ID 11223344

Dear Arthur Novell, Thank you for contacting AT&T Online Customer Service. You can reach us several ways. To report problems with your phone service via telephone, please call AT&T Repair Office 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1-800-288-2747. Follow the appropriate phone prompts to reach the AT&T Repair office. To report problems with your phone service via our Online Repair Form, simply click on or paste the following URL into your browser: <http://12.26.57.31/repairform/emailsurvey.asp>. Complete all fields and provide as much information as possible to better assist our technical agents. Be sure to provide a valid Contact Number on the form to avoid any delays in caring for your problem. For other suggestions and possible simple fixes regarding common service problems please visit: http://www.usa.att.com/localhelp/repair_and_maintenance.html . For quick answers to commonly asked questions about AT&T Local Service please visit us at: <http://www.usa.att.com/localhelp/> . To change or add features to your Local Service, please visit us at: https://www.customerservice.att.com/fus_landing

Sincerely,
Michael
AT&T Local Service



Better?

Dear Arthur Novell,

Thank you for contacting AT&T Online Customer Service. You can reach us several ways:

- To report problems with your phone service via telephone, please call AT&T Repair Office 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1-800-288-2747. Follow the appropriate phone prompts to reach the AT&T Repair office.
- To report problems with your phone service via our Online Repair Form, simply click on or paste the following URL into your browser: <http://12.26.57.31/repairform/emailsurvey.asp> . Complete all fields and provide as much information as possible to better assist our technical agents. Be sure to provide a valid Contact Number on the form to avoid any delays in caring for your problem.

More Help Is Available Online

- For simple fixes regarding common service problems please visit: http://www.usa.att.com/localhelp/repair_and_maintenance.html
- For quick answers to commonly asked questions about AT&T Local Service please visit: <http://www.usa.att.com/localhelp/>
- To change or add features to your Local Service, please visit: https://www.customerservice.att.com/fus_landing

Sincerely,
Michael
AT&T Local Service



e-write.

Writing for online readers

6. Use correct punctuation, spelling, and grammar.

- “Small picture” writing skills
- Use an e-mail system that has tools to support correctness
- Understand the speed vs. correctness trade-off
- Correctness can be learned



7. Offer other options for getting help.

- E-mail shouldn't "dead-end"
- Phone number
- FAQs
- Chat
- E-mail address
- Web self-service



Questions?



e-write.

Writing for online readers

Top tips for writing great e-mail to customers (for managers)

8. Distribute writing standards, including a portfolio of model e-mails
9. Offer ongoing training.
10. Develop a writing recognition program
11. Hold agents accountable; score the quality of their e-mails



8. Distribute writing standards.

- Develop e-mail writing standards comparable to your telephone service standards
- Adapt the writing guidelines used by other departments in your agency: Communications, Publications, etc.
- Use or adapt the E-Mail Scoring Tool (*with permission ...*)



8. Distribute writing standards: a portfolio of model e-mails.

- An aid to training new employees
- A concrete product suited to adults' learning style
- An antidote to agents' perception that managers' quality judgments are biased



9. Offer ongoing training.

- Group training
 - In-house trainers
 - Outside trainers
- Self-paced training
- Training modules delivered during weekly staff meetings



10. Develop a writing recognition program.

Connect all recognition to compliance with your published writing quality standards

- Invite an outsider (expert, customer) to do a review of e-mails to recognize excellence
- Recognize specific writing traits:
 - Best answer to complex question
 - Best polite reply to angry customer



10. Develop a writing recognition program.

- Create an annotated collection of excellent e-mails and recognize any agent whose e-mail is included in the collection
- Give agents a gift equal to the value of an excellent e-mail:
 - Use company data on the value of a customer
 - Use your own data on the cost of an e-mail



10. Develop a writing recognition program.

- Reward agents for writing or editing canned answers or knowledgebase entries
- Let agents use the E-mail Scoring Tool to review the overall quality of e-mail at your center. Reward agents for ideas about how to improve writing skills



11. Hold agents accountable; score the quality of their e-mail responses.

E-WRITE's Customer Service E-Mail Quality Review Tool



Leslie O'Flahavan, E-WRITE
Leslie@ewriteonline.com
301-989-9583
www.ewriteonline.com



Measure the quality of your agents' e-mail

- Conduct a holistic review of e-mail quality
- Evaluate e-mail quality using a 100-point scale
- Practice using E-WRITE's Customer Service E-Mail Scoring Tool



Give the e-mail a quality score

Standard	Points Earned	Possible Points
1. E-mail provides a correct answer to customer's question(s).		20
2. E-mail provides a complete answer to customer's question(s).		20
3. E-mail is written in a personal, professional tone.		20
4. E-mail is written at the appropriate level of complexity for the customer.		15
5. E-mail uses formatting to enable customers to scan.		10
6. E-mail is free of punctuation, spelling, or grammar errors.		10
7. E-mail offers other options for getting help.		5
TOTAL		100
Quality Rating		



Don't use call monitoring standards for e-mail monitoring

- “Keeps conversation going with appropriate pauses and silences ...”
- “Provides an end-of-call summary of actions to be taken ...”
- “Asks clarifying questions, helps customer identify the problem...”



Standard, explanation, score

Standard	Explanation
<p>1. E-mail provides a correct answer to customer's question(s).</p> <p style="text-align: right;">20 points</p>	<p>The e-mail should answer the customer's question(s) correctly, based on current product or process knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specifications • Knowledgebase articles • FAQs • Policies • Input from colleagues or managers <p>Excellent: The e-mail answers all the customer's questions correctly and according to company practice/policy.</p> <p>Very Poor: The e-mail contains incorrect information or violates company practice/policy.</p>
<p><i>Customize this Standard for your company:</i></p>	

1. E-mail provides a correct answer to customer's questions(s).									
Excellent		Very Good		Fair		Poor		Very Poor	
20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11
Points awarded out of a possible 20 _____									



Standard's point value represents its e-mail quality "weight"

Standard	Explanation
<p>4. E-mail is written at the appropriate level of complexity for the customer.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">15 points</p>	<p>The e-mail response matches the customer's level of technical knowledge. The response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflects the customer's level of technical knowledge, determined by the customer's e-mail or customer data • Avoids jargon, abbreviations, highly technical language for the novice customer • Uses appropriate technical language for the expert customer <p>Excellent: E-mail contains the amount of detail and terminology appropriate to the customer's level of technical knowledge</p> <p>Very Poor: E-mail uses many terms, acronyms, or abbreviations and/or provides guidance the customer can't understand. Or, the e-mail provides a "novice" answer to an "expert" customer.</p>
<p><i>Customize this Standard for your company:</i></p>	

4. E-mail is written at the appropriate level of complexity for the customer.									
Excellent		Very Good		Fair		Poor		Very Poor	
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6
Points awarded out of a possible 15 _____									



Download the E-Mail Quality Review Tool through June 4, 2010

www.ewriteonline.com

E-WRITE's Customer Service E-Mail Quality Review Tool



Leslie O'Flahavan, E-WRITE
Leslie@ewriteonline.com
301-989-9583
www.ewriteonline.com



Writing Matters blog

The screenshot shows a blog post on the 'writing.matters.' website. The header features the site name in a purple and orange gradient. Below the header, the authors are listed as 'By E-WRITE's Leslie O'Flahavan and Marilynne Rudick'. The main content area includes a date 'October 20, 2008' and a title 'Archiving Back Issues of an E-Newsletter: When is Enough Enough?'. The text discusses the challenges of archiving e-newsletters in the 'Web 3.0' era. On the right side, there is a sidebar with the 'e-write.' logo and several navigation links: 'Email E-WRITE', 'ARCHIVES' (with sub-links for 'October 2008' and 'September 2008'), 'CATEGORIES' (with sub-links for 'Blogs', 'Bulleted lists', 'Customer service e-mail', 'E-mail', 'Grammar and usage', and 'Newsletters'). At the bottom of the main content area, there is a 'BOOKMARK' icon and a partial sentence: 'Here are five approaches to archiving back issues of an'.

writingmatters.typepad.com



Questions? Comments?

Leslie O'Flahavan

E-WRITE

Leslie@ewriteonline.com

Tel. 301-989-9583

www.ewriteonline.com

www.WritingWorkbook.com

