



Music to Their Ears:

What Customers “Hear” in Your E-mail

BY JOY VAN SKIVER

Responding to consumers' e-mail messages in 24 hours is a great goal, one that's easy to measure and one that lots of organizations are reaching.

Ensuring that each response is successful is not as simple, but it's crucial to getting what you want—consumers who stick with your brand and spread good news about you.

Here's a thought-provoking observation from a recent benchmark study published by the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals: Very dissatisfied consumers who received a company's Internet response conveyed their experience to almost twice as many people as did similarly dissatisfied telephone callers.¹

Twice as many! It's time to pay attention to what's happening after the e-mail leaves your system. Call monitoring lets you hear a consumer's reaction to an associate's phone manner, but there's no way to eavesdrop on the consumer reading your e-mail.

How do you know if your messages are working for you or against you? Something that is acceptable to you and your staff may actually offend a consumer. Although no one e-mails a message intending to make the recipient feel slighted, it happens often. You may have experienced it yourself with internal messages you've received at your organization or even with personal e-mails from family and friends. The tone of a message can actually overpower the content.

You're probably thinking, "I can't devote the time or the staff to the luxury of checking every e-mail response for good tone."

What can you do?

Start by taking a hard look at the canned paragraphs

your customer service reps are stringing together or the messages they're using thousands of times a year. Because e-mail — virtually overnight — became such a prominent form of communicating with consumers, messages may have been thrown together in haste just to have something in place.

Going for the Best

At a major consumer goods company, consumer affairs management decided they wanted more than just acceptable e-mail messages representing them. They wanted the best.

To reach that goal, they needed to recognize what was effective and what they could improve. In a review of selected typical responses along with the consumer's message that prompted each one, The Writing Exchange used a quantitative evaluation technique to prepare an E-mail Audit for this client. The audit analyzed three categories: customer focus, style and tone, and credibility.

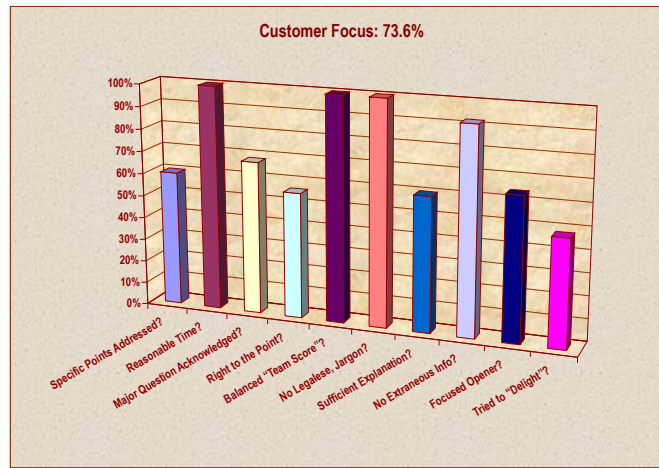
In our e-mail audits, we weight each of the three categories by its relative impact on the effectiveness of an e-mail response. Within each category, we use five to ten weighted criteria to identify the specific characteristics of each e-mail we evaluate.

The resulting ratings are not scores or grades. They reflect strictly the degree to which the e-mail responses meet the criteria we have established.

Customer Focus

Nothing matters more than customer focus. When people sense from your tone that you genuinely care about their concerns, they are more likely to remain loyal to your brand.

Criteria in this category include content and organization as well as response time and the actual wording of the message. Our client had very strong ratings in four of the ten criteria making up the Customer Focus category.



Reasonable Time?

Because of the instant nature of the Internet, consumers have high expectations about hearing from a company right away. A reasonable response time in most situations is the next business day. This company met that criterion with flying colors!

Balanced "Team Score"?

Too many references to *we* and *our* and *us* in a message can give the impression that you're bragging about your company, that you're being defensive about your company's position or that you don't care about the consumer. Lots of references to *you* and *your*, on the other hand, will give consumers the impression that they come first. When we tally references to *we* vs. *you*, scorecard style, we arrive at a "team score."

While no consumer would ever take the time to do this same kind of tally, people "hear" the words and "feel" the tone.

The team score in the messages we evaluated showed a good balance between the use of *we* and *you*.

No Legalese or Jargon?

Every company has jargon, and that's fine within the company. If consumers don't understand internal terminology, however, they may feel left out and confused. Acronyms, for example, are commonplace within every organization, but they may be totally unfamiliar to some consumers.

Consumer affairs responses often need to be reviewed by the legal staff to ensure that nothing opens up po-

tential liability for the company. Unfortunately, when legal terms become a part of the message, it may sound more like a contract than a conversation.

The vast majority of the messages we evaluated for this client were in plain English with no jargon or legalese.

No Extraneous Information?

Short e-mail messages are not only acceptable, they're expected. It's not necessary to fill the screen for every response.

When there's not much to say, don't say much!

Most of our client's messages were free of the kind of clutter that may annoy sophisticated consumers.

Specific Points Addressed?

Consumers want to feel that you have listened to them. On the phone, the consumer can repeat a question. On the Internet, that's not possible unless the consumer writes back to you after receiving your response. Because a lot of people won't bother to do that, missing the target the first time increases the risk of that consumer spreading bad news.

Finding exactly what the consumer wants may take time. When they are frustrated and angry, consumers tend to offer lots of thoughts and questions, and they may not pay much attention to organization. This presents an extra challenge for consumer affairs staff.

Our client is now re-evaluating the hundreds of canned responses that go out every day. The consumer affairs staff is creating additional messages to ensure that every e-mail addresses the specific points in the consumer's query. One generic response about packaging, for example, may not work effectively for the consumer who complains only about difficulty opening boxes.

Focused Opener?

When Contact Us messages began pouring in a few years ago, some consumer affairs departments tried to distinguish their responses by starting

every message with, “Thank you for contacting us online.” Online was new then! No one would say to a consumer on the phone, “Thank you for contacting us by telephone.” When we draw attention to the ludicrous nature of that opening sentence, the response from all of our clients is laughter. That sentence is out there because somebody entered it in the response system, and nobody stopped to think about it.

Starting messages with, “We received your e-mail,” is unnecessary and inappropriate since you would not be responding if you hadn’t received something. A specific thank you such as, “Thank you for asking about. . . .” is more effective than the stock opener, “Thank you for contacting us.”

Our client has decided to address their standard opening lines, something consumer affairs departments often overlook. Too many people see the opener as a throwaway line, just a sentence needed to start a response. The more specific you can be in your opening line, however, the better. Remember, consumers want to know, first and foremost, that you “listened” to them.

Style and Tone

In the style and tone category, we measure ten criteria, all relating to the

or she reads an e-mail. That “voice” may sound discourteous or condescending or generally negative even though the consumer affairs staff never intended an inappropriate style or tone.

Our criteria in this category range from word choice to sentence structure to format.

Real, Not Phony?

Consumers want to hear you “talking” to them. When you think about speaking versus writing as you create an e-mail response, the message generally sounds “real.” Even canned messages can be conversational.

No one would say on the phone, “Our company’s primary objective is the production of nutritious, chemical-free foods of the highest quality.” That sentence sounds like something from an organization’s glossy marketing brochure or from a mission statement.

Concise, No Repetition?

If you say the same thing twice or use roundabout phrases or simply include nonessential words, some people may become annoyed as they’re “listening” to you. Consumers who are savvy enough to use the Internet want you to be direct and not waste their time.

Wordy sentences also lose emphasis. Rather than give a step-by-step account such as saying, “After receiving your e-mail, I called and spoke with the product manager in charge of . . .,” a better approach is to start with the product manager and explain what you found out: “The product manager in charge of . . .

explained that”

Our client is re-evaluating the formula of using the same line to open and close each message. “Thank you for contacting us” in the opening line and again in the closing line is

especially obvious in very short messages.

No Clichés?

Anything that sounds as though it could be a rubber stamp makes your response seem insincere and starchy. “We appreciate your interest in our products,” for example, is so overused that it no longer conveys what it actually says.

When comments don’t quite fit the situation, consumers may feel they are receiving a canned answer, not an individualized response. Even if the message is canned, you don’t want your customer to feel like it is.

Many companies rely on a few standard closing sentences that don’t convey the same warmth as that pleasant voice on the phone. Can you imagine closing a phone conversation with, “We appreciate your interest in our company and products”?

The best way to end a response is to say something that relates specifically to the consumer’s message. If that’s not feasible, an alternative is simply to end with the main part of the message. If the “heart” of the response is well written, a separate closing line is often not necessary. After all, an e-mail message is not an essay requiring an introduction, body and closing. It’s simply a conversation.

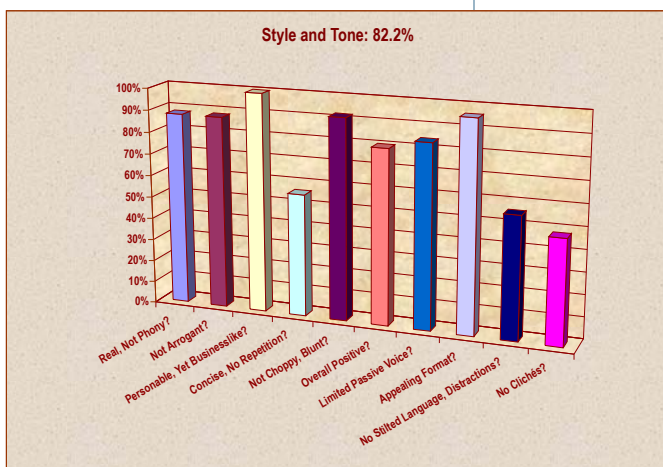
Credibility

Although this is the least important factor contributing to an e-mail’s success, when consumers notice mistakes, they may question the competency of your organization’s staff. They also may make a correlation between your message and your company’s products or services. If messages go out with errors, credibility becomes an issue.

Our client’s rating in this category is an average of each e-mail’s weighted rating in five criteria. Their e-mails had almost no mistakes in grammar, word usage, spelling and punctuation.

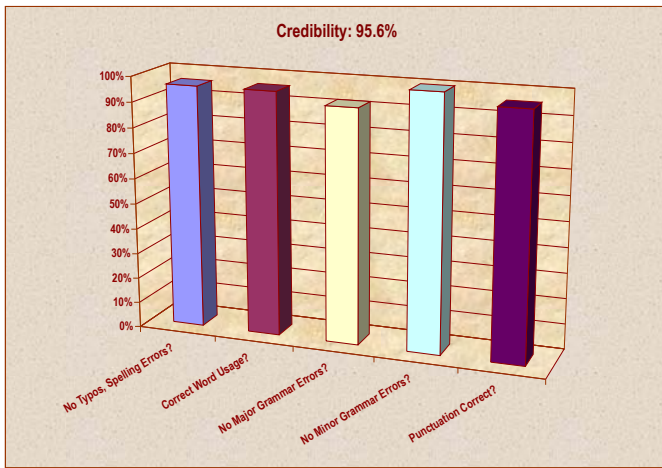
Your Own Analysis

In the e-mail audits The Writing Exchange prepares for consumer af-



“sound” of a message. While this company’s ratings were high in six of the ten criteria, our audit revealed a few opportunities to improve the warmth and sincerity of messages.

A consumer “hears” a voice as he



fairs clients, we focus on data first, recommendations next, and then suggested revisions. You may not have time right now for such a thorough analysis, but you can do something that's quick and easy.

Here's an analytical method that will give you a general sense of what's effective and what's not: Pick up the telephone and read your canned messages out loud.

To get the most out of this "sound test," have one staff member read aloud a typical consumer's message and another staff member say your department's e-mail response while

holding the phone. Listen for your gut reactions. If you can't finish a sentence without taking a breath, for example, the sentence is too long. If you hear the same word or phrase over and over, you need to cut. If the rhythm becomes monotonous, you need to vary your sentence structure. If some-

thing sounds phony or insincere, think about how you really would convey the same message on the phone.

Relationship Building

In this new Web-centered world, consumers do not think twice about sending you an e-mail. It's becoming the natural way to communicate. Be ready for each message with a response that sets the tone for the future of your relationship with that human being.

Your website does a great job of showcasing your products and your

company, but it's not as intimate as one-to-one communication. E-mail lets you get "up close and personal" with every consumer who solicits information from you. It presents a wonderful opportunity to build relationships. What consumers "hear" in your message will stay with them long after they've deleted it. ■

¹Benchmark: *Phone vs. Web Customer Contact*, page 13, SOCAP International, 2003



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CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT • SEPTEMBER 2004

Customer-focused E-mail Audit

If your e-mail quality control is limited to a manager reviewing messages before they go out, The Writing Exchange has a better evaluation technique for you. Our E-mail Audit gives you the equivalent of call monitoring. The foundation for the audit is an analytical system we have used successfully in major corporations since 1978. Our method is objective, and the results are measurable.

The detailed report you receive provides you with:

- Statistics
- A narrative explanation of our findings
- Graphs illustrating the data
- Specific recommendations
- Suggested revisions of your e-mails

What *do* your customers "hear" in your e-mails?

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