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Business Communication

How to Respond to an Upsetting Email

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HBR Staff; Anton Vierietin/Getty Images

Summary. Receiving an upsetting email is ... well, upsetting. Whether the email is critical, hostile, rude, or threatening, our rational minds get hijacked as our emotions race to the fore. Of the many emails we get in a day, some are bound to be distressing. How you respond to... [more](#)

Jan, a sales manager at a furniture manufacturing company, was sitting at her desk, working on a report due later in the week. The day was going fine, and she felt unruffled and composed. Then she took a break to look through emails. There was a message from a major client at the top of her inbox. She opened it and grew pale. It read:

We're really unhappy with the way this purchase was handled, Jan. It caused us a lot of inconvenience. We're reconsidering if this relationship is working for us.

Her heart began to race. She completely forgot about the report and sat stunned, staring at her screen.

It's happened to all of us. We open our inbox in a calm frame of mind and then ... pow! An upsetting email enters our world. Whether the email is critical, hostile, rude, or threatening, our rational minds get hijacked as our emotions race to the fore. Of the many emails we get in a day, some are bound to be distressing. When we get these messages, our first impulse may be to freeze or fight back.

What to Do When You Receive an Upsetting Email

How you respond to unsettling emails speaks volumes about your maturity, emotional intelligence, and business savvy — especially when you're in the early stages of your career. Here's what to do.

Don't take it personally. Disturbing emails may feel like personal attacks, but often, they're more a reflection of the writer's state of mind. Perhaps the writer is having a bad day at work or home. If you take the attitude that the email is not about you as a person, you can stay self-assured.

Don't respond immediately. The worst way to respond to an upsetting email is to shoot back an equally upsetting reply. Take a strategic pause. Remember that once you hit send, your hasty response becomes public. It can be forwarded endlessly and cited in future lawsuits. Avoid addressing substantive issues until you cool down and analyze the situation.

Don't respond emotionally. An upsetting email can trigger various emotions, such as shock, anger, or panic. Before you respond, take a few deep belly breaths to get your emotions in check and center yourself.

Analyze the email carefully. You might cringe the first time you read a challenging email. Force yourself to reread it objectively. Put your attention on the genuine business issues rather than the tone.

Choose the Best Way to Approach the Email

Some emails cross the boundaries of acceptable behavior. They may contain inappropriate content such as racism, sexism, antisemitism, and other positions that have no place in a business environment. If you receive such a message, refer to your company's policy on harassment or hate speech. In most cases, these incidents should be reported to management or human resources.

Other emails are upsetting because the writer is venting about their negative feelings or simply letting off steam, and you are the unlucky recipient of the rant. Often, it's best to ignore these emails or send back a neutral acknowledgment such as: "I apologize for the inconvenience this may have caused. I am working with the team to rectify the error on that report and will have it over to you shortly."

In many cases, however, these emails require a thoughtful response — particularly when an important deal, a vital relationship, or a job is on the line. Once you compose yourself, you can figure out how to craft just that.

Here is a five-step process you can follow to plan out your reply. I've used Jan's example to illustrate how she responded to the email the right way.

1) Thank the writer for taking the time to communicate.

Before anything else, remember to show your appreciation for the writer's effort to reach out to you. Even if the message has a negative tone, the writer cared enough about you and your relationship to spend time sharing their thoughts and feelings. Acknowledge this for the gift it is.

Jan, whose customer threatened to pull his business from her company, began her email response this way:

Thank you for taking the time to share your concerns. We're always grateful for a chance to make things right. I'm looking into the situation and would love to talk with you to address your concerns.

Jan recognized that, in most cases, the situation can't be resolved through email. People often need to talk on the phone, on Zoom, or in person to get to the bottom of the issue. Jan's client was in a different city, so she didn't offer to meet on the same day. Instead, she scheduled a Zoom meeting for a day later as she wanted both parties to let their feelings settle down.

2) Explain your position without blame or bluster.

Keep in mind that this is only the start of the conversation. Your goal is to set the basis for your face-to-face conversation. There may be facts of which the writer was unaware. You can use this conversation as an opportunity to share this knowledge with them.

After exchanging pleasantries in her Zoom meeting with the client, Jan began:

I spoke to my sales team and learned that one of the items you requested was back ordered at our supplier's warehouse. The sales team wanted to send your entire order together, so they held off on shipping the available items. When the team learned that the supplier needed more time than expected to complete your order, they decided to go ahead and send the available items in the interim. As a result, you did not receive all the items you ordered, and they also reached you late.

Note: If you're working across time zones, and a conversation isn't possible, you could use this language in an email.

3) Identify the core issues.

In your response, offer a resolution for the actual issue that troubled the writer. If that person does not feel you understand what's at stake, they may lose faith in your response and decline the meeting you've proposed. Jan said:

I realize that not having all the items you ordered made it impossible for you to fill a special order for your customer in turn.

Jan's client confirmed that this was indeed the consequence of her team's action.

4) Take responsibility and apologize if necessary.

This step is crucial. Use "I apologize" rather than "I'm sorry." Apologize is a performative verb. Simply by writing, "I apologize," you have performed an action. In contrast, "I'm sorry" is a weather report about how you are feeling. If you are the manager, the buck stops with you. Jan continued:

I apologize for the inconvenience this caused you. As the manager, I take full responsibility for this situation.

5) Focus on solutions.

The sooner you can move the other person from the past (where the upsetting incident happened) to the future (where solutions lie), the better off you will be. You have no control over what has already happened, but you have an opportunity to concentrate your attention – and your reader's attention – on the future, where positive change can occur.

Once Jan apologized, her client began to be mollified. He was receptive when she said:

Here's what I propose: We will fast-track your special request and ship it by next Friday. As a sign of our good will, we offer you a 15% discount and free shipping on these items. Going forward, I will personally oversee all activities on your account. We value your business and hope to have a long and positive relationship.

The client was satisfied that Jan understood his concerns and had a plan to correct her company's errors. He accepted her proposal and Jan breathed a sigh of relief.

Following the Zoom call, Jan sent a brief, friendly email to the client that confirmed their new agreement.

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Receiving an upsetting email is ... well, upsetting. However, it can be a springboard for improved business relationships. When your colleagues see you remain cool under pressure, they trust you more. When managers and clients see that you take responsibility for errors and forge ahead for solutions, they gain confidence in your abilities.

So, the next time you receive an email that takes your breath away, pause before responding, acknowledge the writer's concerns, take responsibility, and most importantly, focus on solutions.

Elizabeth Danziger, founder of Worktalk Communications Consulting, offers webinars and presentations that equip teams to write clearly, confidently, and correctly. She is the author of *Get to the Point!*, a reader-friendly book on business writing.

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