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TIPS AND TRICKS FOR TEACHING COMPLAINTS AND ADJUSTMENTS TO BUSINESS STUDENTS

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Abstract

In the dynamic world of business, effective communication plays a pivotal role in customer satisfaction and maintaining business relationships. This article explores strategies for instructing business students in the art of handling complaints and implementing adjustments. Drawing from both theory and practical expertise, it sheds light on the intricacies of teaching students the nuances of complaints and adjustments in a business context.

The article delves into the critical components of teaching complaints, emphasizing the importance of understanding what information to include, which issues to address, and the appropriate language to employ. It provides a comprehensive framework for structuring complaints that enables students to articulate grievances clearly and professionally, ultimately leading to more effective resolutions. Moreover, the article offers insights into teaching the art of crafting adjustments, guiding instructors on how to empower students to appease dissatisfied customers, make amends for failures, and respond adeptly to unjustified complaints. Practical strategies and sample sentences are presented to equip students with the skills necessary to navigate the complex terrain of customer service and satisfaction, so as to not only resolve issues, but to also strengthen business partnerships.

Keywords: complaints; adjustments; language; mindset; content; challenges

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1. Introductory remarks and research methodology

In the fast-paced realm of modern business, where relationships are often forged and tested through communication, the ability to adeptly handle complaints and implement adjustments stands as a linchpin for success. The present research explores this critical facet of business education by attempting to instruct the next generation of business leaders on the delicate art of addressing customer dissatisfaction. From the fundamental mindset required to compose effective complaints to the strategic considerations involved in crafting adjustments, this article aims to empower students with indispensable communication skills.

Navigating the complex landscape of complaints and adjustments necessitates more than mere rhetoric—it demands a nuanced understanding of the underlying dynamics at play. In this article, we

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traverse the challenging terrain where disagreements and conflicts coalesce with the need for maintaining professionalism. By distilling both theoretical concepts and practical strategies, the study lays the groundwork for educators to instill in their students not only the ability to express dissatisfaction but also the skill to effect meaningful resolutions, ultimately contributing to the longevity and success of business collaborations.

Complaints and adjustments encompass the processes through which individuals or entities express dissatisfaction and seek resolution within commercial transactions. A complaint, in essence, articulates discontent or disagreement with a product, service, or aspect of a business interaction, requiring a thoughtful response to address the customer's concerns. Adjustments, on the other hand, constitute the business's reply to a complaint, involving actions taken to rectify the issues raised and restore customer satisfaction. These mechanisms operate as vital tools in both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) contexts, providing avenues for conflict resolution and relationship enhancement. While applicable to both B2B and B2C scenarios, the current research uniquely concentrates on complaints and adjustments within the specific domain of business-to-consumer interactions.

The research methodology employed in this study involves the analysis of complaints and adjustments written by first-year students at the Faculty of Business and Administration (FABIZ), enrolled during the academic year 2023-2024. The corpus, comprising a collection of student-generated documents, serves as the primary data source for examining the nuances of communication within the context of addressing customer dissatisfaction and implementing resolutions. By focusing specifically on the contributions of first-year FABIZ students, the research aims to provide insights into the initial stages of business education and to assess the students' proficiency in articulating complaints and crafting adjustments. This targeted approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the pedagogical challenges and opportunities associated with teaching effective communication skills in the realm of business-to-consumer interactions.

2. Complaints

2.1. Generalities

Since we always embark on the challenging task of writing to a business partner equipped with a specific mindset, we will begin our research by highlighting that, as far as the given mindset is concerned, the main difficulty springs from the fact that we find ourselves in a situation where there is disagreement and even conflict to deal with. While in the business arena, situations often arise where the parties involved have colliding interests (even in the case of an uneventful sale, the seller aims for a price as high as possible whereas the buyer aims for the opposite, the lowest possible price), in the case of complaints, the writer has to openly express dissatisfaction while maintaining a polite and tactful tone – a challenge more difficult than it seems, especially given the fact that they are likely aggravated by what they perceive as an injustice that has been done to them. Therefore, aside from expressing discontent in a tactful way, the writer also has to make sure they are containing their emotions and avoiding accusatory, negative or emotionally charged language.

However, despite its difficulty, this demanding task also has its advantages. Although this type of situation is challenging due to the conflictual nature of the interaction, it is a common occurrence in the business world and it should not be viewed as an insurmountable barrier. On the contrary, if all actors involved are acting in good faith, there is a strong possibility that the incident will be solved, the problem will be overcome and the collaboration will resume and even improve. Any company acting in good faith will want to know if there is something wrong with their product or service or if they can improve their activity so as to keep customers happy – hence, if the complaint is justified and crafted in a sincere way, the general outcome will be a positive one.

In terms of content, in order to write a justified complaint and build an air-tight case, it is important for the writer to highlight the discrepancy between promise and reality rather than merely the aspects that made them unhappy. If one simply states why one is dissatisfied, one may come across as a demanding customer that is impossible to please. If, by contrast, one shows that the company promised something and then failed to deliver, the focus shifts towards the company's responsibility, and they will come across as being deceptive.

Companies make promises to their customers in many ways. It may be a statement in an ad, in a TV commercial or on a billboard; it may be a social media post or an affirmation made by an influencer, or it may simply be a note on its website, on the label, on the packaging – in any of these cases, if there is a statement committing to something that was not delivered, the customer has an iron-clad case. Being deceptive is possibly the most unethical thing one can do in business – high prices are not unethical, for example, as long as they are transparently conveyed and as long as the customer knows what to expect. Conversely, saying one thing and doing another translates into deceiving customers, and no company wants to have a reputation for doing that.

As far as the language goes, the way in which the complaint is written must comply with a set of golden rules that we will briefly review. Firstly, the tone must be firm, yet tactful. There is a fine line between assertive and aggressive and business theorists generally agree that, while the former stance is highly recommended, the latter one is not. An aggressive attitude will antagonize the recipient and fail to meet the writer's goals, and we must bear in mind that the goal of a complaint is not to vent, but to obtain something specific, usually a refund or a replacement.

Another task that may be difficult to fulfil stems from the fact that the language must be fact-focused and devoid of emotion. We must avoid using accusatory language (such as the 2nd person followed by a reproach) or words that are emotionally charged (*outrageous, horrible, awful, disgusted, infuriated, amazed, enraged*). Equally, we must avoid informal language (*a rip-off, a scam, a hustle, stiffed* etc.). We must convey the information that is relevant for the issue at stake in a clear and succinct manner, describing both the problem and what we expect the recipient to do in order to solve that problem. Our letter must not only focus on fixing things, but also on salvaging the business relationship (Taylor, S., 2012: 329) – this is crucial, since the goal of almost any player in this field has to do with long-term collaborations and repeat business.

2.2. *The structure, content and language of complaints*

Theorists agree that the structure and content of complaints are predictable and follow some main guidelines that need to be complied with; aside from that, the content is customized according to the specifics of that particular situation.

Broadly speaking, the introductory paragraph should include a brief description of the reason for writing. Ideally, it is at this point that some positive aspects, if any, should be highlighted, – for instance, if this is a B2C situation and one has made purchases from that particular retailer in the past that one has been happy with, it would be good to mention them in this introductory part. Similarly, if this is B2B communication and this particular business has always been prompt in their payments, this aspect should be mentioned. If the products have always been good quality, this aspect should equally be mentioned.

I am writing to inform you about an incident that took place in your Mega Mall store earlier today. I have been a happy customer of Zara for years, appreciating the high quality, attractive design and affordable prices of your clothing. Regrettably, therefore, this recent experience has compelled me to voice my concerns and seek resolution.

Let me begin by expressing my satisfaction with the services your company has constantly delivered. However, a recent incident has led me to write this letter to address a matter that requires your attention.

The main body of the complaint should include all the relevant details – as there is a fine line between too little and too much information, and since research shows that, surprisingly, the latter occurs more frequently than the former, one must make sure that, while providing all the necessary facts, one does not fall into the trap of information overload. It is also in this main part of the letter that one needs to highlight what has already been done to get the problem solved, the ways in which the company has been deceptive, the ways in which one has been negatively impacted by their failing to deliver on their promises, as well as one's expectations regarding what the recipient should do to fix the problem (such as a refund, a partial refund, product replacement, free after-sales service etc.)

1. *On May 21st, I booked a trip (No. H56349) for a 5-night stay at Hotel Summer Beauty, as advertised in your brochure. The promotional material highlighted the hotel as a luxurious 4-star property located by the beach, offering a premium experience for its guests. Regrettably, my experience was far from what was promised.*
2. *Upon arrival, I quickly realized that the hotel was not situated anywhere near the beach. Instead, it was a around 2 kms away, necessitating transportation for even basic beach access, an undertaking that turned out to be extremely challenging, given that there were no parking spots by the beach and I was travelling with two young children (aged 3 and 5). Therefore, this discrepancy was a significant inconvenience, a painful departure from the idyllic beachside setting I had anticipated and it almost completely ruined my holiday.*
3. *Furthermore, the quality of accommodation provided fell well below the standards one would expect from a purported 4-star hotel. The room lacked basic amenities, the furnishings were outdated, and the overall cleanliness left much to be desired. The conditions were in stark contrast to the luxurious and comfortable environment promised in your promotional materials. Please find attached photos that prove everything I have stated in this letter.*
4. *While discrepancies between marketing materials and reality can occur, the extent of the disparities in this case is unacceptable. As a customer who relies on accurate information to make informed decisions, I feel let down and misled by the representations made in your brochure.*
5. *In light of these issues, I kindly request that I receive a partial refund of 40% of the overall cost of the trip, a refund that, given the situation described above, I feel I am strongly entitled to.*
6. *I would appreciate your prompt attention to this matter and I hope for a swift resolution. However, in case my refund is not approved, I will have no choice but to contact Consumer Protection. Given your company's reputation, I do hope that will not be necessary.*

We can see, in the sample above, all the elements described. The extract starts with a reference to the company's promises to the consumer (paragraph 1), followed by a polite and deferential, yet firm description of the problems encountered, descriptions intertwined with recurring references to the same promises (paragraphs 2 and 3). The relevant details are provided succinctly, without any information overload. Paragraph 4 contains generalities aiming to save the recipient's face while at the same time reinforcing the writer's disappointment, whereas paragraph 5 puts forward a clear statement of the compensation requested, thus representing the thrust of the complaint. The last paragraph of this extract revolves around the alternative solution of contacting Consumer Protection as a last resort, a necessary step that many complaints include.

The concluding paragraph must contain a brief summary of what has been said so far. Besides, if possible, one must end on a good note. Businesses almost always try to salvage relationships with partners despite whatever setbacks may occur; very rarely do they close all doors, and this happens only when it has become clear that, despite all of their efforts, the collaboration cannot continue. Therefore, it is customary to end a complaint by expressing optimism and hope that the problem will be resolved and collaboration will be resumed.

While my recent experience has been disappointing, I believe in the potential for your company to rectify the situation and maintain its reputation for quality service. I look forward to a swift resolution and the opportunity to continue our relationship on a more positive note.

Despite the setbacks encountered during this trip, I remain hopeful that your company values customer satisfaction and will take the necessary steps to address these concerns. I look forward to a positive resolution and the opportunity to continue our collaboration in the future.

2.3. Challenges

Based on our experience with the students' responses, we have identified that the main challenges they face stem from the temptation to use blunt, accusatory language and to directly place blame on the recipient, as well as from the difficulties they encounter when they attempt to contain their emotions. Regarding this last point, while it is clearly difficult to write in a calm, detached manner when one is annoyed or even furious, we must always remember that the reason we are writing a complaint in the first place is, in most cases, our desire to obtain something concrete, such as a refund or a replacement of the faulty product(s). Blowing off steam may make us feel relieved for a short while, but will aggravate the recipient, make them respond negatively and will likely result in their denying our claims.

Thus, students' responses included sentences such as:

1. *You have to correct your mistake immediately, or else I will contact Consumer Protection.*
2. *If you don't refund my money, I will take legal action right away.*
3. *The way I was treated in your hotel is outrageous!*
4. *The food was horrible, my dog wouldn't eat that.*
5. *The shop assistants were gossiping all along and paid no attention to me.*
6. *It is your fault the products were damaged on the way! I told you to have them labelled them as "fragile"!*

Upon reading sentences like those above, we need to clearly reiterate to students that the primary goal of writing to a business partner is not just to fix the problem but also, and perhaps even more importantly, to fix the relationship in the long run. Since anything that sounds accusatory will put the recipient on the defensive and likely result in a negative reaction, we must constantly bear in mind that the tone and language of our letter should pursue the ultimate goal of a financial gain, both short-term and long-term (since a broken collaboration means less profit).

Moreover, not only are the examples above inappropriate in that they sound rude and even aggressive, they may also come across as offensive, such as the comparison with the dog that we see in example 5. This may happen for a number of reasons. Primarily, while students at this point have already become acquainted with the differences between the formal and the informal register, they are still, to a large extent, influenced by the language they use online and by communication on social media (where boundaries wane and the disinhibition effect of the internet takes over), so they may be unable to switch to a different type of communication, with a different goal and a different audience. It is the teacher's role to help students fully grasp and successfully apply a completely different way of getting the right message across.

To end this part of our research, we must point out that a letter of complaint must be written right away, the moment one becomes aware that something is wrong. A delay will only weaken one's case – on the one hand, one may come across as sloppy and not really keen on getting the problem solved, since one was in no rush to do so. On the other hand, the longer one waits, the stronger chances are one may forget relevant details.

Equally importantly, since anyone writing a complaint feels they have been wronged (even if the complaint is seen as unjustified by its recipient, it does not appear so to the writer), it is not customary to apologize. While, generally speaking, it is perfectly fine to apologize and make amends if one acknowledges one has been wrong, this is not the case with complaints, as demanding what one believes one is entitled to is not something one views as wrongful behaviour.

Last but not least, as has been said before, accusatory language must be avoided at all costs. While we may be naturally inclined to look for someone to blame, the truth is that sometimes, no one is to blame. Problems may occur as a result of some misunderstanding and, even if there is human error, this may not be intentional or malicious and there may exist an innocent explanation for the problem. Therefore, while this is difficult to do, emotions must be contained and one must focus on the facts and use clear, neutral language to explain what went wrong and how one expects the problem to be solved. Letters of complaint are solution-oriented undertakings.

3. Adjustments

3.1. Generalities

As is well-known, adjustments represent replies given to letters of complaint. Broadly speaking, adjustments fall into two main categories: those that accept the complaint and those that reject the complaint, while the difference between the former and the latter stems from whether the seller accepts or declines responsibility for whatever it is that went wrong.

Once the seller accepts responsibility and acknowledges that there was a problem with either the product or the service or with the way they were delivered, the right thing to do is to make amends and comply with the buyer's wishes. Accepting a complaint, assuming responsibility and fixing a problem is difficult not only because one loses face, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because this course of action translates into loss of profit – once one embarks upon making things right, either by replacing a product or by refunding the customer's money, one will inherently lose a share of one's profits. This is, in fact, a general consequence of operating ethically in business.

By contrast, if one decides to decline responsibility and label the complaint as unjustified, albeit implicitly, it is essential that one should provide a clear, reasonable and cogent explanation of why one doesn't feel one is at fault and also of what one thinks the reasons are for the problem one is contacted about. It would be an unforgivable blunder to decline responsibility without at least attempting to provide an explanation for one's stance.

We can see, therefore, that when we write an adjustment, in terms of mindset, there is a twofold challenge: on the one hand, there is the difficulty of tackling an inherently conflictual situation and, on the other hand, we have to make the decision of whether to accept the complaint and lose both face and money or to reject the complaint and possibly lose a customer, not to mention the potential damage to our reputation.

Therefore, in light of what has been said so far, the content of an adjustment faithfully reflects the mindset of the writer: if the seller assumes responsibility and makes amends, we will have a letter in which they apologize, explain why they think the error occurred, explain how the problem has been / will be fixed and assure the recipient that similar issues will not happen in the future. Conversely, if the complaint is rejected, an explanation will be provided whereby the writer will attempt to explain why their company is in no way at fault.

Similarly to complaints, irrespective of whether the answer represents an acceptance or a rejection of the demands made, the language of adjustments must be firm and tactful, assertive yet not at all aggressive. Adjustments are generally written by sellers (with the notable exception of adjustments responding to complaints about late payment), and we must bear in mind that it is the buyer, not the seller, that reigns supreme in the business world, since it is the buyer that controls the money. Additionally, any business aims for long-term collaborations and is reluctant to burn all bridges with potential partners. Therefore, even if the complaint is technically rejected, in that the seller declines responsibility, does not acknowledge they are at fault and does not comply with the client's wishes, they may still offer some compensation (such as a partial refund or a discount on future purchases) in an attempt to salvage the relationship. Most importantly, however, the language, even in this latter

case, is deferential and, if possible, conciliatory – as a rule, businesses will go to extreme lengths to overcome setbacks and salvage relationships.

3.2. *The structure, content and language of adjustments*

As we have said already, broadly speaking, adjustments can be divided in two main categories: those where the complaint is accepted, and those where the complaint is rejected. Both the structure and the content of the adjustment is contingent upon which tack the writer decides to take.

Thus, in the former case, the writer accepts responsibility and consequently agrees that there has been a problem on their part. In most cases, this attitude stems from a genuine belief; however, there are some rare situations in which a company may accept responsibility only to salvage the relationship. Whatever the case may be, if one accepts responsibility, the first step to take, in the introductory part, is to acknowledge the receipt of the complaint and to apologize.

We want to express our gratitude for bringing the matter to our notice. Your complaint about order no. X6547 has been received, and we apologize for any inconvenience or dissatisfaction you may have experienced.

Thank you for bringing your recent concerns to our attention. We have received your complaint regarding the carpet damaged in transit, and we sincerely apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

In the main body of the adjustment, it is customary to explain what one thinks went wrong. Moreover, one needs to clearly state what one has done already in order to fix the situation and also what one intends to do in the future to make sure such mistakes do not ensue again. Anyone can make mistakes, but it is crucial to highlight the fact that this was a singular occurrence and therefore, an isolated incident.

We have carefully examined the discrepancy in your billing statement and identified an error in our invoicing system. We are promptly correcting the billing error and implementing measures to prevent similar occurrences in the future.

Upon reviewing your complaint about the loose stitching in the blouse, it has come to our attention that there was an oversight in the quality control process. We deeply regret any inconvenience caused, and we are taking immediate steps to rectify this by enhancing our quality assurance procedures.

If one does not yet know what went wrong, one should not procrastinate. One should still reply right away and be very transparent regarding the fact that not all the data is known, but one is looking into the matter and will explain what went wrong as soon as one finds out.

We want to assure you that we take your concerns seriously, and our team is actively looking into the matter. At this moment, we haven't identified the specific cause of the issue, but we are committed to a thorough investigation to determine the root cause and provide a comprehensive resolution.

A direct consequence of the fact that one assumes responsibility is that one has to make amends – one cannot acknowledge a problem and then refuse to fix it. Therefore, if the complaint is accepted, the natural stance to take is to comply with the customer's wishes and give them exactly what they want.

In light of your concerns, we understand the importance of resolving this matter promptly. Therefore, as requested, we will process a full refund for your purchase. Please allow 2 working days for the funds to reflect in your account

One can also offer some extra compensation, such as a discount on future purchases or something similar, and it is good business practice to end on a good note, expressing hope that, once this problem solved, the fruitful collaboration will resume.

Your satisfaction is our priority, and we are committed to learning from this experience to improve our services. We genuinely hope to have the chance to continue our collaboration, and we assure you that we are taking steps to prevent similar occurrences in the future.

By contrast, rejecting a complaint translates into declining responsibility for whatever it is that went wrong. Consequently, the letter will start by acknowledging the receipt of the complaint and even thanking for it, but there will be no apology. The absence of an apology does not mean that one shouldn't express empathy or consideration for the recipient's perspective; however, this empathy should be expressed in such a way as to make it clear that one do not think there was any problem on one's part.

Thank you for bringing your recent concerns to our attention. We understand the frustration you may be feeling, and we want to assure you that we take customer feedback very seriously.

We value your feedback and the opportunity to address the concerns you've raised.

Besides, since this response is in fact a rejection, one needs to unequivocally explain why one is not to blame – the more the reader is likely to resent the answer, the clearer and more tactful it should be. For this reason, we believe that a rejection is more difficult to write than an acceptance – empathy and respect for the recipient's viewpoint should coexist with firmness and with a steady belief in one's own perspective.

After careful review, however, it appears that the reported problems are not attributable to any shortcomings on our end. Our investigation reveals that the difficulties you've faced are not linked to our processes but rather to external network interruptions.

Our team has thoroughly investigated the matter, and it is our conclusion that the issues you experienced were not caused by any errors or negligence on our part. It appears that the root cause lies in local infrastructure limitations rather than any deficiency on our part.

While one has no intention of giving in to all the customer's demands, one may still offer some minor compensation, in order to save face and salvage the relationship. For the same reason, it is customary to end on a good note and express hope that this setback will not significantly impact the business relationship.

Your feedback is instrumental in helping us improve, and even though we believe the reported issues are unrelated to our services, we want to ensure your continued satisfaction. Therefore, we would like to offer you a 5% discount on your future order as a token of our appreciation for your understanding. We remain dedicated to providing you with excellent service in the future.

It goes without saying that, irrespective of whether one accepts or rejects the complaint, one should use language that is formal, courteous, deferential, and one should focus at the same time on the current problem and on the broader perspective, that of the overall relationship with this particular customer.

3.3. Challenges

Upon analysing the students' responses, we have identified that the main problems occur as follows: when accepting the complaint, while complying with the customer's demands, they sometimes omit to point out that the incident was an isolated one; when rejecting a complaint, they sometimes simply

refuse to accept responsibility for the problem, while failing to explain in a clear, unequivocal way why the problem was not their fault.

While we cannot use examples to illustrate the former situation, as it identifies an omission, as far as the latter one is concerned, we have come across sentences such as:

While we appreciate your concerns, our analysis does not reveal any shortcomings in our fabrication processes that could explain the damage to the shirt. Consequently, we must respectfully decline your request for a refund.

After careful examination of your complaint, we have found that we are unable to accept responsibility for the alleged defects occurring in transit. Our internal investigation found no evidence of any problems that may have arisen while the carpet was shipped. Regrettably, therefore, we are unable to accept your request to replace the faulty item.

When reading sentences like the ones above, we must point out that denying a complaint causes significant face loss to the recipient; therefore, the least we can do is to provide an air-tight explanation that fully exonerates us. Vague, insufficient explanations will aggravate them and cause serious, possibly irreversible damage to the business relationship.

4. Conclusions

In the present research, we have tackled the role of effective communication in the business world, with a focus on writing complaints and adjustments. We have chosen to look into these specific letters due to their twofold role: on the one hand, they represent a challenging task due to the fact that they reflect a situation that is tense, possibly even conflictual; on the other hand, once this task successfully overcome, it has the potential to lead to an improvement of the seller's business model and to a better collaboration between the seller and the customer.

Our key concern, therefore, has been the improvement of business partnerships. No one is without fault, and since mistakes may naturally occur, any company acting in good faith will want to know if there is a problem on their part and will want to fix it. While giving in to customer demands inherently translates into a short-term profit loss, the long-term benefits clearly outweigh the setback, as the customer will likely return and the seller's reputation will grow. The iterative process of fixing problems, relationships, and overall business models is therefore presented as a key takeaway.

Clearly, the business arena is not a place devoid of effort. The article touches upon the challenges faced by students, such as the temptation to use accusatory language and difficulties in containing emotions. We strongly believe educators need to address these challenges by reinforcing the primary goal of achieving a positive resolution and maintaining long-term relationships.

In conclusion, the article provides a comprehensive guide for teaching students the art of handling complaints and making adjustments, offering a blend of theoretical principles and practical strategies for effective communication in the dynamic world of business.

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