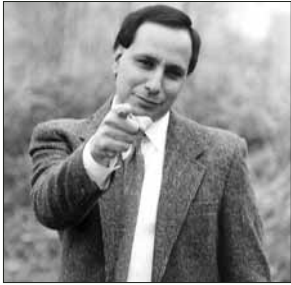


The Guerrilla Framer



by
Paul Cascio

Oops! Delivering Bad News to Your Customer

Delivering bad news to your customer is never an easy task, but unfortunately, there are times when you just can't avoid it. Mistakes do happen, materials can arrive damaged or late, or framing orders can be written incompletely, incorrectly or perhaps even misplaced. And, in the worst case scenario, your customer's property is damaged or lost.

When these things happen—and hopefully they won't happen often—it falls upon you, the business owner or manager, to convey the bad news to your customer. And of course, it's you who will take flack from a disappointed, perhaps even angry, customer. That's why you get paid the big bucks.

While delivering bad news is never easy, how you handle the task can make a big difference in how your customer reacts. Here's some tips that can help you keep the messenger from being shot.

Rule #1: Handle the task yourself.

Don't delegate this important task to a subordinate. I know it's tempting to assign the task to the person who made the error, and it may help deter future mistakes. However, your main objective is not to dole out punishment, but to preserve the good relationship you have with your customer. If it will make you feel better, you can let the perpetrator sit in while you make the phone call.

Rule #2: Speak only to the customer.

If you can't reach the customer directly, never give the bad news on an answering machine, on voice mail, or with another person. Instead, leave a message for the customer to call you as soon as possible.

Rule #3: Be honest. Be compassionate.

Drop the news in as gentle and professional a manner as possible in order to minimize the damage to your business and preserve a good future relationship with your customer. By treating your customer fairly, with sensitivity and empathy, you allow them to dislike the message without taking their disappointment or anger out on the messenger.

Rule #4: Use the "Good News/Bad News" Approach.

You need to offer a positive alternative if at all possible. There's no value in just telling a customer. "Your frame is back ordered. Would you prefer to wait?" Say, "It's due in two weeks, or would you prefer to select another frame?"

Never say, "Do you remember that old photo of your grandmother? Well, it caught on fire in our mounting press."

Of course, if you do actually destroy an object of priceless, sentimental value there probably won't be much you can do to console your customer. In that case, simply being honest and sympathetic is all you can really do. It also helps if your order forms contain a disclaimer clause, and that you have a good lawyer.

During my 15 years in the business, I have been fortunate to have only two incidents when a customer's property was damaged. Now for the gory details.

The first accident occurred when, as a rookie, I managed to place the mounting tissue on top of a poster, rather than under it. I know it doesn't seem possible to make this mistake, but I managed to do it. Fortunately, I was able to purchase a duplicate poster from the publisher and

my customer was none the wiser. (Thankfully, most publishers include their name and address in the small print at the bottom of their posters.)

The second incident involved a movie poster known as a “One Sheet.” For some reason, One Sheets are printed on both sides, with the printing on the reverse side being a mirror image. In other words, everything is printed backwards. Why? I have no idea.

Unfortunately, my employee didn’t notice this minor anomaly and proceeded to mount the poster with the mirror image showing. In this case, we were able to offer my customer two alternative solutions. We could either pay for a new poster or provide a mirror through which the original poster could be read. She chose the new poster.

There are two mistakes that are commonly made when delivering bad news. The first is to avoid telling the customer the bad news. However, stall tactics don’t

change the situation; they only add stress for everyone involved. Sooner or later, you have to face up to the disappointing news.

The other mistake is the polar opposite of the “delay and avoid” tactic. This is to blurt out the bad news and dump the problem on the customer. “Did you know there is a coffee stain on your Picasso?” You’ll remain insulated from any feelings for the customer, but your customer will feel abandoned and cheated, not to mention angry.

Remember, delivering bad news is never easy, but by being honest and showing compassion for your customer, there is a good chance that you’ll minimize the damage and earn your customer’s respect. ■