



## How to Break Bad News to a Client



Sometimes things just don't go your way. Seven steps to telling your customers the unfortunate truth without jeopardizing your reputation and credibility

Merge Gupta-Sunderji || May 25, 2016

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**I**n the world of business, things don't always go according to plan. Shipments can get delayed, production lines may break down, and unforeseen events might prevent people from getting the job done.

When such crises occur, they often delay or derail something you've promised to a client. Now, in addition to dealing with whatever the problem is, you also have to break the bad news to the very people who are responsible for your revenue. It's not the easiest task in the world. To add insult to injury, you're facing not only an upset customer, but also a damaged reputation, particularly if such events occur repeatedly.

Entrepreneurs all eventually find themselves having to tell clients that things haven't gone exactly to plan. What separates the successful ones from the rest is how they deliver the message

Here are seven things to keep in mind when you're delivering bad news to a client.

#### 1. DON'T PUT IT OFF

Bad news is like bad food—the longer it sits, the worse it tastes. Your customer needs to hear about this from you, not from the word on the street. Get ahead of it, and get on with it. The sooner you let them know, the sooner you can start fixing the problem.

#### 2. ASSESS THE SURPRISE LEVEL

Is the bad news something your clients may already be expecting, possibly because you've given them advance warning? Ideally, the answer is yes.

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People go through three phases when they first hear unpleasant information—denial, anger, and acceptance—before they're ready to move to possible resolutions. If your client is already anticipating disappointing information they may already have worked through some of the denial and anger. If the news is a complete surprise, expect them to react negatively.

### 3. OPEN WITH A SOFTENER

While I'm not suggesting that you sugar-coat the facts, there is something to be said for at least trying to tone down the intensity of the bad news you're breaking. Starting with "I am sorry to have to tell you," "Unfortunately," or "Regrettably," can soften the tenor of your message. It's possible that the news is so bad that no words can assuage it, but a soft opening means that you're at least trying to mitigate the damage.

### 4. THEN STOP TALKING

Let your client vent in response to your news. Remember, you have to expect that they will be angry, particularly if they had no prior inkling of the problem. Don't try to interrupt or cut them off. Just listen quietly.

The trust you can build by simply letting people say what they feel is extraordinary. If it's appropriate, acknowledge and validate what they are saying. That doesn't mean you have to accept liability for a mistake or problem that may not have been of your making. "I can see that this situation is upsetting," recognizes and accepts what your client is feeling without accepting blame.

### 5. DEMONSTRATE THAT YOU'RE LISTENING

Once your client has had an opportunity to vent, start your response by repeating back a portion of what you heard them say. Using their words and phrases demonstrates that you were listening.

### 6. EXPAND ON THE SITUATION, BUT BE PRECISE

Only now should you move into offering additional information about the problem or crisis. Be as specific as you can without descending into jargon. Stay away from general statements, which usually just cause irritation. Explaining that there's going to be a two-week delay in implementation because of production shortages from a supplier for a single component offers greater clarity than simply saying you are behind schedule because of supplier issues.

Now is also the time to state explicitly what you are prepared to do to help resolve the situation or lessen the impact of the bad news. Detail specific corrective actions you have already taken or are willing to take.

The key to success in this step is to be precise, not ambiguous or long-winded. But stay away from absolute guarantees, or you may just be setting yourself up to over-promise—and disappoint—again.

### 7. SUMMARIZE IN A POSITIVE MANNER

Thank your clients for their willingness to have this conversation with you. Let them know that you appreciate their business. Then, review what you've covered, clarify your plan, and agree on who's going to do what before the next interaction.

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Delivering bad news is no one's favourite thing to do, but it's a necessary evil in the world of business. If you keep your cool and bear these seven points in mind, you'll get your message across in a way that maintains your reputation and credibility.

*Merge Gupta-Sunderji is a speaker, author and consultant whose leadership development practice focuses on turning managers into leaders and people power into results. Through large-audience keynotes, small-group training, one-on-one mentoring, and customized consulting, Merge has given over 65,000 professionals in eight countries specific and practical tools to help them achieve leadership and communications success.*

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