

## Do's and Don'ts for Winning Email Responses

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More and more customers contact us through email. They expect prompt responses. A recent study by Jupiter Research indicates that 35% of customers expect a reply within six hours, an additional 55% expect a response within 24 hours.

Though many people focus on response time, content is just as important. The same study indicated that lack of a thorough response (45%) will cause on-line customers to view a company negatively when considering future purchases. Poorly crafted emails generate additional emails, potentially eating up your e-reps time. Worse, they can drive unnecessary calls to your most costly channel – your call center reps. And at that point, customers are bound to be angry and frustrated!

Here are some tips for designing email responses that are both thorough and appropriate:

- **Do** format your response so that it's easy to read on a screen:
  - ◆ Make sure the subject line is concise and meaningful to the recipient...not just a generic "Response from Customer Service." But also be careful that it doesn't look like spam (e.g., "Hi Lisa").
  - ◆ Have one subject per paragraph.
  - ◆ Separate paragraphs by blank lines.
- **Do** be brief. Use as few words as possible to convey your message. More is not better when it comes to email. An email is not perceived as an electronic letter.
- **Do** use simple, declarative sentences. Write for a third or fourth grade audience, particularly if you're creating templates that are sent automatically. You do not know the education level of your sender or the sender's level of comfort with the English language.
- **Do** be sensitive to the tone of the original email. If the sender is upset because of an error on your part, acknowledge the error. Clearly state what you are doing to correct the situation.
- **Do** make sure you answer all the questions posed in the original inquiry. A partial answer frustrates the sender and results in additional contacts. It also makes the company sending the response look inept.
- **Do** make it clear what actions you will be taking next and when the writer can expect the next contact from you.
- **Don't** ask for an order number/case number or account number when one is included in the original email...sounds pretty basic, but we've reviewed a lot of email responses that request information that was prominently displayed in the sender's original message.
- **Don't** blame the writer. If you require specific pieces of information (e.g., account number) set up web forms so that the writer can't proceed without entering key pieces of information.
- **Don't** stitch separate canned phrases together without careful review before sending. The results are emails where some phrases are upbeat and positive, while other phrases are cautionary and negative. The result is not only jarring to the reader, but an indication that you're company is sloppy and doesn't care about the customer or quality.

- *Don't* write responses that sound like they came from your legal department. First, these are off putting to the reader. Second, they are likely to generate even more contacts because the recipient doesn't understand them.
- *Don't* just tell the sender to go to your web site. In many cases, they have already been to the web site and couldn't find the answers they were looking for. If you want them to go back to the web site, provide a direct link to the exact information the writer needs.

There is a lot to consider when developing your catalogue of templates and responses. Many organizations get it wrong - even the White House:

From: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx [mailto:xxxxxx@yahoo.com]  
Sent: Tuesday, February 25, 2003 9:32 AM  
To: '[president@whitehouse.gov](mailto:president@whitehouse.gov)'  
Subject: Rhode Island tragedy

Mr. President:

Although I've only lived in Rhode Island for less than a year, I've learned about the strong bonds and loyalties people in this state feel for each other. Many are directly affected by the fire at the Station, many more are in mourning for friends and coworkers. Yesterday, there was a memorial service, and there was not even a message by the President to the people who are suffering.

Here is the reply from the White House email response system.

From: White House Mail Relay Autoresponder [mailto:White House Mail Relay Autoresponder] On Behalf Of [Autoresponder@WhiteHouse.GOV](mailto:Autoresponder@WhiteHouse.GOV)  
Sent: Tuesday, February 25, 2003 9:33 AM  
To: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  
Subject: Re: Rhode Island tragedy

Thank you for emailing President Bush. Your ideas and comments are very important to him.

For up-to-date information about the President and his policies, please check the White House web site at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

Unfortunately, because of the large volume of email received, the President cannot personally respond to each message. However, the White House staff considers and reports citizen ideas and concerns.

Again, thank you for your email. Your interest in the work of President Bush and his administration is appreciated.

Sincerely,  
The White House Office of E-Correspondence

Please Note:

If the subject of your email was a request for a Presidential greeting, please note that all greeting requests must be submitted in writing to the following address:

The White House  
Attn: Greetings Office  
Room 39  
Washington, D.C. 20502-0039

Please review the guidelines carefully before mailing your request to the White House. The guidelines are accessible at:  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/greeting/>

Not surprisingly, this response did not comfort the sender. What could the White House do better?

1. Check subject lines for key words that have significant emotional content (e.g., tragedy, suffering, mourning) and handle these emails in queues monitored by empathic CSRs.
2. Check subject line for key words that are relevant to recent events (e.g., Rhode Island tragedy, Station fire, Iraqi prisoner abuse). Stay on top of events to develop a variety of response templates that are appropriate for an evolving environment.
3. Write templates to handle common situations. Requesting that the president express concern when many in the community are killed is one of these situations. One of the key roles of a president is to comfort the grieving. Perhaps a standard set of phrases that could be used on many occasions would be useful.
  - ◆ “The President and all Americans grieve at the tragic loss of life. He is sorry that he cannot personally express condolences to all involved.”
4. Don’t include information that is not requested and is inappropriate to the situation. In this case there are five examples of inappropriate information:
  - ◆ “Thank you for emailing President Bush. Your ideas and comments are very important to him.”
  - ◆ “For up-to-date information about the President and his policies, please check the White House web site at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).”
  - ◆ “Your interest in the work of President Bush and his administration is appreciated.”
  - ◆ “Please Note:  
If the subject of your email was a request for a Presidential greeting, please note that all greeting requests must be submitted in writing to the following address:  
The White House  
Attn: Greetings Office  
Room 39  
Washington, D.C. 20502-0039  
Please review the guidelines carefully before mailing your request to the White House. The guidelines are accessible at:  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/greeting/>”
  - ◆ “Again, thank you for your email.”

With a little thought, a better response could have been sent. Perhaps something like this:

From: White House Mail Relay Autoresponder [mailto:White House Mail Relay Autoresponder] On Behalf Of White House ECorrespondence Autoreply

Sent: Tuesday, February 25, 2003 9:33 AM

To: [XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX](#)

Subject: Re: Rhode Island tragedy

The President and all Americans grieve the loss of life. He is sorry that he cannot personally express condolences to all involved. This tragedy affected so many of our citizens, their families and friends. Know that they are in the prayers of the President and Mrs. Bush.

Sincerely,  
The White House Office of E-Correspondence

This response is appropriate because:

1. It is short and to the point.
2. It expresses sorrow over the events of concern to the sender.
3. Notes that the president cannot express condolences personally...he is a busy man, but conveys that in an acceptable way.
4. Offers prayers. Everyone knows the president is deeply religious. This statement is in character and for a significant percentage of the population is a comforting thought.

As you can see, faster email response isn't always better email response. Make sure the emails you send to your customers are clear and concise - and address their questions and concerns. You'll not only improve customer satisfaction, you'll win new converts to a lower cost self service channel!

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