

How Sorry are You?

by Steve D'Antonio

During a recent project I helped a client navigate warranty "support" from a well-known marine equipment manufacturer after he'd been given the run-around for months. Reviewing their e-mail exchanges I was struck by the manufacturer's lack of empathy and the marked absence of what I refer to as "the right words."

Throughout the exchanges, the company's representative remained clinical and detached, revealing no emotion. He answered technical questions but did not acknowledge the customer's frustration or disappointment. He expressed no regret that the customer was having this unpleasant experience and never said, "I'm sorry." In short, the representative's emotional quotient, or EQ, was woefully inadequate.

Effective apologies meet the following criteria: They begin with a heartfelt (fake it if you have to) apology, such as "I am so sorry this has happened." That's followed with why you are sorry, for instance, "that we let you down by not getting this problem troubleshoot and repaired in a timely fashion."

I've practiced this technique, which quickly becomes enjoyable as good results are nearly guaranteed. First, the recipient is surprised, because apologies are so rare in most industries. Then—and most importantly from the perspective of the one delivering the apology—the recipient is disarmed. Itching for a fight, the aggrieved party is often left nearly speechless, and that's your chance to say how you will correct the problem, provided you are willing and able to do so (even if you can't or choose not to, the apology is essential): "We'll ship you a new unit, at no charge of course; you'll have it no later than the day after tomorrow, and I'll e-mail you the tracking number as soon as I have

it. We'll also send you a shipping label to return the defective unit." Of course, for this to work, you must follow through.

When polled, people who are unhappy with a service said they want to know that the person they appeal to for help is sympathetic, and they need that in words and deeds.

Initially, the mechanics of delivering the message is simply remembering the three steps: sincerely apologize, articulate what you are apologizing for, and explain what you will do to correct the problem and how you will make sure it won't happen again. For example: "I'm very sorry that we left greasy handprints on your white ottoman in the saloon. I'll have it professionally cleaned immediately. I've spoken with the mechanic responsible for this, and he now understands what he did wrong and will never let it happen again."

Don't underestimate how resistant people can be to offering the three-step apology; it simply doesn't come naturally to most of us. Also, don't ignore subtleties such as inflection and body language. The curt one-word "sorry" won't work; it essentially translates to, "I'm sorry you're making my life miserable right now." Furthermore, saying, "I'm sorry you are angry" can come across as, "I'm sorry you're being a jerk." Acknowledgement of someone's displeasure should be part of a complete apology. I prefer, "I'm sorry we've let you down. If you are unhappy, I'm unhappy." If the exchange occurs in person, try to appear contrite rather than defiant: hang your head just a few degrees; it's noticeable.

If you are a manager or owner, teach your staff the importance of the three-step apology, how to deliver it, and why *training* them to enhance their EQ is so important, especially for customer-service

representatives and those resolving problems with customers.

Another valuable message that doesn't often come naturally to employees is accepting responsibility and apologizing for the mistakes of their co-workers. Saying, "I didn't do that; don't blame me" when confronted by a dissatisfied customer simply fuels his or her ire. The first contact, whoever that may be within the organization, should begin addressing the issue and disarming the complaint regardless of his or her prior involvement with the problem at hand.

Another client, knowing my passion for effective industry communication and customer support, sent me a copy of a placard he saw hanging in the reception area of a plumbing-supply house. It was entitled "Customer Service—The 10 Most Important Words." With some editorial liberties, they include: "I apologize for our mistake. We will make it right." "Thank you for your business." "I'm not sure but I'll find out." "Is there anything else I can do for you?" "What works best for you?" "How can I help you?" "How did we do?" "We're glad you're here." "Thank you."

Finally, the most important single word in the customer-service lexicon is *yes*.

Embrace the apology protocol, and raise your EQ with the right words, and you'll be rewarded with dividends. *Yes*, it's guaranteed. **PBB**

About the Author: For many years a full-service yard manager, Steve now works with boat builders and owners and others in the industry as "Steve D'Antonio Marine Consulting." He is the technical editor of *Professional BoatBuilder*, and is writing a book on marine systems, to be published by McGraw-Hill/International Marine.