

"In other words..." - Writing to clients without pissing them off

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One of the things that consistently amazes me about business writing is that you can't really say what you mean. Unless you want a world of drama. So, here are some ways to engage with clients and customers without offending them or making them feel stupid, by using my 'safe' versions of the rude phrases that tempt you...

Over the last few months I've spent many hours in one of my clients' customer support centres, teaching the service staff and complaints handlers how to write great emails. And one of the things that consistently amazes me is this: you can't say what you mean in business. Unless you want a big, wide world of drama.

There are moments - and if you've worked in service, you'll know this - where you want to hold your head between your palms, look down at the table and... cry. Because the client isn't hearing what you're saying, wouldn't understand it if he was hearing it, and would probably argue anyway. Just because he's that sort of guy.

What you mean vs what you write

To deal with those clients on those days, here are some ways to convey information without offending them or making them feel stupid. Neither of which is helpful. Keep this little table handy, and try my way when you want to explode with truth...

What you wish you could write:	What you should write:
Client, you are stupid.	I apologise if there is some confusion. Please allow me to clarify this issue for you.
Client, I have explained this issue to you already.	Just to confirm the situation, the below is the sequence of events so far [bullets or numbers]:
Client, I have no idea what you're talking about!	My apologies; I am clearly confused. Please clarify exactly what you need and I will do my best to help you.
Client, there isn't enough detail in this email/query.	I'm afraid I am not completely certain what you require. Please provide a little more detail so I can assist you promptly.
Client, we don't do that. Sorry for you.	Our policy is currently not to xxx [is currently to xxx..]. However, I've escalated your suggestion [or complaint or advice] to the appropriate person. Many thanks for taking the time to raise this with us.
Client, someone other than me stuffed up.	It seems that there has been an oversight in terms of [doing x or y], for which I apologise. Allow me to try to fix the situation by...

What you may have noticed

If you were concentrating, you'll have noticed two major things about the right-hand column: one, almost all of those statements make the issue out to be your fault and two, there are lots of apologies. This is the nature of professional \$\$\$-covering.

Good luck!

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.

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