

English Corner



Dr. Mable Chan is a lecturer at the Department of English, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She was awarded the Faculty Award for Outstanding Teaching in the 2005/06 academic year and has vast experience teaching academic and business English to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Her new book 「職時上位：名人英語全面睇」, which is about business English, is now available on the market. In this column she advocates using simple and concise English for business writing.

My previous article, published in April, was about sending goodwill messages, a common communicative function in the workplace to express goodwill and establish rapport with clients or companies. This article is about conveying negative messages, which is a common matter in the Hong Kong workplace.

Two different approaches to conveying negative messages

Sometimes we have to give bad news to our readers. To do this well, we need to know how to soften the bad news to reduce disappointment or discontent.

Imagine that you need to send a message to colleagues about a salary cut. How are you going to convey the bad news: in a direct way or an indirect way? What is the difference?

Indirect approach

There are two approaches to writing negative messages: the direct approach and the indirect approach. An indirect approach is mostly used in conveying negative messages. There are four main parts to an indirect communication:

- **Buffer** – different ways to cushion the bad news: good news; showing appreciation / compliments / understanding; apology, etc.
- **Reasons** – reasons for the bad news; this could be external factors such as a poor economic backdrop;
- **Bad news** – the negative message; and
- **Closing** – showing goodwill, offering alternatives, forward looking, etc.

In other words, the bad news is not presented first. Instead some other information which is used to accentuate the positive and pave the way for the readers to accept the bad news is given first. The indirect approach is predominantly used in the following situations:

1. to refuse requests (e.g. to refuse possible requests concerning releasing confidential information of your company or financial support for certain events);
2. to refuse claims; or
3. to announce bad news to customers and / or employees (e.g. salary cut, budget cut, manpower cut, introduction of new measures which might cause resistance or discontent).



Direct approach

The seriousness or importance of a negative message can be a consideration for using the direct approach. The direct approach is preferred in the following situations:

1. The bad news is not serious and therefore there is no need to cushion the bad news with a buffer.
2. It is essential for the readers to understand the bad news without delay.
3. Some companies may require all mail to be written using the direct approach.

An example of negative messages using the indirect approach

16 June 20—

Mr. Simon Wan
12 Nathan Road
Mongkok

Dear Mr. Wan

Thank you for your online order of the “value-added fitness plan” on 15 June 20—. Our online purchase system has been in use since May 20— and the number of customers browsing our website for updates and purchasing online is on the increase. **[Buffer: background information about the website and expressing thank-you]**

The “online sales week” activity has just started, and a range of popular fitness plans and beauty care plans will be introduced daily to cater to YOUR desire to be SLIM and ATTRACTIVE. The first sales item available online is the “value-added fitness plan” which is an ALL-IN-ONE plan covering beauty care, yoga classes, gymnastics training and massage services. **[More background information about the attractiveness of the product (i.e. the value-added fitness plan)]**

As you know, such a comprehensive tailor-made service does not come cheaply and we are sorry for the teething problems which led to the discrepancy in the price shown online. The problem has now been fixed and we assure you that this will not happen again. The original cost of the “value-added fitness plan” is HK\$2,500, and we are going to offer you a 60% discount in reordering the fitness plan. Now, you only have to pay HK\$1,500 to enjoy this best-selling fitness plan which guarantees a NEW YOU after use: slimmer, smoother complexion and a more healthy body. **[Reason: The bad news is announced in the third paragraph. Note how the writer de-emphasizes the bad news: avoiding the use of negative words, not revealing the bad news in the first sentence or the last sentence of the paragraph, and an alternative is offered.]**

Grab this chance to enjoy the fitness plan at such an incredible price, and reorder the plan at <http://fitnessplanreorder.hk> until this Sunday. Use the code 1234 as the username and 8888 as the password for reordering the product. **[Encourage the readers to re-order by using imperatives (e.g. grab, use)]**

Thank you very much for your continued support and please find attached a HK\$100 coupon for your next online purchase. I look forward to serving you again in future. **[Closing: establishing goodwill by attaching coupons and**



looking forward]

Yours sincerely
[signature]

Mable Chan
Sales Director
ABC Fitness Centre

Encl.

Source: 陳美寶 (2009). *職時上位: 名人英語全面睇* 世界出版社

Quiz:

1. Your company cannot sponsor an activity called "Save the Earth Day" but you still want to show your appreciation of the cause and the significance of the activity. What kind of buffer is this?

2. What can you do to soften the negative impact of bad news?

3. How can we close a negative message with goodwill?

Key:

1. Compliment.
2. We can use passive constructions to avoid mentioning the agent (i.e. the focus changes from the subject to the object), and therefore avoid being blamed for the negative message. We also have to avoid using negative words in describing the negative message, and not to start or end a paragraph with the bad news.
3. In the closing paragraph, try to reiterate the positive or goodwill message. Being forward looking, offering alternatives, and showing goodwill are common ways of closing a negative message.

References:

陳美寶 (2009). *職時上位: 名人英語全面睇* 世界出版社