

## Knowing When to Say You're Sorry to Your Customers

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*Failing to properly apologize to customers when things go wrong can result in a huge backlash that can have devastating effects on your business.*

Most of us recognize the expression "love means never having to say you're sorry" from the book and movie *Love Story*. The same sentiment is not true in business, yet many entrepreneurs think they're somehow above apologizing. That attitude can easily drive you out of business.

I started thinking about this a few weeks ago when owners of the Amazon Kindle who had purchased copies of George Orwell's *1984* and some other novels had their books "zapped" by Amazon without notification. Although they received refunds, many were understandably upset. If the reaction of the people I saw commenting about this on Twitter was any indication, thousands of other consumers were outraged as well, many making connections between what Amazon did and the infamous overreaching Big Brother of *1984*.

Much of the initial reporting on the event left out that the yanked titles were apparently pirate versions sold by an unauthorized dealer. Still, Amazon's first reaction was a little lacking to say the least. Purchasers of the illegal copies got an e-mail notification from Amazon saying, "We recently discovered a problem with a Kindle book that you have purchased. The next time the wireless is activated on your device, the problematic item will be removed." A few days later the company issued a statement saying they were changing their systems so that "in the future we will not remove books from customers' devices in these circumstances."

With customer service like that, who wouldn't be mad?

Even so, many business owners would have left it at that, satisfied that they were justified in their actions and that they'd done the right thing (pulling pirated books and refunding their customers). But they'd be wrong -- that's the tone deaf response. And being tone deaf can cost you customers, partners, and employees.

Some of the positive traits that make an entrepreneur successful can turn into negative characteristics. Confidence can too easily morph into arrogance. Are you decisive or a control freak? It's a tricky tightrope we business owners walk every day. I've known far too many entrepreneurs who think because they own the business, they own the truth. Just because you say it, do it, or believe it doesn't necessarily make it so.

Entrepreneurs are not perfect. We all make mistakes. And our success may well be dependent not just on correcting our errors (quietly without anyone noticing), but admitting to them. Your employees will trust and respect you more, will be more loyal, and will work harder if they know you won't blame them for mistakes you make. And if you think it doesn't matter what your employees think of you, you're wrong. In today's age of instant and viral communication, it's all too easy for the disgruntled to air your dirty laundry to thousands. And the consequences are actually worse if you run a local business. Your employees all have friends and family and in the area (who also have friends and family in the vicinity) and, before you know it, the number of people walking through your doors has slowed to a trickle.

As the owner of the business, you have got to assume responsibility for not only your actions, but for those of your employees as well. Do you think Jeff Bezos, Amazon's founder and CEO, was in on the decision to eliminate those books from customers' Kindles? I don't know, but somehow I doubt it. But when the negative press and customer reaction kept ramping up, Bezos stepped up and took responsibility. This note from him was posted on Amazon:

*This is an apology for the way we previously handled illegally sold copies of 1984 and other novels on Kindle. Our "solution" to the problem was stupid, thoughtless, and painfully out of line with our principles. It is wholly self-inflicted, and we deserve the criticism we've received. We will use the scar tissue from this painful mistake to help make better decisions going forward, ones that match our mission.*

*With deep apology to our customers,*

*Jeff Bezos*

As you can tell, Bezos pulled no punches. Hundreds of comments were posted on Amazon addressing Bezos' apology. I didn't read them all, but the overwhelming majority of what I saw was positive, thanking Bezos for apologizing and pledging undying loyalty to Amazon.

While you may never need to apologize to those you love (though I hardly recommend that), when it comes to business, the words "I'm sorry" may help turn those proverbial lemons into lemonade.