

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Knowing What to Say

By Douglas E. Welch

Did you know that the computers at my local bank, as well as the ones at the Federal Reserve, were “crashed” by a virus a few weeks ago? Neither did I, until I was told just that by the teller at my local bank. Of course, the teller was wrong, but imagine the response a less tech-savvy patron might have upon hearing such news. It probably wouldn’t cause a “run” on the bank, but in this era of fear, uncertainty and doubt, such broad pronouncements about technology can cause big problems for your company and you.

Small Issues

This whole scenario started when I went to my local branch to receive a check for a Certificate of Deposit that was maturing. After dealing with a teller to close the account, I found that he couldn’t print my check. The teller then said that an Internet virus had knocked out the Federal Reserve computers.

I knew about the worm that was causing some problems with communication, but his dire description was truly overblown. I understand that not everyone is as knowledgeable about high tech as you and I, but neither the loan officer nor the manager I talked with did anything to dispel the teller’s original diagnosis.

Placing the Blame

I can place only so much of the blame on these workers, though. They obviously had not been instructed in what to tell the customers, and responded to the best of their technical knowledge. Unfortunately, it seems they got most of their information from the overblown, and often incorrect, reports from the mainstream media, when it should have come from their in-house IT department.

When front-line workers respond in this fashion, the simple truth is it is because their technology staff has failed them. The tech workers, often in a rush to solve the problem itself, have not explained the situation clearly enough. Left to their own devices, and eager to offer some explanation for the problems, front-line workers will fall back on whatever they may have heard, regardless of the source. As I left the bank, I began to think about what damage this situation did to the bank’s reputation, and how this scenario might have been avoided.

Communicating

It should now be clear that you, as high-tech workers, must have a plan for situations such as this. Otherwise, what might be a relatively simple outage will be blown out of proportion by the time your customers hear of it. Here are a few guidelines to prevent a bad situation from getting completely out of hand.

First, develop a clear and concise explanation of the problem that is currently occurring. You need to ensure that both your front-line staff and your customers can understand this explanation.

Second, communicate this explanation to *everyone* in your organization, not just those directly involved with serving your customers. I do mean *everyone*—from the receptionist to the CEO. This allows the company to present a coherent message on the problem no matter whom a customer may contact. When everyone has a good explanation of the problem, they don’t have to make up anything.

Third, provide an estimated time for the restoration of services, or at the very least, when you will provide the next update on the status of the problem. Don’t leave your people without some sort of indication as to the next step in the process. Let them know that you will be in touch again, at some later time, with an update, if not a solution.

Finally, let everyone know when the situation has been corrected and systems are functioning normally again. Also, include information on the cause of the problem and what steps are being taken to ensure that it doesn’t happen again. Again, these explanations should be clear enough for anyone to understand, whether they are your coworkers or your customers.

Your reputation, and that of your company, depends greatly on the perceptions of your customers. Technology problems are bound to occur. Dealing with these problems correctly will quickly differentiate your company from your competitors. Don’t allow a bad situation to be made worse due to poor communication. Give your fellow staff members the information they need to serve their customers, whether the problem is large or small. Your entire company will benefit, as will your high-tech career. □

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