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What We Have Here Is a Failure to Communicate

Which sign are you more likely to obey: “Keep off the Grass!” or “Please Walk on the Pathways”? Research shows that we comprehend a positive statement 30% to 40% faster than we do a negative statement.

Our mind actually has to unscramble a negative message to determine the meaning. Consider the following statement: “Don’t think about a watermelon.” What is the first thing that comes to your mind? A watermelon! Your mind had already pictured the watermelon before you understood what the message was asking you to do.

When there is an important message to deliver, stating it in a positive manner makes all the difference: “Please remember” is

better than “Don’t forget.” Positive language focuses on what *can* be done instead of what *can’t* be done. Positive messages suggest alternatives, show a willingness to help, and emphasize positive actions and positive consequences. Alternatively, negative messages often sound like commands or have subtle implications of blame. Receiving a brisk “No” — with no alternatives — makes the recipient feel a lack of control, which triggers frustration and negative emotions.

Take a look at how positive and negative communication affects clients with these two emails about participant enrollment issues in a 401(k) plan. First, the negative message:

We regret to inform you that we

Delivering a message in the most positive way possible is the key to avoid triggering negative emotions.

BY SARAH SIMONEAUX

cannot process your enrollment, since you have neglected to provide sufficient information. Please complete ALL sections of the online form and submit it to us as

soon as possible.

Negative words such as “regret,” “cannot” and “neglected” are unlikely to make a participant want to participate in the plan. The use of capitals in “ALL” implies that the participant was at fault failing to complete the enrollment process.

Here’s much more positive version of the same message:

We are delighted to have you participating in our retirement plan!

We would like to complete your plan enrollment as soon as possible.

Please complete the online form, with the highlighted areas filled in, and we will be able to complete your enrollment immediately.

We would be happy to help you with your enrollment or with any questions you may have. Feel free to contact us any time.

This message sets the tone by using the positive words “delighted” and “happy.” In contrast with the negative message, this email implies that the provider is responsible for completing the enrollment on behalf of the participant, and that the participant is not at fault. In fact, the message encourages the recipient to seek out help to get enrolled in the plan.

One simple way to train client-facing staff to create positive communication is to replace negative “trigger” words with positive phrases. Check out this list of “trigger” words and phrases and have staff think about the emotions triggered in the customer:

- No...
- That’s not our policy...
- That’s not my job...
- You can’t...
- I have no idea...
- You must...
- You have to...

Asking associates to replace phrases like the ones above with more positive statements like the ones below can foster more positive communication:

- Here are some options...
- I will...
- Here’s what I can do...
- Let me see what I can do...

“Positive messages suggest alternatives, show a willingness to help, and emphasize positive actions and positive consequences.”

- I’m confident that we can...
- I’ll find out...
- What works well is to...

Using positive language doesn’t mean always saying “Yes.” However, delivering a message in the most positive way possible is key to avoid triggering negative emotions. Remember that small changes in language can have a big impact! **PC**



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