Off to the Polls!

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In less than two weeks' time Americans will head to the polls for yet another "historic" election. Although I can't recall any election during my lifetime that wasn't billed as "historic," I accept the label and look forward to standing up and being counted. I'm also looking forward to the end of the constant barrage of negative campaign ads and the removal of campaign signs from the otherwise beautiful landscape near my home.

The privilege of voting is an opportunity to speak up and say which candidate's platform appeals best. As citizens we are in fact "customers" of the country, state, county or city the candidates wish to represent. When we vote for a candidate we are placing trust and faith that our candidate will live up to their promises. After the election, we can send feedback to our representative through multiple channels, including social media posts and even old-fashioned emails. And we hope that representatives are monitoring their "customer" satisfaction levels.

Many nonprofits try to gauge customer satisfaction by using online surveys, polls, or by offering an online feedback or complaint form. I've been a devotee of client feedback loops and barrier-free complaint processes since reading *A Complaint is Gift-2nd Edition*, by Janelle Barlow and Claus Moller. In their terrific book, Barlow and Moller explain that complaining customers are doing us a favor. They also outline practical steps for turning a livid customer into your #1 fan. I particularly like the section on responding to complaints via email. Many nonprofit organizations, including the Center, regularly invite feedback from donors, customers and clients via email. Yet in some cases, our responses fall short of the ultimate goal of building stakeholder confidence in our missions. Here are a few tips for improving the quality of your email responses to customer complaints.

Winning Emails When Clients Complain

- **Thank your client, customer, donor or partner** for taking the time to contact you. Let these generous stakeholders know that you appreciate learning about the problem or concern.
- **Acknowledge the specific issue** raised by the customer. Have you ever received an "auto-response" to a complaint? Did it give you a warm feeling about the company or organization? Probably not. By personalizing your response to a complaint you're taking the first step to convey genuine concern.
- **Provide contact information for the person at your organization who is responsible for handling the complaint**. At a minimum, include name, title, phone number and email address. Provide contact info even if you believe you have solved the problem in your response.
- **Invite and encourage a client or donor to follow-up** with additional questions, concerns, feedback,

or information.

- **Never blame the client for their dissatisfaction with your nonprofit**. A friend of mine recently told an angry patron that she “was the type of person who could never be satisfied.” When the customer started crying he realized that his response “hit the mark” in the wrong way. Yes, it is true that you can’t “please all of the people, all of the time.” But, poor service is never your client’s fault.
- **Resolve to learn from every complaint**. Perhaps the biggest mistake made in complaint handling is quickly dismissing the complaint, the complainer, or both. Open the “gift” and ponder its meaning. Ask: how can we use this information, given freely by someone who cares, to improve our services and advance our mission?
- **Pick up the phone**. In some cases an email apology may be inadequate. Before clicking “reply” consider whether the situation warrants a phone call. A call allows you to hear the full story and take time to convey, with sincerity, your commitment to help.
- **Don’t take complaints personally**. Barlow and Moller write that “When someone points out our mistakes, it can feel as if our skin has been punctured with a sharp instrument. It seems to physically hurt.” They add that “Heads of government undoubtedly experience the personal frustration that results from devoting their lives to public service, working hard to be responsive, and then finding themselves at the center of daily attacks.” Don’t allow complaints to get under your skin. Acknowledge the discomfort then shift your focus to what you can learn from the complaint. Remember the potential for an angry customer to become your #1 fan.
- **Never respond in anger**. If a heated customer complaint makes you angry, you’re at risk of fueling the fire. Vow to diffuse the heat by responding kindly to angry complaints. Draft the response you would want to receive if you were in a similar situation. When in doubt, follow the tips above.

Though we aim to view complaints as gifts, no one truly enjoys receiving a complaint. We would all prefer to hear that clients and donors are satisfied 100% of the time. Instead of responding in haste, on auto-pilot, or ignoring the occasional angry email from a donor or client, resolve to turn those email “gifts” into reward for your nonprofit. Take advantage of feedback and you might get elected for a second term.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic, suggestions for best-in-class risk management, and questions about the Center’s resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504. The Center provides risk management tools and resources at www.https://nonprofitrisk.org/ and offers consulting assistance to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.