Message Tone

Messages fall into one of three categories: good news, bad news and neutral. Examples of good news messages include communicating thanks, positive news, and appreciation.

Positive message example : [from Lehman, C.M. and D.D. Dufrene. (2011). BCOMM, 4th ed]

A casual dress policy has been approved for First National Bank and will be effective July 1. As most of us agree, casual attire in the banking industry generally means “dressy casual,” since virtually all of us interact with our clientele regularly throughout the day.

To maintain our traditional professional image while enjoying more relaxed attire, please follow these guidelines:

**Men**

Sport or polo shirt, with collars

Khakis or corduroys

Loafers with socks

**Women**

Pant suit

Sweater or blouse with pants or skirt

Loafers with socks

Low heels with hosiery

Tennis shoes, open-toed shoes, sandals, jogging suits, shorts, jeans, sweatpants, and sweatshirts are inappropriate. Formal business attire should be worn when meeting with clients outside the office.

Please visit the HR website for the complete casual attire policy and illustrations of appropriate casual attire. If you have questions as you begin changing in your wardrobe, please call me at ext. 59.

**Note that this message:**

* announces approval of policy
* restates appreciation by assuring reader of benefits gained
* explains policy clearly, including table formatted for quick, easy access to details
* encourages open discussion

Neutral messages communicate routine information that others need, but will likely have no emotional reaction guiding their response or interpretation. These messages begin in a positive tone, present the required information, and then close positively. Instruction manuals and procedure-related information should be organized, step-by-step way, using all of the rules for effective business writing discussed in this and prior lessons. Negative messages are a bit more challenging because the news is bad, but must be communicated in the same positive tone used for good news messages and neutral messages. Bad news messages include forms of criticism and denial.

Effective bad news messages follow unique rules to avoid personalization. It’s important that the receiver not feel attacked. To facilitate this, do the following:

1. Sandwich the bad news between the positive opening and a positive closing.
2. Avoid the use of personal pronouns like ‘you’ and ‘we’, as they tend to signify figure pointing in bad news messages, and indicate a hierarchical separation between message sender and message receiver. Even though it may exist, point it out will be counter-productive.
3. Use abstract terms and passive voice to avoid appearing confrontational.
4. Avoid negative wording such as ‘cannot’ and ‘will not’.
5. Communicate hopefulness for the future. Provide comments of empathy when appropriate.

Examples of negative news communicated in a positive tone:

**Negative**: You will not receive an extended credit line due to your poor payment history.

**Positive**: XYZ Company looks forward to extending the requested credit once your payments have been made on time for a period of 12 months.

**Negative**: Your product is inferior.

**Positive**: ABC product falls short of established standards.

**Negative**: You failed to meet this month’s quota.

**Positive**: This month’s quota did not meet the published goals.

Of course not all bad news messages can be communicated in a positive manner. Third, fourth and fifth notices, for example, must progressively lose the softer edge to be taken seriously. Still, some negative word choices can be replaced with more positive versions. Examples include using ‘lacks’ instead of ‘does not have’, and ‘allowed’ instead of ‘did not prevent’. Not only are these choices softer, but they are more concise as well.