

Apologies, Their Use and Meaning: A Course Module

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Abstract

The apology is an important marketing and management tool. Knowing how to apologize correctly is a skill that must be mastered and should be studied. The purpose of this paper is to provide needed course material for instructors preparing a course module on this relatively new and very topical subject. This paper is targeted to educators and anyone who wants to understand the fundamentals of apologies. Possible relevant disciplines include: marketing, management, medicine, hospital administration, nursing, business law, and philosophy of law, among others. The paper includes examples of apologies, some good and some not, drawn from real life as well as from television and film. A reading list is provided as well.

Key words: apologies, remorse, the good apology, apologies in business, apologies in politics.

Apologies, Their Use and Meaning: A Course Module

The apology is an important marketing and management tool (Friedman, 2006). Knowing how to apologize correctly is a skill that must be mastered and should be studied. The purpose of this paper is to provide needed course material for instructors preparing a course module on this relatively new and very topical subject. Possible relevant courses for this material may be found in disciplines such as: marketing, management, medicine, hospital administration, nursing, business law, and philosophy of law, among others.

The Good Apology

A good apology has to have several elements. Some use the “Four R’s as a mnemonic device to remember what needs to be done. These are:

- Remorse
- Restitution
- Rehabilitation
- Request for forgiveness

Others make reference to the “Five R’s”:

- Recognition
- Remorse
- Repentance

- Restitution
- Reform

In essence, a good apology has several characteristics:

- The individual or organization making the apology must recognize that a wrong was committed.
- The remorse must be sincere, not simply “regret” at being caught. There is a big difference between remorse and regret. The person or organization should make it clear that they are ashamed of what they did and will never do it again.
- The remorse must be communication to the offended parties – companies can and should use the media – and an explanation as to why the offense was committed should be made.
- Reparations and / or restitution should be offered.
- It has to be clear that this will never occur again and that serious reform has taken place.

The apology, if done correctly, heals all wounds and allows both parties to move ahead and forget about the past.

According to Weisul (2011), there are nine crucial elements to an effective apology. These are:

1. Everyone has to agree on the facts and what actually happened.
2. The offender must take full responsibility for what happened.
3. The apologizer must say the actions that were taken were wrong.
4. The offender must use a phrase such as “I was wrong.”
5. The offender must express sincere regret.
6. If the victim(s) wants the apology to be made in public or in written form, the offender should comply.
7. The offender should be willing to offer reparations/monetary compensation.
8. You can only apologize for things for which you are responsible.
9. The apology has to be genuine.

A major reason that people do not apologize is that they are afraid the apology will be seen as a sign of weakness and/or guilt. In reality, an apology indicates great strength as it is a munificent act that restores

and rehabilitates the self-concept of the offended party. Corporations may be afraid to apologize because they feel that it may be an admission of guilt that can lead to lawsuits. On the contrary, hospitals have found that apologies may reduce the incidence of lawsuits (Cohen, 2000).

In Politics

Knowing how to apologize is not only important in commerce or interpersonal relations, but on the political stage as well. To this day, the Armenians are distrustful of the Turkish people because they have not expressed remorse for the genocide that occurred almost 90 years ago. Japan's neighbors are not convinced that Japan is sincerely remorseful over what it did during World War II.

Some other apologies in the political arena:

- Prime Minister Kevin Rudd of Australia apologizing to the Aborigines. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3TZOGpG6cM>.
- Apology by President Clinton for study done at Tuskegee. See <http://clinton4.nara.gov/textonly/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html>.
- President Clinton Apologizes to the Nation. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r4e5Wg4PDI>.

In Religion

Pope John Paul II made one of the most revolutionary changes in Catholic attitudes towards Jews by the following apology on March 12, 2000 (See <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/pope-yad-vashem.htm>):

We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of Yours [the Jewish people] to suffer, and asking

Your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the CovenantFor the role that each one of us has had, with his behavior, in these evils, contributing to a disfigurement of the face of the Church, we humbly ask forgiveness.

He went to the Western Wall on March 26, 2000 and inserted a *kvitel*, a small piece of paper, in the cracks, with the following message:

God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring Your name to the nations: we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of Yours to suffer and asking Your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.

Pope John Paul II was the first pope to visit a synagogue as well as a number of Holocaust sites, and he established full diplomatic relations with Israel. This apology did a great deal to improve Catholic-Jewish relations.

In Criminal Justice

Restorative justice, a new approach to criminal justice, is about restoring conditions to the way they were before the crime was committed. With restorative justice, the offender must take responsibility for his actions and understand the harm he has caused. The hope is that the wrongdoer will have a better understanding of the harm he has caused by meeting with the victim, that he will feel true remorse, and apologize for the crime. By apologizing and understanding the harm caused by the crime, the hope is that the perpetrator of the crime will be very reluctant to commit the offense again.

In Medicine

Many medical schools now teach students to apologize for mistakes rather than try to cover up. Hospitals are finding that apologies by doctors result in fewer malpractice lawsuits than the old approach in which doctors refuse to take responsibility. A number of states have even passed “immunity for apology” laws that enable physicians to apologize and show how sorry they are for what happened without having their own words used against them in litigation.

In Business

Fuchs-Barnett (2002) discusses the interesting case of an \$85 million lawsuit brought against the retailer Eddie Bauer. A young African-American teenager was accused by a store security guard of stealing a shirt. It turned out that the young man was innocent. According to the teenager’s father, “If they had apologized from the start or given some response, the lawsuit wouldn’t happen. It feels like they don’t care.”

Intel is a case study in how not to deal with customers when a product flaw is discovered. A professor found a bug in Intel’s (then) new P5 Pentium chip; this occurred in 1994. The truth was that the flaw would only cause problems for a miniscule number of users who worked on very sophisticated, high-end applications. For everyone else, the flaw would not be an issue. Intel, however, tried to cover up. That was a huge mistake which led to a public relations fiasco. Eventually, the company agreed to replace the chip for customers who requested it (Cooper, July 2010).

The apology by Tokyo Electric Power CEO Masataka Shimizu after the explosion at the Fukushima plant, brought on by the earthquake, in which the company expressed its “deep regrets” did little to help

its image. There were too many elements missing from the apology for it to be effective (Weisul, 2011).

In fact, the public did not even feel that it was genuine.

Friedman (2006) discusses the case of McDonald's. The company had falsely claimed that its French fries and hash browns were fried in pure vegetable oil. It turned out that the company used lard.

McDonald's did more than apologize to Hindus and vegetarians about their ersatz vegetarian French fries and hash browns. The settlement also included a payment of 10 million dollars for charities and educational organizations connected with Hindus and vegetarians. One important benefit of a sincere apology from a CEO is that it sends a message to everyone throughout the company that the organization is sincere about changing its culture.

Friedman (2006) also cites the story of Stew Leonard as an important lesson for businesspeople on the value of an apology. A customer claimed that a carton of buttermilk had a bad smell and wanted to return it. Leonard smelled it and told the customer it was fine. They argued about it, and finally Leonard gave in and replaced the buttermilk. The unhappy customer said that he would never shop in Leonard's supermarket again. Leonard then realized that for the price of a container of buttermilk he lost a customer, whose lifetime value to him could be as much as \$246,000, the average amount a customer spends in a lifetime of shopping in supermarkets.

The corporate world also understands how an apology can undo all kinds of marketing blunders. The apology, however, has to be sincere and from the soul. Jetblue's founder and CEO, David Neeleman, made a classic apology for flight cancellation chaos that occurred in 2007. The apology appeared in numerous newspapers as well as the company website. A video was posted on YouTube in which the CEO apologizes to his customers. Neeleman also used the apology as an opportunity to introduce a JetBlue Airways Customer Bill of Rights.

Dear JetBlue Customers,

We are sorry and embarrassed. But most of all, we are deeply sorry. Last week was the worst operational week in JetBlue's seven year history. Many of you were either stranded, delayed or had flights cancelled following the severe winter ice storm in the Northeast...

Words cannot express how truly sorry we are for the anxiety, frustration and inconvenience that you, your family, friends and colleagues experienced. This is especially saddening because JetBlue was founded on the promise of bringing humanity back to air travel, and making the experience of flying happier and easier for everyone who chooses to fly with us. We know we failed to deliver on this promise last week ...

Apple had a huge public relations nightmare in 2010 when the iPhone 4 was introduced and there was an avalanche of customer complaints about the poor antenna design (Cooper, 2010). Apple apologized and admitted that its phones inflated signal strength and sometimes erroneously displayed full signal strength on the phone's bar graph. The following letter was sent in response to the complaints.

Dear iPhone 4 Users,

The iPhone 4 has been the most successful product launch in Apple's history. It has been judged by reviewers around the world to be the best smartphone ever, and users have told us that they love it. So we were surprised when we read reports of reception problems, and we immediately began investigating them. Here is what we have learned.

To start with, gripping almost any mobile phone in certain ways will reduce its reception by 1 or more bars. This is true of iPhone 4, iPhone 3GS, as well as many Droid, Nokia and RIM phones. But some users have reported that iPhone 4 can drop 4 or 5 bars when tightly held in a way which covers the black strip in the lower left corner of the metal band. This is a far bigger drop than normal, and as a result some have accused the iPhone 4 of having a faulty antenna design.

At the same time, we continue to read articles and receive hundreds of emails from users saying that iPhone 4 reception is better than the iPhone 3GS. They are delighted. This matches our own experience and testing. What can explain all of this?

We have discovered the cause of this dramatic drop in bars, and it is both simple and surprising.

Upon investigation, we were stunned to find that the formula we use to calculate how many bars of signal strength to display is totally wrong. Our formula, in many instances, mistakenly displays 2 more bars than it should for a given signal strength. For example, we sometimes display 4 bars when we should be displaying as few as 2 bars. Users observing a drop of several bars when they grip their iPhone in a certain way are most

likely in an area with very weak signal strength, but they don't know it because we are erroneously displaying 4 or 5 bars. Their big drop in bars is because their high bars were never real in the first place.

To fix this, we are adopting AT&T's recently recommended formula for calculating how many bars to display for a given signal strength. The real signal strength remains the same, but the iPhone's bars will report it far more accurately, providing users a much better indication of the reception they will get in a given area. We are also making bars 1, 2 and 3 a bit taller so they will be easier to see.

We will issue a free software update within a few weeks that incorporates the corrected formula. Since this mistake has been present since the original iPhone, this software update will also be available for the iPhone 3GS and iPhone 3G.

We have gone back to our labs and retested everything, and the results are the same—the iPhone 4's wireless performance is the best we have ever shipped. For the vast majority of users who have not been troubled by this issue, this software update will only make your bars more accurate. For those who have had concerns, we apologize for any anxiety we may have caused.

As a reminder, if you are not fully satisfied, you can return your undamaged iPhone to any Apple Retail Store or the online Apple Store within 30 days of purchase for a full refund.

We hope you love the iPhone 4 as much as we do.

Thank you for your patience and support.
Apple

In September of 2011, an email message was sent to every single Netflix subscriber as an apology for a change that annoyed many customers. Netflix announced that it would split into two different companies: one for DVD rentals by mail (to be called Qwikster) and one for streaming. Consumers were very dissatisfied with the fact that they would now have to deal with and pay for two separate accounts, costing about \$6 more per month to keep both services. Approximately 800,000 out of about 25 million Netflix customers cancelled their subscriptions to Netflix; the stock has dropped 52% (Wortham and Stelter, 2011). Michael Gordon, CEO of a public relations firm, was quoted as saying: "I have a feeling the apologies are just beginning. They're catching customers off-guard by making huge changes and not providing a lot of explanation for them. It's been handled poorly." The Netflix apology:

I messed up. I owe you an explanation.

It is clear from the feedback over the past two months that many members felt we lacked respect and humility in the way we announced the separation of DVD and streaming and the price changes. That was certainly not our intent, and I offer my sincere apology. Let me explain what we are doing.

For the past five years, my greatest fear at Netflix has been that we wouldn't make the leap from success in DVDs to success in streaming. Most companies that are great at something – like AOL dialup or Borders bookstores – do not become great at new things people want (streaming for us). So we moved quickly into streaming, but I should have personally given you a full explanation of why we are splitting the services and thereby increasing prices. It wouldn't have changed the price increase, but it would have been the right thing to do.

So here is what we are doing and why.

Many members love our DVD service, as I do, because nearly every movie ever made is published on DVD. DVD is a great option for those who want the huge and comprehensive selection of movies.

I also love our streaming service because it is integrated into my TV, and I can watch anytime I want. The benefits of our streaming service are really quite different from the benefits of DVD by mail. We need to focus on rapid improvement as streaming technology and the market evolves, without maintaining compatibility with our DVD by mail service.

So we realized that streaming and DVD by mail are really becoming two different businesses, with very different cost structures, that need to be marketed differently, and we need to let each grow and operate independently.

It's hard to write this after over 10 years of mailing DVDs with pride, but we think it is necessary: In a few weeks, we will rename our DVD by mail service to "Qwikster". We chose the name Qwikster because it refers to quick delivery. We will keep the name "Netflix" for streaming.

Qwikster will be the same website and DVD service that everyone is used to. It is just a new name, and DVD members will go to qwikster.com to access their DVD queues and choose movies. One improvement we will make at launch is to add a video games upgrade option, similar to our upgrade option for Blu-ray, for those who want to rent Wii, PS3 and Xbox 360 games. Members have been asking for video games for many years, but now that DVD by mail has its own team, we are finally getting it done. Other improvements will follow. A negative of the renaming and separation is that the Qwikster.com and Netflix.com websites will not be integrated.

There are no pricing changes (we're done with that!). If you subscribe to both services you will have two entries on your credit card statement, one for Qwikster and one for Netflix. The total will be the same as your current charges. We will let you know in a few weeks when the Qwikster.com website is up and ready.

For me the Netflix red envelope has always been a source of joy. The new envelope is

still that lovely red, but now it will have a Qwikster logo. I know that logo will grow on me over time, but still, it is hard. I imagine it will be similar for many of you.

I want to acknowledge and thank you for sticking with us, and to apologize again to those members, both current and former, who felt we treated them thoughtlessly.

Both the Qwikster and Netflix teams will work hard to regain your trust. We know it will not be overnight. Actions speak louder than words. But words help people to understand actions.

Respectfully yours,
-Reed Hastings, Co-Founder and CEO, Netflix

p.s. I have a slightly longer explanation along with a video posted on [our blog](#), where you can also post comments.

The public has expressed dissatisfaction with this so-called apology, noting that the price hike was not reversed or mitigated in any way. It is not clear yet at this writing whether Netflix's lost customers will return. In addition, Netflix has all but given up on Qwikster.

Celebrities

Some consider celebrities to be "big business." At the very least, celebrities have been known to unleash public relations firestorms that require a great deal of skill in response. Some celebrity apologies:

- Tiger Wood's Apology <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs8nseNP4s0>
- Michael Richard's Apology on the Letterman Show <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC26RI-Ria8>
- Mel Gibson's Apology: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article696911.ece>

Collections

In this section are some links to interesting collections of real apologies.

➤ “Top Ten National Apologies,” *Time Magazine* (June 2010).

This collection includes Willy Brandt’s apology on behalf of the German people for the Holocaust, as well as apologies for Bloody Sunday, Argentina's Dirty War, American Slavery and Jim Crow, Apartheid, Internment of Japanese-Americans, The Code Breaker, The Aborigines, The Galileo Case, and Japanese Sex Slavery. See

http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1997272_1997273_1997274,00.html.

➤ “Top Ten Apologies of 2010,” *Time Magazine* (December 2010).

This includes an apology by the CEO of Toyota for safety problems. See

http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2035319_2033824_2033826,00.html.

➤ “Ten Notable Apologies from the Last Decade,” *Listverse* (2010).

See <http://listverse.com/2010/05/26/10-notable-apologies-from-the-last-decade/>.

➤ “Top 5 Corporate Blog Apologies,” from Mario Sundar’s *Marketing Nirvana* blog (August 2008).

See <http://mariosundar.com/2008/08/12/top-5-corporate-blog-apologies/>.

➤ “The 5 Most Half Assed Apologies for Historic Crimes,” *Cracked.com* (May 2010).

See http://www.cracked.com/article_18528_the-5-most-half-assed-apologies-historic-crimes.html.

➤ “The 6 Most Insincere Apologies of All Time,” *Cracked.com* (March 2009).

See http://www.cracked.com/article_17105_6-most-insincere-apologies-all-time.html.

Additional Course Materials - Apologies from Television and Movies

It is always useful to have at the ready a selection of images, videos, and animations that are entertaining as well as instructive. The video clips in this paper are available on YouTube at the time of this writing. The authors believe that they are all short enough to qualify as “fair use,” certainly for academic, non-commercial use.

►From *The Honeymooners*: Ralph’s apology to Alice.

One way to begin a lecture on apologies might be with a pointed illustration of What Not To Do. So, let us examine what is arguably the worst apology ever (and an example of television at its finest). It was on the episode “A Matter of Record” of the classic television show, *The Honeymooners*. Ralph Kramden is apologizing to his wife, Alice, for calling her mother a blabbermouth (See

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0qTizSkOCY>):

Hello, Alice. This is me, Ralph. Alice, I'm sorry. I'm miserable without you. Please come back to me, Alice. I apologize for everything I said. I even apologize to your mother. I know she doesn't mean the things she says, Alice. It's just her nature. She doesn't mean to be mean. She's just born that way. When she says things about your old boyfriends and about the furniture in the apartment, I know that she doesn't mean to get me mad. She's just naturally mean, that's all. When she spilled the beans about the end of the play, I shouldn't have got mad at that. I should've expected it from her. I know how she is. She's never gonna be any different, Alice! She's gonna be the same old way, Alice! SHE'S A BLABBERMOUTH, ALICE! A BLABBERMOUTH!

That is clearly not the way to show remorse. Of course, neither is telling someone, “I am sorry you feel that way,” or stating that “If anyone has been hurt by my actions, I am sorry.”

►Apology by Archie Leach (John Cleese) in the film *A Fish Called Wanda*.

Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v= mI7ldxcio0>.

➤ *Babylon 5* scene, the Captain apologizing.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8vA0ANTUM0>

➤ *Friends*

- Joey apologizes to Ross, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIIm7yBdUG4>.
- “We Were on a Break,” available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsvsRZhNVp4>.

➤ *Seinfeld*

- Kramer apologizes to a monkey. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMzle1FnqOI>.
- In “The Apology,” George Costanza (Jason Alexander) demands an apology from Jason Hanky (James Spader) and then, still dissatisfied, wants an apology for the apology. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eaUXkicnXQ>. In another clip, Hanky assures George, “You deserve a better apology.” Is that really an apology? Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_QfilVbAd4.

➤ *Curb Your Enthusiasm*

Larry David’s HBO television show, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, has been a veritable font of examples of less-than-good apologies. Here we list three.

- The Begrudging Apology. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zM6fQ52YZoM>.
- Snacking and Apologizing. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSzna- SaXU>.
- The Shush Apology. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzNXekrHzm4>.

Reading List

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