

[TradeOnlyToday](#) > [Columns & Blogs](#) > [Marketing Insight](#) > A heartfelt 'I'm sorry' can soothe an angry customer

## A heartfelt 'I'm sorry' can soothe an angry customer

Posted on August 24th, 2015 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)

 Like 3  Tweet 1  +1 0  Share



My last column shared the disappointment a group of us experienced during the Hull of a Tour-Freedom Ride when we stopped to tour the Harley-Davidson plant in York, Pa. I recounted a series of incidents that negatively impacted the perception of Harley-Davidson, even among die-hard owners and fans such as myself.

My goal in sharing this incident was to remind boating industry readers about how critically important the customer experience is and to make sure everyone who has customer contact understands the pivotal role they play. Their individual actions and attitude directly affect not only brand perceptions, but also have the power to positively — or negatively — impact future sales.

I actually was surprised by the response and the volume of emails I received, as well as the handful of posts on Trade Only and on my own Facebook and other social media pages.

A colleague who works for a major boat manufacturer told me my column caused a lot of internal discussion and was posted in the company's break room. Another said the guy who conducts the plant tour had it taped next to his computer. Another emailed to say she had copied the article and included it in a personal notecard to her entire dock staff to remind them about how important they are in delivering positive customer experiences.

In the past I've shared positive experiences with Harley-Davidson dealerships that I felt would benefit our industry. I've been a keen observer and champion of the motor-sport giant in many areas where it excels. Perhaps that is why the factory tour experience was so profoundly disturbing and why I felt compelled to share it. This experience sharply reminded me that all of the awesome things your company does on a daily basis can be undermined by one stupid or careless customer incident.

I would have moved on to a different topic this month, but there now is more to the story. It's about how to take a negative customer situation and turn it around.

Let me explain.

I'm not sure how, but my column managed to catch the attention of Harley-Davidson's C-Suite. You can imagine my surprise when I found an email from H-D president and CEO Matt Levatich in my in-box. It wasn't posted in a public forum, but was a personal note, written for my eyes only.

*Dear Wanda,*

*I recently came across your column on the experience you and your group had on our York Operations plant tour. I am terribly sorry to hear of your experience, and at the same time I thank you for highlighting our opportunity. We are a company that treasures the passion and loyalty of our customers, and we are working like never before to reward that loyalty and also reach new people in pursuit of personal freedom astride a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. We clearly missed it by a mile on your tour. Reading of your experience was sobering, to say the least, and we will use the learning to its full extent.*

*Unlike your car brand shift, I do hope you will return to our facilities to experience a tour that meets our (and exceeds your) high expectations. And, I appreciate you riding our great motorcycles. Thank you*

*again.*

*Matt Levatich*

*President and CEO*

The first word that came to mind when I read this email was, wow. Why? Because the company's top guy cared enough to respond to a situation I had addressed. Not his PR minions or some customer service manager in Milwaukee. Hearing from the president and CEO got my attention.

Like most of us who have a negative experience with a brand, I didn't take the time to write to the company after my incident. Frankly, I figured it wouldn't matter. I never expected to hear from anyone at Harley-Davidson, least of all the CEO. (Learn from this, boating folk! Is your CEO engaged and paying attention?)

Second, I appreciated the fact that his email was personal and addressed my unique experience. It wasn't a stiff, formal, boilerplate response. It used my first name. It was professional in content and context, but casual in approach. Fitting for the brand — like a conversation you might have with a fellow biker.

In addition, Levatich easily could have posted this message on the comment board for all to see, but he didn't. He chose the direct route. That personal touch scored my respect because it rang genuine. And just so there's absolutely no ambiguity here, I asked for permission to share this letter because I felt there were lessons to be learned by full review; it's the only reason you're reading it. The original email had standard disclaimer language that clearly precluded me from sharing the content.

Third, the communication lacked any tone of defensiveness. I'd published a pretty negative column that addressed my sincere disappointment in Harley-Davidson, my brand of choice. Many of us in a similar situation would likely have rushed into battle. Matt, however, never questioned it. He addressed my experience and referred to it as an "opportunity" — and thanked me for sharing it. Gotta give kudos for what I'd call a very smart and positive response.

When an owner or a CEO or a manager apologizes from the outset and addresses a customer's concern, it is disarming. It communicates that they have both listened and heard. Smart companies recognize that when their customers complain it is, as Matt expressed, an opportunity to listen and learn. Those of us with a goal of constant improvement must embrace those concerns so we can correct a problem we may not even be aware exists.

I emailed Matt back and thanked him for his interest and response. I also have since shared a positive link to a different story I've published in Born to Ride magazine, where my personal motorcycling conversion and Harley story enjoyed prominent coverage. In both instances I've received the courtesy of a prompt reply.

On the heels of the email from the president, I also heard from the individual who manages factory tours. I have to give her credit; she did her due diligence and tracked me down. She, too, apologized for the experience on behalf of the company and the factory tour staff. She asked for the names or descriptions of those involved so she could specifically address the concerns, noting that the company clearly reinforces to the tour guides how critical they are in representing the brand and the power they have to "make it or break it" for the guests. All positives.

Unfortunately, however, she included one line I truly wish she'd avoided because it seemed to minimize our group's experience. She noted that in her 13 years at Harley-Davidson she's never received negative feedback like this concerning her staff's interaction with guests.

How do you think that made me feel? She tiptoed on sounding defensive. It didn't make me feel any better to learn we were the only group in 13 years that had ever reported a bad experience. I felt she had dismissed — or perhaps failed to trust — our collective feedback. What I was tempted to say in response is that the multiple tour folks we encountered all likely didn't get up on the wrong side of the bed on the same day.

What would have been a better way to make her point, in my opinion, would have been personalized to communicate something like this: Wanda, we conduct thousands of tours in our factories, and most of them receive very positive marks from our guests. We're so very sorry that we disappointed your group, and we'll take your feedback to our team with the goal to address and improve the experience in the future.

Despite your company's best intentions and your investment in training and professional development, your team inevitably will drop the ball once in a while. Someone will disappoint or upset a customer. By acknowledging the complaint promptly and following with a genuine apology, even your harshest critics often are willing to forgive. However, it's important to investigate the complaint with those who need to be involved and ultimately fix the problem.

This is a marketing column. Don't forget that all of the marketing bucks in the world won't overcome the real-world experience of your customers and prospects. Your brand position must align with who you really are if you expect it to resonate with authenticity.

If yours is a company that claims to care about its customers, everyone who has the potential to connect with that most important audience — from the CEO to the tour guide to the receptionist — all have to own it and protect it 24/7.

*Wanda Kenton Smith is chief marketing officer of Freedom Boat Club, president of Marine Marketers of America and president of Kenton Smith Marketing. [wanda@kentonsmithmarketing.com](mailto:wanda@kentonsmithmarketing.com)*

*This article originally appeared in the September 2015 issue.*

Copyright © 2015 Cruz Bay Publishing Inc., an Active Interest Media company. 10 Bokum Rd., Essex, Conn., 06426-1185