

How to Deliver Bad News to Customers

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When fate hands you a lemon, make lemonade.

~ Dale Carnegie

The intention of usability testing and user experience (UX) research is to help clients and end users. If you want to help people, you must first understand problems and issues. You have to explain the challenges you discover. After all, you can't fix what you don't know is broken. Your clients cannot take action without information. You can't improve something or make it usable without exploring what isn't working.

In order to be effective in the usability business, you have to face the fact that you'll have to deliver bad news. You have to talk about what's not working. You might have to bruise egos and make your client uncomfortable.

So, what can you do? How can you effectively break bad news to clients in order to help them, and end users? What are the tips and tricks?

There are some concrete ways to handle the delivery of bad news that will turn it into good news. With steady nerves and a little planning, you can set a more positive tone in no time at all. You can deliver bad news and your client actually will love you for it.

Starting Before You Start

The most important trick in delivering usability results is quite simple, but it's often ignored. You must begin by delivering bad news before you even start working!

You will never find yourself in a situation where there will be 100% positive news. When you do UX work, there are always challenges to face. There are no exceptions. Since you know this, do yourself and your client a favor. Tell them that you will find and then deliver a list of issues.

When I do this, I always make sure to explain how usability testing works. I provide examples. I back up everything I say with references and testimonials. It plants the seed in the mind of my client. If they know that there will be some bad news they can prepare for it. Also, they appreciate understanding the process and the results they will get.

You can make this entire process very positive. You can talk with your clients about the problems and issues they'll hear about, but you can also make it clear that you will offer them clarity. You will give them a clear picture of what they face and you can explain that you will provide them with answers and solutions.

Your introduction will control the first impression you make with the client. Take the straight and honest path. Be professional, competent, and caring. Also, before you dig in, give your client information about the entire process, the results they can expect, and who will be with them the entire way. You're there to be a guide, mentor, worker and confidant. Help them understand your role and project trust and confidence.

How You Deliver Versus What You Deliver

You should pay a lot of attention to how you provide information to your clients. Even if you have great news to deliver, you can cause a lot of pain if you don't consider how your usability results will impact your client.

For example, while your primary client might be the CEO, the ultimate consumers might be the project development team. In other words, the boss might like the results and demand action, but the development team might be frustrated and disillusioned with what you deliver. If possible know all readers; know all audiences. See: [Walking Through Your Product Design With Stakeholders](#)

Another consideration is delivery of information in relation to other information. In other words, it is usually a bad idea to present all negative information in one place in a report in my experience.

Instead, mix the positive and negative points together. When talking about the good news, provide tools and advice for how to do a better job. When talking about bad news, provide useful reference and positive suggestions.

I like to tell stories about certain users that were in the usability tests. I provide concrete and tangible scenarios that clients clearly understand. Then I explain how this user found some functionality very useful but was upset that it wasn't readily available at all times. I also provide specific quotes to highlight both positive and negative points. In short, I make the results very human. It works.

Bad News Is Hardly Bad

The very nature of usability is to find and expose problems. I like to say that flaws are gold and mistakes are gems. If we didn't find things to fix, we wouldn't provide much value. It is important to figure out what doesn't work for users and then provide your client with answers. This is your value.