

Say You're Sorry Like You Mean It

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by Sara Grillo

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An apology is a delicate thing. You get one chance, so don't do it badly and embitter the person further. If you're going to apologize, then say you're sorry like you mean it.

The life of a serial apologizer

I'm constantly blurting out apologies to people on a daily basis. Do you know what it's like pushing a stroller around New York City with four kids under six years old? *Literally*. Here's a snapshot of a typical morning in my family:



- So sorry she pressed all the buttons and now we're going *up* six flights rather than *down* when you're in a rush and obviously late for work.
- I apologize for blocking you (my "bus" is stuck in the entryway as I push my stroller out the door with one hand while I hold the door open with the other one).

And on and on. We can't go anywhere without offending 99.9% of the people around us. It's just one big, huge string of apologies. I should get some, "I'm sorry in advance" banner and stick it to the front of my carriage.

It occurred to me the other day – do I really even *mean* it? Or is the truth that I'm apologizing so people don't call the cops?

Even the best of us mess up. So how do financial advisors go about apologizing the right way?

An apology that fanned the flames

Here's an apology that made me go from annoyed to wanting to punch the person through my computer screen.

I had someone appear on my highly irreverent **podcast**, but he clearly failed to take the time to understand what he was getting into. We'll call him, "Mr. Glib." As you may know, I make no effort to hide my in-your-face style.

Mr. Glib and I had a conversation about this beforehand, but I guess the allure of fame was too tempting to turn down. So a few weeks after his appearance, I asked him to post the show to his social media. No response. I follow up, email gets ignored, blah blah. You know how the story goes.

Finally, I send him an email stating that I'm taking the podcast down if he doesn't respond (see, I told you I'm blunt) and I get this fake, phony, false apology message back from Mr. Glib:

Thanks for following up with me. It turns out that it's a good news/bad news kind of thing: my understanding is that we did make it available to our clients via our private communication system so hundreds of them have access to it, which is the good part, but, unfortunately, because we were so occupied with our annual conference, it doesn't appear that we posted it via our social media. I apologize for this omission, but, honestly, we probably should have been more strategic – this is our busiest time of year, so we should've considered this more carefully. Of course, we greatly appreciate being on the show and hope that this error on our part won't preclude us from collaborating synergistically in the future.

Here's why this email caused me to blisteringly explode in anger.

- Starts with, "Thanks for following up." False statement. Mr. Glib had been *avoiding* me for two months until he was cornered by a threat to pull the whole episode. It's like when people say, "Sorry for the delay in responding" or, "Could you please hold for a moment?" (Have you noticed they never wait for your response). No, you're not sorry. Don't patronize me; you were *annoyed* by my follow up.

- Wastes my time. There's nothing I hate more than a long, rambling email that I have to spend five minutes deciphering. I have four kids, remember?
- Annoying sentence about "good news/bad news." Clearly it's *all* bad news.
- Lying. Mr. Glib clearly tries to feed me some phony line about this "private communication system." Who are you, James Bond? Is this some kind of spy gadget like the Clothing Brush Communicator in *Live and Let Die*? Don't insult me. As if I'm not smart enough to see through it!
- Makes a dumb excuse. It would take literally 10 seconds to post the podcast to social media. In fact it probably took Mr. Glib longer to write this verbose email. He didn't post it because he didn't like it.
- Doesn't address my feelings. At this point, I don't even care whether or not he posts the thing. I'm looking for an explanation of why he won't. To fail to provide one is emotionally unsatisfying.
- Ends with a demand of forgiveness and hope of "collaborating synergistically in the future." Mr. Glib, why would I ever do anything that benefits you ever again? How selfish. You are trying to save face. No Mr. Glib – you aren't going to be forgiven with a lousy apology like this and if I ever see you at the next Schwab IMPACT conference you're going to get good and snubbed by me!

The right way to apologize

This is the apology I would have preferred to receive:

Sara, the podcast came out a bit too far from the guidelines we set for our brand and we won't be posting it to our social media. I imagine this news must be quite disappointing to hear, and I apologize.

It would still be a slap in the face but I would have accepted it because I know he is telling me the truth. That makes me empathize with him. No intent to placate or smooth things over, no lies, no demands for forgiveness. Lastly, it's straight to the point (which you know I love) and I don't have to waste time reading it.

Apology guidelines

To summarize, here are the guidelines I use when apologizing:

- Don't overly explain – get to the point and do it in two sentences or less. Then shut up. Short doesn't mean it's not well thought out. Listen to my **two-sentence rule** for how to do that.
- Make it about the person's hurt feelings and not defending your agenda. Show empathy and the highest understanding about how you made them feel instead of asking them to pardon your behavior.
- Use feelings, not logic. It's not about who is wrong or right; it's about somebody feeling they were wrongfully treated, whether or not that was the case.
- Take ownership and responsibility for what you may have done wrong.
- Don't demand them to forgive you so we can all be friends if we see each other at the next Envestnet conference. Say the words and then shut up and wait for the person to accept or not. It's their choice. You could say, "Would you be so generous to accept my apology," but that is as far as I would go.
- Don't do it in the wrong frame of mind for you or them. If you're angry or you think they may be, wait until emotions die down (if you can).
- Use sincere language, not clichés.
- Say the truth about why something happened, instead of trying to hide in excuses.
- Use the person's name at least once.
- Don't use the word "unfortunately." Whenever I hear this word, I know I'm about to get squashed with some awful news.

The most important thing is don't attempt to solve the issue or justify your behavior. This always comes across as placating. In fact, it makes the person angrier. The apology has to be 100% about *them* and 0% about *you*. Above all, that is what the person wants to hear.

Sara's upshot

Sorry for the pitch ... but I have to mention that empathetic communication like this is the cornerstone of my membership program. To join, you can access it [here](#).

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