



APEX ENGLISH

Your voice. Global.

B1 · BUSINESS ENGLISH

UNIT 7 · B1·7B

When customers complain

Theme · Sales & customers



Unit 7 · B1·7B

When customers complain

Theme: Sales & customers

B1 · Business English



Learning objectives

- Handle a customer complaint in three calm steps — acknowledge, verify, resolve.
- Use quantifiers (some / any / much / many / few / little / most / no) accurately in customer-service writing.
- Turn a 1-star review into a public reply that a future customer will trust.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



Class Book

Warm-up · Your last complaint

Think of the last time YOU complained about something as a customer. Answer three questions in one sentence each.

What was the complaint about, in 5 words?

Was it handled well or badly? What was the ONE thing that made the difference?

Did you ever buy from that company again — why or why not?

Lead-in: guess what the customer really wants

Six customers arrive angry. For each one, don't guess the problem — guess what they actually want the company to DO. Vote (A) an apology, (B) a refund, (C) a replacement, (D) an explanation, or (E) to be heard. Peek at the reveal only after you've committed.

kind: guess-complaint

1. **emoji:** 📦 · **title:** The wrong-size shoes · **situation:** Marta ordered size 39 boots for a wedding on Saturday. She opened the box on Thursday — size 41. She's writing to customer service on Thursday evening. · **answer:** C — a replacement, fast. What she actually wants is size 39 boots at her door by Saturday morning. A refund solves nothing — the wedding is Saturday.

2. **emoji:** 🕒 · **title:** The 45-minute wait · **situation:** A couple sat at a restaurant for 45 minutes before their food arrived. The food was fine. They paid in full, left, and the next day posted a 2-star Google review. · **answer:** E — to be heard. They paid in full and left — they don't want money. They want the manager to see the review and reply publicly. Silence will lose the next twenty customers who read it.

3. **emoji:** 💰 · **title:** The double charge · **situation:** João was charged twice for the same €89 subscription — once on the 3rd and again on the 5th. He noticed on the 10th and emails support, calmly. · **answer:** B — a refund, but also D — an explanation. He wants the €89 back today, and one clear sentence telling him it won't happen again. If he only gets the refund, he still doesn't trust the system.

4. **emoji:** 📦 · **title:** The birthday parcel that never came · **situation:** Isabel ordered her daughter's birthday present two weeks in advance. On the birthday itself, the tracking still says 'in transit — depot'. She calls customer service in tears. · **answer:** A + E — a real apology, and someone to actually LISTEN. A refund won't fix the birthday. The best rep will name the problem out loud ('this shouldn't have happened, I'm so sorry'), then offer a same-day digital gift the child can open, then the refund.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



5. **emoji:** 🤔 · **title:** The confusing bill · **situation:** A small-business owner opens his mobile bill and it's €280 higher than last month. He can't see WHY — the line items are opaque. He calls the network, polite but firm. · **answer:** D — an explanation FIRST, then possibly a partial refund. He isn't accusing the company of a scam. He wants someone to walk him through the €280 line by line. If the explanation is clear, he'll often accept it. If it's evasive, he cancels.

6. **emoji:** 😡 · **title:** The dirty hotel room · **situation:** Amara checks into a business hotel at 11pm after a long flight. The room clearly hasn't been cleaned. Hair on the pillow. She's exhausted and has meetings at 8am. · **answer:** C — a replacement (a different, clean room, tonight, no forms) — plus A, an apology at reception. She does not want to discuss compensation at 11pm. Compensation can be offered by email tomorrow, unprompted.

followUp: Which of the six is the HARDEST case to handle? Rank the top two.

Reading · The three-step complaint recovery

Most complaints don't fail because the customer is unreasonable. They fail because the company answers step three before doing steps one and two. There are three steps, in order, and skipping the order is what makes an angry customer leave forever.

Step one: acknowledge. Not 'sorry you feel that way' — that isn't an apology, it's a defence. A real acknowledgement names the specific thing that went wrong. 'Your parcel didn't arrive on your daughter's birthday. That shouldn't have happened.' Some customers only need this step. They already know it's not personal — they need to know you know.

Step two: verify. This is the step most companies skip. Ask a few short questions to make sure you're solving the right problem. 'Can I check the order number?' 'Was it charged to the same card?' Most support scripts jump straight to a refund, and half the time the refund is for the wrong issue entirely.

Step three: resolve. Offer ONE specific thing, not three vague ones. 'I've refunded the €89 to your card — you'll see it in three working days, and I've flagged your account so this can't repeat.' Notice the sentence: what happened, when it will be fixed, and how you've protected them from a repeat. Few customer-service replies contain all three — most contain none.

1. According to the text, why do most complaints fail?
 - (A) Customers are unreasonable
 - (B) Companies answer step three before doing steps one and two
 - (C) There aren't enough support staff
2. What's wrong with 'sorry you feel that way'?
 - (A) Nothing
 - (B) It's a defence, not an apology
 - (C) It's too formal

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3. Which step do most companies skip?

- (A) Acknowledge
- (B) Verify
- (C) Resolve

Vocabulary in context

Match the phrase to the meaning.

acknowledge (a problem) — name it clearly without defending

verify — ask short questions to confirm the real issue

resolve — offer one specific fix

flag an account — mark it so a problem can't repeat

True / False / Not Given

Based only on the text, choose the correct option.

1. The three steps can be done in any order.

- (A) True
- (B) False
- (C) Not Given

2. 'Sorry you feel that way' is a real apology.

- (A) True
- (B) False
- (C) Not Given

3. Some customers only need the acknowledgement step.

- (A) True
- (B) False
- (C) Not Given

4. Verification usually takes at least ten questions.

- (A) True
- (B) False
- (C) Not Given

5. A good resolution sentence names the fix, the timing and how repeats are prevented.

- (A) True
- (B) False
- (C) Not Given

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React to the text

Discuss briefly.

1. Which step does YOUR company (or a company you know) skip most often?

2. Is there a fourth step you'd add?

Scan for meaning

Find the phrase in the text that matches each definition.

1. name a problem without defending yourself

2. confirm the real issue with short questions

3. offer one specific fix

4. mark an account so a problem can't repeat

Vocabulary · Complaint & recovery language

a complaint — a formal expression that something went wrong

a refund — the money reimbursed to the client

a replacement — a new item to replace the faulty one

a chargeback — the client disputes the charge with their bank (bad for you)

goodwill — an extra gesture not required — free shipping, credit, upgrade

a formal escalation — the complaint moved up to a manager or a regulator

to acknowledge — name the friction point clearly, without being defensive

to verify — confirm the details with short questions

to resolve — close the issue with one specific action

to escalate — pass the case up the chain

to compensate — offer something (money, credit, upgrade) to make up for it

to follow up — contact the client proactively after the fix

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practice

Complete each sentence with *ONE* word or phrase.

1. I'd like to ____ the delay — that shouldn't have happened.

2. Before I ____, can I check the order number?

3. I've processed the ____ — €89 back to your card in three working days.

4. As a ____ gesture, I've added €20 credit to your account.

5. If you'd prefer, I can ____ this to my manager today.

6. I'll ____ on Friday to make sure everything's now sorted.

Collocations · complaint verbs

Match the verb with the noun/phrase.

- issue** — a refund
- resolve** — a complaint
- offer** — a replacement
- escalate** — to a manager
- flag** — an account
- restore** — trust

Odd one out

Choose the word that does *NOT* belong.

1. refund · replacement · discount · discovery call
 - (A) refund
 - (B) replacement
 - (C) discount
 - (D) discovery call

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2. acknowledge · verify · resolve · postpone

(A) acknowledge

(B) verify

(C) resolve

(D) postpone

3. goodwill · credit · upgrade · invoice

(A) goodwill

(B) credit

(C) upgrade

(D) invoice

Word building · verb ↔ noun

Complete the pair.

1. to apologise → an ____

2. to compensate → ____

3. to resolve → a ____

4. to complain → a ____

5. to escalate → an ____



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Grammar · Quantifiers — some / any / much / many / few / little / most / no

- 1. some / any** — • some → positive: 'We received some complaints this week.' • any → negative and questions: 'We didn't receive any complaints.' / 'Did you receive any complaints?' • BUT some in polite offers/requests: 'Would you like some help?'
- 2. much / many / a lot of** — • many + countable plural: 'many customers, many refunds' • much + uncountable: 'much time, much information' • a lot of → both, in positive sentences: 'a lot of complaints / a lot of feedback'
- 3. few / a few · little / a little** — • a few = some (positive): 'We had a few complaints — nothing serious.' • few = almost none (negative feel): 'We had few complaints — under 5.' • a little = some (positive, uncountable): 'a little patience' • little = almost none: 'little patience'
- 4. most / no** — • most of + specific group: 'Most of our customers renew.' / most + general: 'Most customers renew.' • no + noun (strong): 'We received no complaints this month.' • not any (softer): 'We didn't receive any complaints.'
- 5. Customer-service safe patterns** — • 'Some of our customers reported this — thank you for flagging it.' ■ • 'A few users experienced a delay.' ■ (small number, no drama) • 'Very few customers were affected.' ■ (reassures without lying) • ■ Avoid: 'many customers had this issue' when you mean 'a few' — it inflames.

Exercise A — some or any?

Complete with *some* or *any*.

1. We received ____ negative reviews this week — all handled.

2. We haven't had ____ chargebacks this quarter.

3. Did you receive ____ email from support today?

4. Would you like ____ help with the return?

5. There isn't ____ record of your call — could you send me the reference?

Exercise B — much, many, or a lot of?

Complete with the *right quantifier*.

1. How ____ complaints did we get this week?

2. There isn't ____ time before the client calls back.

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3. We got ____ feedback after the launch — mostly positive.

4. I don't have ____ information yet — I'll write back once I do.

5. How ____ patience do you think this case needs?

Exercise C — few vs a few · little vs a little

Choose the version that gives the right FEELING.

1. (reassuring) 'Very ____ customers experienced the outage — under 200 in total.'

2. (reassuring) 'We had ____ complaints — nothing serious.'

3. (negative — 'almost none') 'The team had ____ patience left after 6 hours of angry calls.'

4. (positive — 'some') 'Give the case manager ____ time — she'll come back with a proper answer.'

Exercise D — write the customer-service reply

Rewrite each blunt sentence into a customer-service sentence using a quantifier that reassures without lying.

1. 'Lots of people had this problem.' (bad — inflames)

2. 'We got no negative feedback.' (bad — sounds like a lie)

3. 'There's not much I can do.' (bad — gives up)

4. 'Any customer would be upset.' (bad — abstract)

Exercise E — a customer-service email

Write a 4-sentence customer-service email using AT LEAST four different quantifiers.

1. The customer's parcel is 5 days late.

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Exercise F — find and fix

Each sentence has *ONE* quantifier mistake.

1. We didn't receive some complaints today.

2. I don't have many information about your case yet.

3. Very a few customers reported this issue.

4. Most of customers renew after year one.

Listening · The 1-star review that changed the restaurant

A restaurant owner talks about the *ONE* 1-star Google review that made her rewrite her whole complaint policy. Listen for what the customer complained about, what she did wrong the first time, and the three changes she made afterwards.

pre

Have you ever written a bad online review? Did the company reply — and did the reply change your mind?

What's the **WORST** way you've seen a business reply to a bad review?

gist

1. What was the customer's original complaint?

2. What did the owner do wrong in the first reply?

3. What are the three changes the owner made afterwards?

detail

1. Why did the customer edit the review from 2 stars to 1?

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2. What does the owner now write in the FIRST line of every reply?

3. How many customers, per year, has this policy converted from angry to loyal, according to the owner?

Third listen — read between the lines

Answer from what is *IMPLIED*.

1. Is the owner primarily solving for the ONE angry customer, or for the twenty future customers reading the reply?

2. Would her approach work for every complaint?

Useful language from the audio

Match each phrase to what it does.

"Thank you for writing this — I read every one personally." — opens with acknowledgement, in the first sentence

"We were unusually busy that night." — the defensive line that made things worse

"I'm sorry we let you down on Friday." — names the specific thing without defending

"Come back — dinner for two, on me." — the make-good, offered privately by DM

"The reply was worse than the wait." — the sentence that made her rewrite her policy

Voice A: So — the ONE 1-star review that changed everything. Tell me.

Voice B: 45-minute wait for food, Friday night, place was packed. The food, when it arrived, was fine. Service was distracted. She paid in full, said nothing, and 24 hours later there was a 2-star Google review. My first reply — I'm embarrassed now — was defensive. I wrote 'we were unusually busy that night, and all our staff were doing their best'. Within an hour, she edited the review down to 1 star and added: 'the reply was worse than the wait'. That sentence has been in my head for two years.

Voice A: What changed?

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Voice B: Three things. One: I now reply personally to every review under 4 stars, within 24 hours. Two: I never defend in the public reply. I acknowledge, I name the specific thing, I don't make excuses. 'Thank you for writing this — I read every one of these personally, and I'm sorry we let you down on Friday.' Three: the make-good is offered privately, in a DM. 'Come back — dinner for two, on me.' Never in public. The public reply is for the twenty future customers reading it. The DM is for the one customer in front of you.

Voice A: Does it work?

Voice B: About 40 a year accept the make-good. 70% of those become regulars. It costs me maybe €2,000 in food. It saves me — I can't even calculate. A 4.9 rating instead of a 4.3, on the platform where 80% of my bookings come from.

Fourth listen — fill the gaps

Complete the exact phrases from the audio.

1. The reply was ____ than the ____.

2. I read every one of these ____.

3. I'm sorry we let you ____ on Friday.

4. Come back — dinner for two, on ____.

5. The public reply is for the twenty future customers ____ it.

Speaking · The 60-second complaint recovery

Choose ONE recent complaint (real or realistic). Prepare a 60-second oral recovery. Use AT LEAST one acknowledgement, one verification question, one specific resolution — and AT LEAST two different quantifiers (some / any / much / many / few / little / most / no).

Scene: The wrong-size boots (from lead-in)

A: You: customer service. It's Thursday evening, wedding is Saturday. Save this customer.

B: You: Marta. React — accept the fix, push for more, or walk away.

Scene: The double charge

A: You: customer service. Refund AND explain in one calm minute.

B: You: João. React — accept, push for goodwill, or escalate.

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**Scene:** The 2-star Google review

A: You: the owner. Reply in ONE minute out loud — public version.

B: You: a future customer reading the reply. Judge — would you book or scroll on?

Class discussion

Discuss briefly.

Which is worse for your business — the one angry customer, or the twenty future customers reading how you replied?

In your culture, is 'the customer is always right' true, or is it more nuanced?

What is the ONE customer-service rule you'd introduce tomorrow if you ran a small shop?

Role-play · replying to a public review

Student A: a business owner. Student B: an angry customer who has just posted a 2-star public review. A writes a 3-sentence public reply out loud (acknowledge → don't defend → invite to DM). B is the same customer, reading it. B decides: leave it at 2 stars, edit down to 1, or edit up to 3.

Scene: A late delivery on a birthday

A: Student A: owner. Reply publicly in 3 sentences, offer make-good in DM.

B: Student B: the customer. React — soften, harden, or update the review.

Scene: A rude waiter

A: Student A: restaurant owner. Reply publicly — no excuses about staffing.

B: Student B: the customer. React — accept a private make-good, or double down publicly.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



Workbook — home practice



1. Vocabulary gap-fill

Complete each sentence with **ONE** word or phrase from the box.

Word bank: acknowledge · verify · refund · goodwill · escalate · follow up

1. I'd like to ____ the delay — that shouldn't have happened.

2. Before I resolve this, can I ____ the order number?

3. I've processed the ____ — €89 back to your card in three working days.

4. As a ____ gesture, I've added €20 credit to your account.

5. If you'd prefer, I can ____ this to my manager today.

6. I'll ____ on Friday to make sure everything's now sorted.

2. Quantifiers — some / any / much / many / few / little / most / no

Complete each customer-service sentence with the best quantifier.

1. We received ____ complaints this week — all handled.

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-
2. We haven't had ____ chargebacks this quarter.
-
3. There isn't ____ time before the client calls back.
-
4. How ____ negative reviews did we get last month?
-
5. Very ____ customers experienced the outage — under 200 in total. (reassuring)
-
6. We had ____ ____ complaints — nothing serious. (small number, no drama)
-
7. Give the case manager ____ ____ time — she'll come back with a proper answer.
-
8. ____ customers renew after year one — retention is our strongest number.
-

3. Choose the version that will land better

In each pair, which reply will a real customer accept?

1. Opening a complaint reply:
(A) 'Sorry you feel that way.'
(B) 'Your parcel didn't arrive on your daughter's birthday — that shouldn't have happened, and I'm sorry.'
2. After a double charge:
(A) 'We've refunded you.'
(B) 'I've refunded the €89 to your card — you'll see it in three working days, and I've flagged your account so this can't repeat.'
3. Reply to a 2-star Google review:
(A) 'We were unusually busy that night — all our staff were doing their best.'
(B) 'Thank you for writing this — I read every one personally, and I'm sorry we let you down on Friday.'
4. Reassuring during an outage:
(A) 'Lots of people had this problem.'
(B) 'A few users experienced this — including you. We've fixed the cause and I've credited your account.'

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



4. Find and fix the mistake

Each sentence has *ONE* quantifier mistake.

1. We didn't receive some complaints today.

2. I don't have many information about your case yet.

3. Very a few customers reported this issue.

4. Most of customers renew after year one.

5. Listening — the 1-star review that changed the restaurant

A restaurant owner talks about the *ONE* 1-star review that made her rewrite her whole complaint policy. Decide what she got *WRONG* the first time and what she now does *INSTEAD*.

1. What did the owner write in her **FIRST** reply that made things worse?

2. What is her **NEW** opening line for every reply under 4 stars?

3. Where is the make-good ('dinner for two, on me') now offered — public reply or private DM?

Voice A: The **ONE** 1-star review that changed everything — tell me.

Voice B: 45-minute wait, Friday night. Food was fine when it arrived. She paid, left, and posted a 2-star review the next day. My first reply — I'm embarrassed now — was defensive: 'we were unusually busy that night, all our staff were doing their best'. Within an hour she edited the review down to 1 star and wrote: 'the reply was worse than the wait'. That sentence has been in my head for two years.

Voice A: So what did you change?

Voice B: Three things. One: I reply personally to every review under 4 stars within 24 hours. Two: I acknowledge, name the specific thing, no excuses. 'Thank you for writing this — I'm sorry we let you down on Friday.' Three: the make-good is offered privately, in a DM. 'Come back — dinner for two, on me.' Never in public. The public reply is for the twenty future customers reading it. The DM is for the one customer in front of you.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



6. Writing — turn a bad review into a public reply

You're the owner of a small business. A customer has posted this 2-star review: 'Ordered a birthday cake for Saturday. Arrived on Sunday. Ruined the party. Very disappointed.' Write a 3-sentence PUBLIC reply that acknowledges, does not defend, and invites them to DM for a make-good. Then write the 2-sentence DM. Use AT LEAST two different quantifiers.

7. Case study reflection

Look ahead to Case Study 7 (Florista Alma). Answer briefly.

1. The bakery has lost 52 subscribers in 6 months — silently. Nobody complained. What is your first question to Sofia?

2. Sofia refuses to compete on price. Name ONE non-price advantage you'd protect first.

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Answer key — Class Book

Reading · The three-step complaint recovery

1. (B) Companies answer step three before doing steps one and two
2. (B) It's a defence, not an apology
3. (B) Verify
1. (B) False
2. (B) False
3. (A) True
4. (C) Not Given
5. (A) True
1. Model: step two, verify. We jump to refund because it's fast, but we refund the wrong thing half the time and the customer still complains.
2. Model: step four — proactive follow-up. A 48-hour 'just checking everything's now sorted' email flips a mediocre recovery into a loyal customer.
1. acknowledge
2. verify
3. resolve
4. flag an account

Vocabulary · Complaint & recovery language

1. acknowledge
2. verify
3. refund
4. goodwill
5. escalate
6. follow up
1. (D) discovery call
2. (D) postpone
3. (D) invoice
1. apology
2. compensation
3. resolution
4. complaint / complainant
5. escalation

Grammar · Quantifiers — some / any / much / many / few / little / most / no

1. some
2. any
3. any
4. some
5. any
1. many
2. much
3. a lot of
4. much
5. much
1. few
2. a few
3. little
4. a little
1. Model: 'A few users experienced this — including you. We've fixed the underlying cause and I've credited your account.'
2. Model: 'We received very few negative reports — yours was one of them, and I appreciate you writing in.'
3. Model: 'There are a few things I can do straight away — a full refund, a 3-month credit, or a same-day replacement. Which works best for you?'

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class



4. Model: 'Any customer in your position would be frustrated, and honestly, I would be too — here's what we're doing about it today.'

1. Model: 'A few of our routes had delays this week — yours was one of them, and I'm sorry. There isn't much I can do about the shipping company itself, but I've upgraded your next order to next-day at no cost, and I've refunded most of the shipping fee from this order. Very few customers see this — you shouldn't have been one of them.'

1. We didn't receive any complaints today.

2. I don't have much information about your case yet.

3. Very few customers reported this issue.

4. Most customers renew after year one. (OR: Most of our customers renew after year one.)

Listening · The 1-star review that changed the restaurant

1. 45-minute wait for food on a Friday night. The food was fine, service was distracted. She paid in full, left, and posted a 2-star review the next day.

2. She defended — 'we were unusually busy, all our staff were doing their best' — and the customer edited the review down to 1 star out of frustration.

3. (1) she now replies personally to every review under 4 stars, within 24 hours. (2) she never defends in a public reply — only acknowledges. (3) she offers a specific make-good ('come back — dinner for two, on me') by DM, never in public.

1. Because the defensive reply made her feel unheard. She said: 'the reply was worse than the wait.'

2. 'Thank you for writing this — I read every one of these personally, and I'm sorry we let you down on [date].'

3. About 40 — she tracks the ones who accept the make-good and come back. Around 70% become regulars.

1. The twenty future customers. She says the review is 'a public conversation' — the specific customer might not come back, but the tone of the reply decides whether the next twenty book.

2. Not automatically. For a real safety issue (hair in food, allergy mistake), she'd go further — a call, a full refund, a formal write-up. The 3-step reply is for service-quality complaints, not safety.

1. worse / wait

2. personally

3. down

4. me

5. reading

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Answer key — Workbook

1. Vocabulary gap-fill

1. acknowledge
2. verify
3. refund
4. goodwill
5. escalate
6. follow up

2. Quantifiers — some / any / much / many / few / little / most / no

1. some
2. any
3. much
4. many
5. few
6. a few
7. a little
8. Most

3. Choose the version that will land better

1. (B) 'Your parcel didn't arrive on your daughter's birthday — that shouldn't have happened, and I'm sorry.'
2. (B) 'I've refunded the €89 to your card — you'll see it in three working days, and I've flagged your account so this can't repeat.'
3. (B) 'Thank you for writing this — I read every one personally, and I'm sorry we let you down on Friday.'
4. (B) 'A few users experienced this — including you. We've fixed the cause and I've credited your account.'

4. Find and fix the mistake

1. We didn't receive any complaints today.
2. I don't have much information about your case yet.
3. Very few customers reported this issue.
4. Most customers renew after year one. (OR: Most of our customers renew after year one.)

5. Listening — the 1-star review that changed the restaurant

1. She defended — 'we were unusually busy, all our staff were doing their best' — and the customer edited the review down from 2 to 1 star and added 'the reply was worse than the wait'.
2. 'Thank you for writing this — I read every one of these personally, and I'm sorry we let you down on [date].'
— acknowledgement, in the first sentence, no defence.
3. Private DM only. The public reply is for the twenty future customers reading it. The DM is for the one customer in front of you.

7. Case study reflection

1. Model: 'When was the last time a driver actually TALKED to any of the 52 who cancelled? — because silent churn almost always means we stopped noticing them before they stopped paying.'
2. Model: the driver who knows every customer's name. That's the thing BreadFlow can't copy, ever. Fund whatever protects that — not a discount.

Ask the teacher — notes to bring to class