

Sales Coach Series

First published in Infomatics

Bearing bad news

First published on 01/06/2000

The Dilemma

I have upset one of my biggest customers after delivering a project late. They claim we mis-managed the situation and should have informed them of the problems earlier but I didn't want to involve them. What should I have done?

The Coaching

Nobody likes giving or receiving bad news but at least customers can work around bad news shared early. Need an example? Your car is in the garage until Friday. On Friday afternoon you discover the car won't be ready til Monday. You would have been unhappy if the garage had told you before but now you are livid - and think of the extra hassle arranging a pool car at short notice.

Telling the customer promptly when there may be a problem is sound account management and will command greater respect than burying your head in the sand. This doesn't mean sharing every minor panic along the way but identifying real hazards and communicating proactively with the customer. Next time a problem occurs consider the following:

- What are the possible outcomes and what actions are needed by your company to influence each? Be realistic about timescales
- If there is likelihood of a problem call the customer. Explain the issue truthfully (you don't have to share every minute detail but DON'T LIE!) and inform the customer of your contingency actions -they need to know you are doing something!
- Involve the customer in the problem resolution. Work together to find the best solution for their business - and be flexible.

Remember - if there's a problem the customer will find out sooner or later - which leaves you in control?