

# Writing Effective Business Letters

## Introduction

Writing effective business communications can make a positive contribution to the way a business performs, and how it is perceived by its staff, customers and suppliers.

Whilst e-mails have become the most prolific form of business communication, the letter and other hard copy media are still more effective when used well.

The visual impact of the letter should not be dismissed as old fashioned.

A visually attractive letter, well written, is a powerful subliminal marketing tool.

This simple guide should help you get to grips with writing effective letters and other hard copy communications. It might also help you write more effective e-mails on the way.

The guide may seem lengthy and perhaps very basic, but our aim is give a good foundation and a process that should quickly become second nature.

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The guide can be used as a simple aide memoir or easily re-drafted into a company policy document. It could also be useful for new staff in adopting the corporate style for written communications.

This guide stemmed from a client's need to establish a uniform and consistent corporate style for its written communications, as well as providing guidance to all staff on writing effective communications, much of which had a contractual dimension to them. The target audience ranged from senior executives to site workers.

The guide covers:-

- Memos
- Letters

The construction of an ideal letter/memo by looking at the following:

- Format
- Structure
- Content
- Readability

The purpose of writing a business letter/memo to:

- Inform
- Persuade
- Build goodwill
- Answer/make a complaint

Some common mistakes to avoid

Examples of good and poor communications

Some examples for you to test your knowledge.

## **A guide to the form of communication used in various situations**

### **E-mail**

Use only for informal personal communication on indirect business related issues. This is probably a contentious issue but e-mail should not be seen as the definitive substitute for hard copy communications - Unless very specific policy/guidelines are imposed to cover their use in all circumstances.

### **Memo.**

Use exclusively as an employee to employee communication.

It is an informal **internal** letter.

Use in any situation where a business issue needs to be communicated within the organisation.

### **Letter**

Use for all communications with recipients outside the organisation.

Use for formal communications to staff within the organisation.

### **Report**

An investigative document prepared by the organisation for a specific purpose. Its distribution will be dictated by its contents and purpose.

Report writing is not covered in this guide.

## **Some common factors in a well-written letter**

### **Format/Appearance**

- Consistent in style and layout
- Easy to navigate
- Reflects the corporate style – appearance, structure & content
- Be a good advertisement for the organisation

### **Structure**

- Should have a logical beginning, middle and end
- Use margin headings when covering multiple points/subjects in one letter
- Start a new paragraph for each new subject/topic
- Avoid paragraphs of more than 5-6 sentences
- Avoid sentences of more than 15 –20 words
- Note any attachments, appendices or enclosures at the end of the letter

### **Content**

- Address letters to a named person wherever possible – do not use ‘For the Attention of .....’ if you can avoid it.
- State the subject of the letter clearly after ‘Dear whoever’ - usually a heading
- At the beginning of the letter, usually the first paragraph, summarise the reason you are writing the letter
- The first sentence of each paragraph should introduce/state the topic of the paragraph
- The content should progress logically

### **Readability**

Your letter should be:

- Easy to read – short sentences, one topic per paragraph, clear headings, easy to navigate
- Show a human dimension – friendly but unemotional and objective
- Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Correctly punctuated with no grammar or spelling errors
- No ambiguity or room for mis-interpretation.
- Rounded off in a polite/friendly way to leave a lasting good impression
- Clearly marked at the end with the name of the letter’s originator together with his/her position in the company

## **Preliminaries before you start your letter**

### Are you responding to - or initiating the communication?

If **responding**, make sure you have given the recipient all they want to know. The following may help:

- Use the correspondent's letter/memo/e-mail as the basis for your reply by underlining the points they make to ensure you do not omit responding to any of their points.

When **initiating** a letter/memo/e-mail take a little time to actually plan what you want to say and how best to convey the message(s). This will save you time later and make your message more effective.

Try and put yourself into the position of the recipient so they will understand your intent and therefore be more likely to act or respond in the way you want.

### Can you use your knowledge of the person/company to help the construction of the letter?

- Will the recipient be able to act or will they have to refer to someone else?
- Is the recipient's knowledge of the subject as thorough as yours?
- Is the recipient pro or anti you, the company or the subject matter?

### What is it that you want to say?

- List the key points
- Is there a need for supporting information/explanation?
- What response are you seeking?
- Is there a need to impose time constraints?

### What will the recipient expect/need to know?

- Is it the same as you are planning to say?
- Anticipate their response and answer any questions that your reply may raise – it may save multiple exchanges

## Doing it!

Try and avoid rushing into the communication – unless it is a very basic message you are seeking to convey.

Brain dump all the points you want to make

If you are replying, do all the points fit/match?

What tone of communication are you seeking?

Assertive	Conciliatory
Persuasive	Informative
Accepting	Complaining

Now try a draft

- 1<sup>st</sup> para setting the scene
- 2<sup>nd</sup> para setting the tone
- Body sets out the facts in logical order
- Last Para sets out the action you seek

Now read it as though you were the recipient

- How do I feel about receiving it?
- Does it engage me positively?
- Does it tell me everything I need to know?
- Does it tell me what is expected of me?

Now finalise with any changes.

- Can I edit out anything - even redundant words.
- Does it look good?
- No Typographical errors
- No spelling or punctuation mistakes
- Does it read really well

Do you feel proud to send it!

## The Memo – What should it look like?

Use your organisation's headed continuation paper for first page of a memo. Try and make memos no more than one page in length, if it is longer use plain continuation paper.

If you want to use this document as a company guide – change the document layout to suit your style, if it is different.

### INTERNAL MEMORANDUM

Our Ref:

**To:** First name & Surname Do *not* use "For the attention of"

**From:** First name & Surname

**Date:** Day Month Year

**cc:** First name & Surname, First name & Surname etc

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**Subject:**

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*1<sup>st</sup> Paragraph sets the scene for the communication, explains background and perhaps the reason for writing.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> Paragraph states the objective of the memo, opening with a topic sentence followed with supporting details or information.*

*Subsequent paragraphs, if any should provide further but lesser supporting information.*

*Final paragraph should state what the writer expects or would like to happen next.*

*Sign off using  
Regards*

← Leave 2 blank lines

← Allow 4 blank lines  
for signature

fully justified

Christian & Surname  
Job Title

**The memo – an example**

**INTERNAL MEMORANDUM**

Our Ref: 0761/FAF/KG

**To:** Peter Jones

**From:** David Smythe-Jones

**Date:** 28 February 2009

**Cc:** Benjamin Oliver, Peter Morris

*Typeface should always be the corporate standard  
We have used a serif font as they are considered easier to read than sans serif.*

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**Subject: Nocturnal Data Centre – “*Company name*” exposure to penalties**

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The contract has serious penalty implications. Progress is significantly behind schedule. We are approaching the projected half way point for the contract. I suggest an internal meeting to agree a corporate stance to mitigate our exposure.

The major cause of slippage has been the incompleteness of the design drawings. This has necessitated substantial extra detail design work to be undertaken by both the subcontractors and us. While we have been claiming the cost of this work, the continued scale of the extra design work is, I believe, now likely to impact the completion date.

The high profile of this project, I feel, necessitates careful consideration of the options to ensure “*Company name*” maintains its excellent relationship with the client.

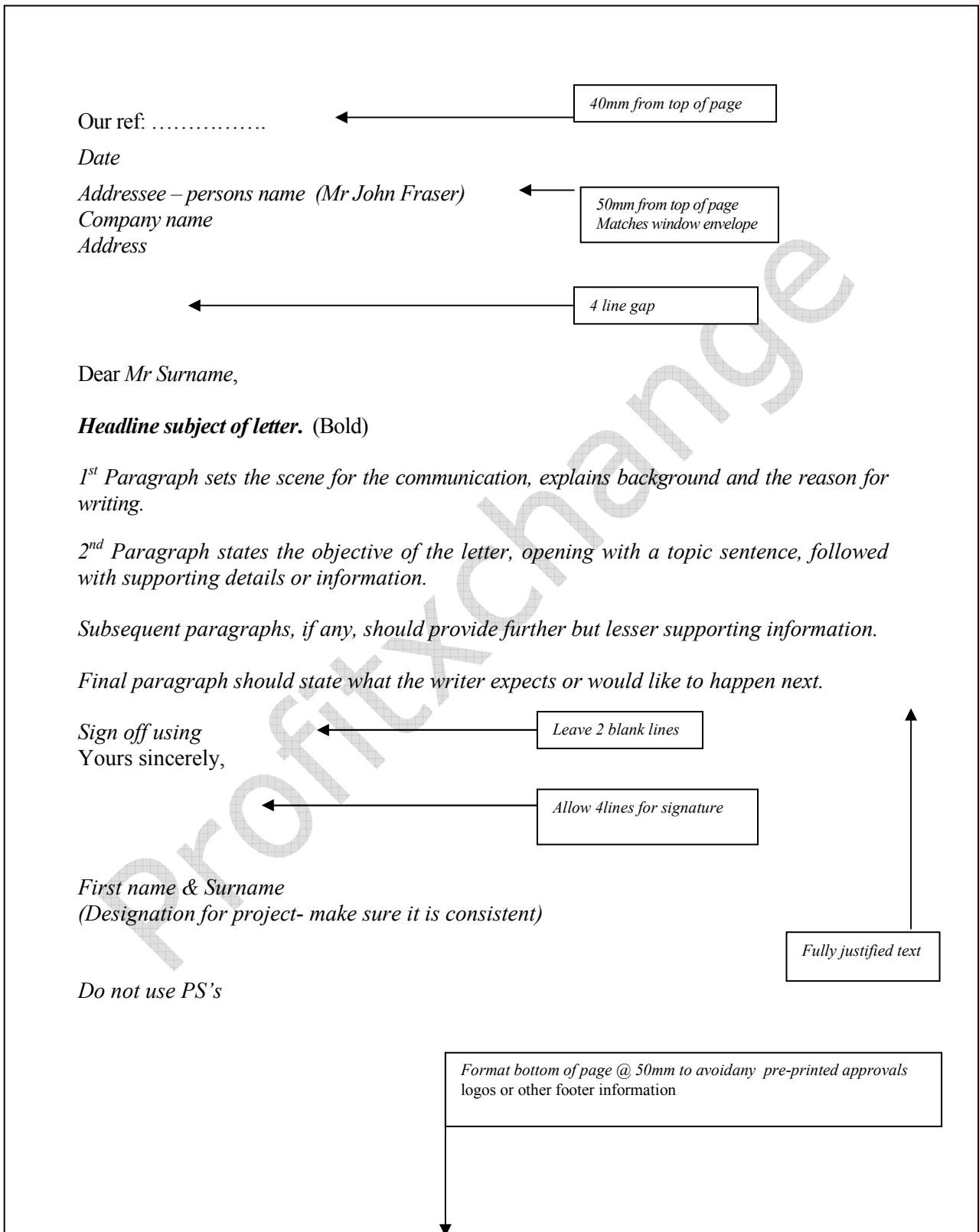
I would like to convene a meeting in the boardroom on July 4<sup>th</sup> to pool our views and agree how we should take this issue forward.

Please confirm that you can attend the meeting.

Regards

David Smythe-Jones  
Project Manager

**The Letter – what should it look like?**



## Letter example

Our ref: C 2000/faf/DO110. Response to 21/03/2009

June 23 2009

Mr John Upstart  
Universal Engineering plc  
Regus House  
113 Harrow Road  
Derby  
DB1 6RT

← *Typeface must always be  
the corporate standard*

Dear Mr Upstart

### **Harrow Road Project: Cold room refrigeration.**

I am responding to your letter dated June 18<sup>th</sup> in which you expressed concern regarding the apparent change in design for the cold room refrigeration system and additional costs you have incurred.

Our stance remains that the extra work was a consequence of your misinterpretation of the Architects' drawings. I have reviewed all the drawing revisions and associated specifications and the access requirements for the cold rooms which have remained unchanged throughout.

We instructed your site team to correct the piping runs to allow for the specified vehicular access into the cold room. At the time your site supervisor acknowledged the problem and undertook the necessary rework promptly and efficiently. (Our site meeting notes of February 25<sup>th</sup> referred to this item.)

I believe I have reviewed the situation fully and do not feel there are any grounds for a claim for this work.

Yours sincerely

Alastair Rushton  
Contracts Manager

CC John Smith, ELC Ltd  
Peter Jones, "*Company name*" Accounts.

## Additional Guidance Notes

### Passive & Active styles

Adopting an active or passive writing style can help engender a more receptive attitude in the recipient.

Consider an active style when you are seeking to be assertive.

Consider a Passive style when you are seeking to be conciliatory.

What's the difference?

#### Active style

The site foreman will check all work done by sub-contractors.

The project manager sent the drawings to you

Do not eat on the work site

*The DOER precedes the DONE*

#### Passive style

All sub-contractor work will be checked by the site foreman.

The drawings were sent to you by the project manager

Eating is not permitted on the work-site

*The DONE precedes the DOER*

## Preparation

No matter how short a memo or letter might be, spend a few moments thinking its structure and content through. Consider yourself as the recipient – how would you like to receive it?

## Salutations

Avoid using “For the attention of.....”

Always try to use ‘Dear *Named Person*’, which always finishes with ‘Yours sincerely’.

If you do have to use ‘Dear Sir’, then use ‘Yours faithfully’ to finish the letter.

## Bullet Points

If there are a lot of references to make within the letter try and list them as bullet points

- J6087/FAF/contract xyz dated .....
- .....
- .....

## Phrases to avoid

With reference to.....

Please be advised.....*keep it more personal.*

We look forward to your early response/convenience,..... *set a deadline!*

In the mean time we remain.....

As regards.....

Should you require any further information.... *The letter should include all the relevant information.*

It will not be our fault...*use something like ... We will not be responsible for.....*

In the not too distant future --- use “soon”

At a later date.....use “later”

In due course.... I haven’t a clue when!

At this point in time.... Use “now”

## Spelling

Do not rely on the word processor spell checker it will not pick up the wrong word with right spelling, eg though instead of through, practice or practise.

## **Numbers**

Use words for one to ten; 11 and over use figures. Except in contracts - use both.

For ranges use 5-6%, not 5%-6% or in money £5-6m, not £5m-£6m.

## **Punctuation**

### **Apostrophes**

With singular nouns use 's also with plurals that do not end in s; eg children's

Use s' with plurals that end in s; eg lessees'

### **Full stop**

Indicates a break in the chain of thought

A comma should mark where a pause is appropriate.

### **Semi/colon/colon**

A slightly more positive pause than comma. Main use is to separate a list within a sentence.

However, the use of bullet points to create a list is preferred and easier to read.

### **Hyphens**

Use for writing fractions- Three-quarters

Some titles, vice-president

Points of the compass, north-east

Words that begin with anti-, non-

Separating identical letters, book-keeping

Co-operate, re-entry

### **But & and**

It has become acceptable to begin a sentence with And or But - but do it sparingly

### **Similar words – there are plenty more so just be aware.**

#### **Principle & Principal**

Principle is law or rule

Principal is the main or most important thing, eg vice-principal, interest on the principal sum

#### **Enquire & Inquire**

Enquire is the act of asking a question

Inquire undertaking an investigation.

*I am enquiring what time the inquiry starts.*

#### **Affect & effect**

Affect means to touch or impinge upon

Effect means to carry out or put into effect.

*We effected sweeping changes that affected the whole project.*

#### **Practice & Practise**

Practice is the habit

Practise is the learning of the habit.

#### **Different**

Use different from – when emphasising difference

Use different to – when emphasising similarity.

## **Some pointers to create a persuasive letter**

All the normal basic business letter writing rules apply.

However, a persuasive letter will usually benefit from some additional thought.

Bear in mind that the recipient may be a reluctant reader in that you may be rejecting some request, maybe a complaint, trying to change a point of view or sell an idea. ( We are not considering direct marketing letters)

### **Key steps**

*Get the readers attention;* open the letter with a positive straight forward statement, preferably in the first paragraph. ( do not exaggerate)

*Build the argument* logically with facts. It might be reference to terms & conditions, codes of practice, meeting minutes or your views.

*State your position,* conclusion, view or the action you seek. e.g what do you want to happen as a consequence of this letter.

*End positively,* try and avoid anything that could be construed as conciliatory – unless you really feel you have to.

## **Responding to a letter of complaint.**

Consider any letter of complaint with an open mind. Switch off any emotional or defensive reaction. Whether the complaint is justified or not, the complainant feels aggrieved

A complaint letter is a clear statement that the complainant wants to give you a second chance. Use it to maximum effect, whoever is at fault.

Investigate the complaint objectively – it will show in your response.

Open the response by expressing your appreciation that they have brought the situation to your attention. If the situation needs time to investigate write and let them know and keep them informed on progress.

Lead the response with good news – if there is any.

Offer an explanation as to what caused the situation. Never make excuses. If possible indicate the action that will be taken to prevent a repetition.

If the company was at fault make a positive apology.

State clearly what restitution you will make, never penny pinch.  
Or why no action is justified.

Be tactful and honest throughout.

Make sure the letter is one you would be happy to receive.

# Working exercises

## Working with punctuation

Read the lines below and add the appropriate punctuation.

For this course please bring a pen paper the invitation and the slides

Get off that scaffold its unsafe shouted the vice president.

Bob get that wrench for me I need it to tighten this bolt

You will see the pretty young lady on the left as you enter the office

What was it you said I did not understand

Peters idea is a very good one

Workmen must wear full safety kit including hard hats and harnesses above ground level

Our advertising was very good but we only got one enquiry.

## Working with punctuation 2 answers

The lines below with the appropriate punctuation added.

For this course please bring a pen, paper, the invitation and the slides.

*Use commas to divide a list, and substitutes for a comma; full stop @ the end.*

“Get off that scaffold its unsafe,” shouted the clerk of works.

*“ ” encloses the verbal statement; comma separates from who said it; full stop @ end.*

“Bob get that wrench for me, I need it to tighten this bolt.”

*“ ” encloses the statement; comma separates the different elements Bob and me, ;full stop @ end.*

You will see the pretty, young lady, on the left, as you enter the office.

*Comma separates two adjectives; commas separate extra detail; full stop @ end.*

“What was it you said?” I did not understand.

*“ ?”encloses the question and ? provides full stop I..... is second sentence; full stop @ end.*

Peter’s idea is a very good one

*Apostrophe shows its Peter’s idea not a plural of Peter.*

Workmen must wear full safety kit, including hard hats and harnesses, above ground level.

*Commas used to separate additional detail; full stop @ end.*

Our advertising was very good, but we only got one enquiry.

*Comma separates two related statements; full stop @ end.*

Exercise

### **Drafting a Memo**

Briefing points

You are the project manager for the Nocturnal Data Centre Project

The design drawings have proved to be incomplete/inadequate

It is a very high profile, prestigious project important to “*Company name*” & your client

It’s running late

We are approaching the half way point

Potentially serious penalty implications

“*Company name*” & our subcontractors have been paid to rectify the design issues

We need to raise the profile of the potential problem with the Architects

We need input/guidance as to how we should manage damage limitation.

We need to invite key “*Company name*” staff to a meeting

Some invitees may have a only a passing knowledge of the project

Draft a memo setting up the meeting.

Exercise

### **Drafting a letter**

Briefing points

You are the Project Manager for the Harrow Road Cold Storage project.

There has been an ongoing disagreement with a subcontractor in connection with re-work you required him to undertake

The work relates to moving some pipe runs to give the required vehicular access.

The sub-contractors management have always felt the drawings had been changed after the work was done and thus is a chargeable extra.

They have now written formally to you asserting their position and seeking reimbursement

As a consequence of their letter you have thoroughly reviewed their assertions and the drawing revision history and cannot find any evidence to support their claim.

In reviewing the history you recall their site supervisor accepting the situation which is supported by the February 25<sup>th</sup> site meeting notes.

You must now write a reply.

ORIGINAL LETTER 1

Our ref: .....

9<sup>th</sup> September 2009

W A Foster PLC

12 Chester Road

Carlisle

CA2 3HP

**For the attention of Mr R H Campbell**

With reference to your letter of 29<sup>th</sup> August 2009. We confirm that we have received a list of your price increases that will apply from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009.

Please let us know whether you would be prepared to accept orders for larger quantities with deliveries split over a certain period eg every three or four months, we understand from your colleague Mr James Frost that if we order in larger quantities you would give us a larger discount.

Yours sincerely

John Smith  
Project Manager

Improved LETTER 1

Our ref: .....

9<sup>th</sup> September 2009

*Mr R H Campbell*  
W A Foster PLC  
12 Chester Road  
Carlisle  
CA2 3HP

*Dear Mr Campbell*

***Re: Price Increases***

*Thank you for your letter of 29<sup>th</sup> August 2009.* I confirm we have received your new price list showing the increases that will apply from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009.

Would you consider accepting orders for larger quantities with deliveries scheduled over a certain *period*, eg every three or four *months*. I understand from your colleague Mr James Frost that if we order in larger quantities you would improve our discount.

We look forward to hearing from you, confirming that you can accept our order arrangements, together with details of the discount that you will be able to offer.

Yours sincerely

John Smith  
Project Manager  
Chess Limited

ORIGINAL LETTER 2

Our ref: .....

9<sup>th</sup> September 2009

R L Dodds & Co Ltd  
14 Queen Street  
Bury St Edmunds  
Suffolk  
IP33 2AA

For the attention of Mr F J Lowe

Dear Sirs

Re: Buying in Quantity

For your information our quote for your order is as follows;

10 Executive Cases, No EF283, £40.00 each.  
20 Concertina Files, No FG 196, £10.00 each  
50 Pocket Diaries , No AF 203, £ 2.00 each.

We enclose our latest catalogue which contains our latest products.

Your soonest response to the above would be appreciated, in the meantime we remain.

Yours faithfully

Frank Smith  
Sales Director

Improved LETTER 2

Our ref: .....

Response to 29/08/2009

9<sup>th</sup> September 2009

Mr F J Lowe  
R L Dodds & Co Ltd  
14 Queen Street  
Bury St Edmunds  
Suffolk  
IP33 2AA

Dear Mr Lowe

Re: Buying in Quantity

*Thank you for your letter of 29<sup>th</sup> August 2009. Our quote for the items you listed is as follows:*

10 Executive Cases	No EF283	£40.00 each
20 Concertina Files	No FG 196	£10.00 each
50 Pocket Diaries	No AF 203	£ 2.00 each

We look forward to receiving your order for these items.

You will find examples of our full product range in the enclosed catalogue, together with our current price list.

Yours sincerely

Frank Smith  
Sales Director  
"Company name"

*Encl*

ORIGINAL LETTER 3

Our ref: .....

9<sup>th</sup> September 2009

Mr F J Lowe  
R L Dodds & Co Ltd  
14 Queen Street  
Bury St Edmunds  
Suffolk  
IP33 2AA

Dear Mr Lowe

PLEASE BE ADVISED THAT ACCORDING TO OUR RECORDS WE FIND THAT THE FOLLOWING INVOICES HAVE NOT BEEN PAID, INVOICE 176, INVOICE 203 AND INVOICE 707. I UNDERSTAND FROM YOUR COLLEAGUE WITH WHOM I SPOKE ON THE PHONE THAT THE REASON YOU HAVEN'T PAID IS THAT YOU WEREN'T SATISFIED WITH THE UNIT OR IT'S INSTALLATION, HOWEVER IF YOU WERE NOT SATISFIED WITH THE UNIT AND/OR IT'S INSTALLATION WHY DIDN'T YOU LET US KNOW IMMEDIATELY.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION WE HAVE IN OUR HANDS A DELIVERY NOTE SIGNED TO THE EFFECT THAT YOU WERE SATISFIED WITH THE GOODS AND WORK AT THE TIME WE LEFT THE SITE AND AS YOU HAVE ACCEPTED THE WORK AS SATISFACTORY PLEASE PAY AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

Yours faithfully

J R Jones  
Accounts Manager

Improved LETTER 3

Our ref: .....

9<sup>th</sup> September 2009

Mr F J Lowe  
R L Dodds & Co Ltd  
14 Queen Street  
Bury St Edmunds  
Suffolk  
IP33 2AA

Dear Mr Lowe

Re: Unpaid Invoices

Our records show that the following invoices have not been paid:

- Invoice 176 (2<sup>nd</sup> January 2009)
- Invoice 203 (3 February 2009)
- Invoice 707 (19<sup>th</sup> June 2009)

I learnt today, from your colleague, John Smith, that the reason payment has been withheld is that you were dissatisfied with the unit or its installation.

I am sorry you have had cause for complaint. However until contacting John we were unaware that there was any cause for dissatisfaction. Our delivery note was signed off as satisfactory.

To help me resolve the situation, would you please send me a full report of the problems. I will supervise immediate corrective action and liaise with you to collect payment before leaving site.

We are keen to give you the very best service and would ask that any shortcomings are reported immediately to me. Confirmation of any complaint should also be noted on the delivery note. Where goods are accepted we do appreciate payment in 14 days, in line with our trading terms.

Yours sincerely

J R Jones  
Accounts Manager  
"Company name"