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Organizational and Supervisory Apology Effectiveness: Apology Giving in Work Settings

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Abstract

We synthesize the interdisciplinary literature into a heuristic for crafting effective organizational and supervisory apologies (the OOPS four-component apology). In the first experiment, we demonstrate how an offense committed by an organization is perceived to be more egregious than an offense committed by a friend or supervisor. Furthermore, results did not support that OOPS apologies are unequally effective if issued by a friend, supervisor, or organization. In the second experiment, we test OOPS apology-training effectiveness. Results indicated that trained participants crafted more effective apologies. Our apology heuristic is an innovation for training business communicators how to apologize effectively.

Keywords

apology, customer relations, supervisor-subordinate communication

We are fallible. Mistakes happen. How, then, should we apologize—if at all—when those mistakes originate in the workplace? Business communication texts offer a lot of advice on the subject (e.g., Adler & Elmhorst, 2008; Locker & Kaczmarek, 2010); however, a wealth of empirical and conceptually sophisticated work done across disciplines on the subject provides an opportunity to reconsider a unified model of teaching business communicators the skill of apologizing based on updated research. Apology, an utterance intended to remedy a social disruption (Scher & Darley, 1997), has been

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investigated by communication scholars, linguists, philosophers, psychiatrists, psychologists, public relations scholars, sociologists, and theologians. The goal of our research was to synthesize major works across these disciplines into a heuristic model that could be used for training business communicators how to craft better apologies. We situate our research within a larger program of positive organizational scholarship that seeks to encourage virtuousness (i.e., moral excellence; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) in work settings. Our aim was to establish general guidelines for crafting apologies that increase the likelihood that apology recipients in work settings experience feelings of forgiveness toward offending supervisors or organizations, especially when offenses do not constitute crises.

The goal presented a paradox because, as Lazare (2004) noted, "apology is remarkably complex yet simple and straightforward at the same time" (p. 23). Like the problem of describing meaning itself (Grice, 1989), apology is complex because similar linguistic forms can take on different connotations when given by different speakers, when uttered to different audiences, or when placed within new cultural contexts (Bae & Park, 2011). Yet apologies across cultures, contexts, and relationships tend to have similar features (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Additionally, an essential feature of effective apologies is getting offended parties to recognize the apologizer's sincerity—a feeling that cannot be taught (Joyce, 1999; Smith, 2005, 2008). Those challenges aside, we endeavored to synthesize important works on apology across the social sciences and humanities in order to establish a general model for teaching business communicators how to harness the power of apology for the restoration and strengthening of key business relationships. Certainly, business communication textbooks offer a number of helpful tips on the topic (e.g., Clampitt, 2010). While many texts' recommendations align with the empirical research on the subject, others do not. In response, we endeavored to crystallize the extant research on apology giving in organizational and relationship science into a coherent teaching method.

In the following paragraphs, we synthesize the literature on apology in order to offer a four-component method for crafting effective apologies in work settings. Then, we argue that understanding apology effectiveness is a product of understanding how apologies change offended parties' feelings of forgiveness before and after receiving an apology. We then move to describe—and document experimentally—how the *offensiveness* of an action may be judged to be more severe when perpetrated by an organization rather than by a friend or a supervisor. Also, we describe why apologies likely produce *similar overall increases* (i.e., changes) in forgiveness across interpersonal and organizational sources and can therefore be thought of as similarly effective in eliciting feelings of forgiveness. Finally, the four-component method for crafting effective apologies in organizational contexts is tested in a second experimental study to verify whether this method can be taught.

Apology in Organizational Crisis Communication Research

The business and organizational communication literature is replete with empirical and theoretical explanations of how organizations can defend themselves rhetorically

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and symbolically from accusations (for a review, see Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). The label *organizational apologia* was given to a set of practical communication concepts that organizational representatives can employ in order to defend their collective's image, identity, and reputation without necessarily admitting fault (Benoit, 1997; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Despite similar etymology, apologia and apology are different. In apologia, the speaker's goal is to defend or restore the organization's image often through specific rhetorical strategies that function to deny responsibility; in apology, the speaker's goal is to remedy an offense—and restore relational rights and privileges—by accepting responsibility (Goffman, 1971; Smith, 2008). Given that much organizational apologia research is primarily concerned with how organizations respond to crisis and that businesses tend to be concerned about whether apologies can be incriminating in litigation (e.g., Patel & Reinsch, 2003; Tyler, 1997), apology is an uncommon topic of apologia research (for exceptions, see Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

However, this absence need not be the case because apologies are likely common in everyday business life. Presumably, organizations are not responding to crises most of the time. Organizational life is mundane, not laden with the kind of existential threats that warrant frequent crisis communication responses. Furthermore, managing the image of an organization is also important with internal organizational audiences, as it is not only and always with external audiences (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). The growing number and diversity of organizational stakeholders (Smudde & Courtright, 2011) make conflict more probable in a world that is being drawn closer together than ever before by globalization and advances in communication technologies (Morreale & Pearson, 2008). As Aquino, Grover, Goldman, and Folger (2003) observed, "Humans working together have endless opportunities to offend or harm others, intentionally or unintentionally" (p. 214). Thus, it stands to reason that crafting effective apologies is an important communication skill needed and used by professionals as they attempt to remedy the relatively minor offenses that are increasingly inevitable in everyday modern work life.

In foundational work, Goffman (1971) and Hearit (2006) explained that in many situations, admitting fault and issuing organizational apologies do not create substantial liability concerns. Examples may include media flaps, service interruptions, situations in which damages are determinable and as parts of legal settlements, or "situations in which guilt can be proved regardless of an apology" (Hearit, 2006, p. 54). Beyond these organizational crisis situations in which apologies are appropriate, apologies are likely to be appropriate in situations that do not constitute crises but do constitute a damaging of relational rights and privileges between supervisors and subordinates or between businesses and their customers. Clearly, the *severity* of an offense matters when determining whether apology is operationally appropriate (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Lazare, 2004; Smith, 2008). And certainly, there are egregious offenses that create catastrophe in terms of an organization's image, reputation, and sales (e.g., misleading sales practices; Stevens, 1999). However, when offenses are relatively minor (e.g., a salesperson misses a meeting with a client) and do not constitute a severe threat to an organization's image, then it stands to reason that apology can be a useful

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symbolic method for achieving a restoration and strengthening of relationships (Goffman, 1971; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Apology, then, constitutes a form of proactive business communication strategy for repairing minor reputational losses (Horsley & Barker, 2002). In fact, Bolkan and Daly (2009) found that organizationally issued apologies are significant predictors of customers' willingness to continue to patronize offending companies. However, these empirical findings conflict with some business communication texts' suggestion to avoid apologizing for minor offenses (e.g., Locker & Kaczmarek, 2010; Ober, 2009). In contrast, we agree with the nuance of Thill and Bovée (2013), who argue that the "scope of the apology depends on the magnitude of the mistake" (p. 267).

Apology in Interpersonal Relationship Research

To date, business communication researchers have offered little empirically derived or theoretically sophisticated advice on how to *give* apologies on behalf of a collective. However, scholars working in the domains of interpersonal relationship science have presented complex explanations and models that we reappropriate for work settings. For example, the sociologist Nicholas Tavuchis's (1991) book, *Mea Culpa*, has been cited by hundreds of journal articles and books. In his comprehensive analysis and description of apology, Tavuchis explained that apologies must include at minimum an admission of fault and expressions of regret and sorrow. He observed that apologies constitute "both the medium of exchange and the symbolic quid pro quo for, as it were, 'compensation'" (p. 33). Additionally, Tavuchis recommends that effective apologies refrain from supplying excuses, defense, justifications, or explanations for actions that offend and create the necessity for apology. Importantly, well-known business communication texts concur with these points (e.g., Adler & Elmhorst, 2008; Andrews & Baird, 2005; Clampitt, 2010); however, others do not mention the importance of expressing regret explicitly (e.g., Shwom & Snyder, 2012).

The psychiatrist Aaron Lazare (2004) offers an in-depth discussion of the importance of apologies for mending relationships and enhancing mental well-being. He argues, "Some people will not forgive and even appear to be psychologically unable to forgive without a prior apology, despite their knowledge that some degree of forgiveness could relieve them of their lifelong grudges" (p. 241). Similar to Tavuchis (1991), he recommends apologies must contain admission of fault and expressions of regret. Also, he recommends that apologies include promises of forbearance (e.g., *It won't happen again*) and offer reparation to offended parties in order to maximize the psychological effectiveness of apologies. Again, some business communication texts concur, although they describe this process somewhat differently (e.g., Ober, 2009; Shwom & Snyder, 2012).

Psychologists have explored the apology speech act in depth. For example, Scher and Darley (1997) analyzed the components of apology-as-speech-act to determine its essential parts and their independent and combined effects. Apology is a speech act, in part, because specific utterances (e.g., *I'm sorry*) are required in order to perform the function of the act. Scher and Darley tested four apology components (including an

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apology-functioning speech act, expression of speakers' responsibility, promise of forbearance, and an offer of reparations) to see whether each component had enough independent influence, in terms of creating forgiveness, to warrant their inclusion in effective apologies. Their findings suggest that each component contributes uniquely to enhancing the effectiveness of an apology. Similarly, McCullough, Root, Tabak, and Witvliet's (2009), McCullough et al.'s (1998), and McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal's (1997) extensive and rigorous psychological investigations of forgiveness reveal apology's mediating role in producing forgiveness after a perceived offense. The researchers' work demonstrates that apologies are effective in eliciting forgiveness to the extent that they also invite offended parties' empathy. When offended parties feel they themselves are alike or identify with the offender, forgiveness often follows. Feeling empathy toward a collective, though, may be much harder than feeling empathy toward another individual. This notion is elaborated on in a later section.

Empirical investigations in communication on apology often take the form of forgiveness or forgiveness-seeking research (e.g., for a review of forgiveness research, see Kelley & Waldron, 2006). Apology has been characterized as a *direct* forgiveness-seeking strategy (Kelley, 1998), in contrast to strategies such as humor and nonverbal assurance (Kelley & Waldron, 2005) for seeking the offended party's forgiveness. Since apology is often situated within the larger forgiveness process in communication research, it should be no surprise that these scholars offer nuanced, prescriptive suggestions for the content of apology messages. For example, Kelley and Waldron (2006) recommend that partners (not just offending parties) must accomplish three communication activities in the forgiveness process (not just apology process). The authors argue that (a) the emotional damage of the offense must be mutually recognized, (b) the relational meanings of the offense must be interpreted, and (c) the partners must "co-construct a relational future" (p. 328). Additionally, Kelley and Waldron (2005) reported apologies that explicitly acknowledge wrongdoing and offer compensation increase perceptions of relational intimacy among participants. Thus, there is similarity across major works in different fields on apology in that each suggests core sets of elements to effective apologies. Taken together, their recommendations represent best practices for *interpersonal* apologies seeking an offended party's forgiveness.

A Four-Component Model of Organizational and Supervisory Apology

We argue that the context of the workplace shapes the consequences of apology for those involved in ways similar to, and yet distinct from, interpersonal contexts. In the following paragraphs, we explain how apologies in interpersonal relationships are similar to apologies in work settings. Next, we explain our heuristic model for crafting effective organizational and supervisory apologies based on our review of the apology literature. Finally, we describe how apologies in work settings may be different from those in interpersonal contexts.

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Apologies in interpersonal and work contexts share a common discursive function and therefore are likely to have similar features. All apologies share a similar impetus in that apologies are initiated by a perceived offense and a desire to remedy that offense symbolically on the part of the offending party (Tavuchis, 1991). Furthermore, all apologies are speech acts (Scher & Darley, 1997). Austin (1962) explained that when we speak, we produce social accomplishments with our words. For example, under certain conditions, a judge can pronounce two persons to be married and that pronouncement calls into being a new social reality of marriage (Searle, 1969). Apologies are similar, because in order to perform the social reality of apology, a speaker must "acknowledge responsibility for having committed some offending act, and he or she must express regret about the offense" in order for the apology speech act to be performed (Scher & Darley, p. 129).

Organizational and Supervisory Apology: Best Practices

Given the breadth and depth of knowledge now available about the contents of effective apologies in interpersonal research, we synthesize and extend the interdisciplinary literature on apology in interpersonal contexts by offering a four-component model (labeled the OOPS model for short) for crafting effective apologies in work settings. Specifically, and in alignment with the extant research, our model includes four components: a narrative account of the offense, voicing regret with an explicit apology-functioning speech act, promising forbearance, and offering reparations. We explain each in detail in the following paragraphs.

The four components are divided into two parts: First, we recommend organizational and supervisory apologies contain minimally (a) a narrative account of the offense (e.g., *I damaged your trust when I . . .*) and (b) voicing of regret with an explicit apology-functioning speech act (e.g., *I am so sorry*). As Smith (2008) explains, "Apologies stand a better chance of bearing significant meaning if the offender and the offended share an understanding of the facts relevant to the transgression at issue" (p. 28). In fact, in a philosophical treatise, Smith (2005) outlined nine functions a full apology must accomplish. These first two recommendations fulfill at least seven of those functions. Also, Kelley and Waldron's (2005) research demonstrated that acknowledging wrongdoing explicitly increases feelings of relational intimacy after a transgression between partners. Furthermore, this point aligns with the spirit of Andrews and Baird's (2005) business communication text, which states, "Saying 'I'm sorry; I'll try not to do it again' *is rarely seen* as a sign of weakness or failure" (p. 164). In contrast with these points, the business communication textbook by Locker and Kienzler (2013) recommends apologies (*in our terms*, the apology-functioning speech act) should be made "only once" and not repeated (p. 345). Yet, from a message-effects perspective (Cappella & Street, 1989), if the goal is to elicit forgiveness via apology, and apology-functioning speech acts are an indispensible message feature of apology, then, that repetition (within limits) should increase the likelihood a recipient will process the presence of the apology speech act. Perhaps the suggestion comes from a desire to preserve face by avoiding apology, but when producing feelings of

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forgiveness is the intended messaging goal, repetition of the apology-functioning speech act seems advantageous, as the results of these studies suggest (see the Results section and Appendix B).

Then, in order to maximize the persuasiveness of organizational and supervisory apologies, we also recommend including a (c) promise of forbearance (e.g., *I promise this will never happen again*) and (d) an offer to make reparations (e.g., *What can I do to make it up to you?*). As previously stated, Tavuchis (1991), Lazare (2004), and Scher and Darley's (1997) gold standard works recommend these components to maximize the effectiveness of apologies in securing forgiveness in interpersonal relationships. Additionally, philosophers (Davis 2002; Joyce, 1999; Smith, 2005, 2008), linguists (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), and interpersonal relationship researchers (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Kelley, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2005; Waldron & Kelley, 2005) make similar recommendations or report empirical evidence that one or both components increase the likelihood of relationship restoration or forgiveness. Thus, these features almost certainly characterize highly effective apologies across contexts. In fact, a close reading of popular business communication texts reveals that Adler and Elmhorst (2008) as well as Clampitt (2010) recommend each of these four components—among other components—although these authors' specific descriptions differ in minor ways. The OOPS model is original in the sense that it identifies the four apology components based on a digest and synthesis of data-driven research across many disciplines. The OOPS model is not based on the advice of textbook authors; however, we do compare and contrast the OOPS model to business communication textbook recommendations throughout.

Offensiveness and Apologies in Organizational Contexts

Despite the considerable similarity between apologies in the interpersonal and work settings, differences likely exist as well. To date, we are unaware of any research report or business communication textbook that identifies and compares systematic differences between the effectiveness of interpersonal and organizational apologies; however, differences in the *source* of apologies across these contexts likely change the perceived severity of negative feelings associated with offenses that apologies attempt to mitigate. Specifically, in either the interpersonal context or the organizational context, the apology-functioning speech act (e.g., *I am sorry*) of an apology is likely to remain the same because apologies would not be identifiable without it. However, between interpersonal and work settings, interlocutors and relational histories are necessarily different. When the offending party is an organization or business, a boundary spanner (e.g., customer service representative) must speak on behalf of the collective in order to issue an apology (e.g., *"We" are sorry*). Organizations cannot speak for themselves (Hoffman & Ford, 2010). In such situations, the offended party likely has a different kind of relational history with the organizational representative (although there may be instances in which an organizational representative is also a friend) and organization than they do with a friend, or even a supervisor. Such relational differences likely reduce the emotional buffering that empathy plays in the

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perceived severity of an offense. For example, McCullough et al. (1997; McCullough et al., 1998) demonstrated that feeling empathy for an offending party facilitates forgiveness by the offended party. Their research applies to preexisting interpersonal relationships. However, it seems reasonable that feeling empathy for a friend or supervisor with whom one has relational history is less problematic than feeling empathy for a collective with whom one *cannot* have a personal relationship in the traditional sense. In which case, individuals likely perceive similar offenses, when committed by an organization as compared to friends or supervisors, as especially egregious. That claim, however, has not yet been tested. Thus, we posited the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: After controlling for severity of offense and content of apology, working adults are less forgiving of an offense committed by a collective (i.e., organization) than by an individual (i.e., friend or supervisor), *before* a four-component apology is issued.

To study the effectiveness of apologies across interpersonal and work contexts requires an understanding of how apologies change offended parties' feelings of forgiveness before *and* after receiving an apology. We wondered whether organizational apologies are any less effective in eliciting a *change* in feelings of forgiveness before and after the apology is issued, as compared to friend or supervisor apologies. To determine the relative effectiveness of four-component organizational apologies as compared to friend or supervisor apologies, we asked the following research question:

Research Question 1: After controlling for severity of offense and content of apology, are four-component apologies *more effective* in eliciting feelings of forgiveness (i.e., create greater changes in forgiveness before and after a four-component apology is issued) when issued by a friend, a supervisor, or an organization?

Study 1

Method

Participants. To test our first hypothesis and answer our first research question, we collected a sample of 147 working adults who participated in the first of two experimental studies. The sample was recruited by incentivizing (i.e., extra credit) undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses to recruit working adults (i.e., those over the age of 21 with full-time, paid work experience) to participate. Students were provided postcards containing study information to share with potential participants; thus, the sample was largely based on the authors' students' social networks. Additionally, 2,000 postcards were mailed to a random selection of residences within a Midwestern state; the postcards contained a link to the online survey. All participants were incentivized with the chance to win a portable media player or one of five gift cards. The sample included 94 women and 53 men, and the average age was 41.8 years

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(*SD* = 12.44), ranging from 21 to 65 years of age. Participants' work experience ranged from 5 months to 53 years (*M* = 22.14, *SD* = 12.89). Participants' supervisory experience ranged from none to 40 years (*M* = 7.54, *SD* = 8.72).

Measurement: Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale. McCullough and his colleagues researched forgiveness in close relationships for more than a decade (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 2009). Their work resulted in impressive progress including the creation of the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale (TRIM-12), a reliable and valid measure of forgiveness. The TRIM-12 has been used in sophisticated modeling of the apology-forgiveness association (McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough et al., 1998). It is a 12-item scale that measures intention to forgive as a lack of revenge and avoidance feelings toward an offending target (McCullough et al., 1998). The TRIM-12 asks respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements on a 5-point, Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Two example items are "I don't trust him/her" and "I'm going to get even." Since lower scores represent less presence of feelings of revenge and avoidance (i.e., higher forgiveness), we elected to reverse code the measure so that higher scores represent higher degrees of forgiveness. Internal reliability estimates of the TRIM-12 have been reported to be as high as .94 (McCullough et al., 1998). For Study 1, pretreatment measure Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$, posttest = .88.

Procedures and design. Participants were directed to an online survey. Participants read consent forms before participating, in accordance with institutional review oversight. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three scenarios in which (a) a friend, (b) a supervisor, or (c) an organization wronged them (i.e., A friend/boss/retail store where you shop has owed you a $500 reimbursement for the past 90 days), at which point, *half* the participants were again randomly assigned to take a pretreatment measure (i.e., TRIM-12) to capture how forgiving they were of the offense, before ever reading a four-component apology. Half received the pretreatment so that the possibility of instrument reactivity could be tested; also, by employing an offense that could be quantified in terms of time and money, we were able to create conceptually comparable situations across different interpersonal and organizational contexts. Then, all participants received four-component apologies (i.e., the treatment, see Appendix A), took a posttreatment measure of forgiveness (i.e., TRIM-12), and reported demographic information.

Results

An independent samples *t* test was conducted to determine whether there were systematic differences between posttreatment TRIM-12 scores of those who took the pretreatment TRIM-12 (*M* = 3.94, *SD* = 0.68) and those who did not (*M* = 3.97, *SD* = 0.58). Results indicated no significant instrument reactivity, $t(145) = 0.77$, *ns*.

To test our first hypothesis, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with post hoc analyses using Tukey's honestly significant difference procedure was computed to examine whether participants were less forgiving of the offense (i.e., owing the participant $500 for 90 days) when committed by a collective than by a friend or supervisor, prior to receiving an apology. Our hypothesis was supported in that

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participants were significantly less forgiving of the organization prior to apology, $F(2, 73) = 16.42$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Post hoc tests revealed that participants perceived the same offense to be more egregious when committed by an organization than by a friend or supervisor; no differences were detected between the friend and supervisor conditions.

To answer our first research question, we conducted a 2 (pretreatment, posttreatment) × 3 (friend, supervisor, organizational apology source) mixed-groups factorial ANOVA to determine whether a four-component apology is more effective in eliciting feelings of forgiveness (i.e., creating changes in levels of forgiveness before and after a four-component apology was issued) when issued by a friend, a supervisor, or an organization. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. Results indicated no significant interaction between change in forgiveness (i.e., pre- and posttreatment TRIM-12 scores, or before and after a four-component apology was issued) and apology source, Wilks's $\lambda = .96$, $F(2, 71) = 1.65$, *ns* (see Figure 1). Thus, these data did not support the notion[1] that four-component apologies are especially effective in eliciting feelings of forgiveness when given by friends, supervisors, or organizations—a point that holds promising implications for business communication practice in that it suggests communicating apologies can be similarly effective in increasing feelings of forgiveness in work settings as compared to interpersonal contexts. Furthermore, results revealed a significant main effect for four-component apologies in increasing feelings of forgiveness between the pre- and posttreatment measures, $F(1, 71) = 31.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .31$. In other words, four-component apologies significantly increased feelings of forgiveness across conditions.

Study 2

Training for Persuasiveness

The first study allowed us to test whether four-component apologies were especially effective in eliciting feelings of forgiveness in interpersonal or work settings. Results indicated that participants tended to view a similar offense committed against them by an organization as being more severe when compared to friend or supervisor perpetrators. Again, however, our results did not support[1] the conclusion that differences exist in four-component apologies' relative effectiveness in eliciting increases in feelings of forgiveness from friends, subordinates, or customers. Thus, these results are promising for business communication pedagogy in the sense that they suggest four-component apologies may hold the potential to improve subordinate-supervisor and customer-organization relations by encouraging forgiveness, after relatively minor offenses, in ways similar to apologies uttered between friends. Also, it is likely that supervisors and organizational representatives need and use the skill of crafting apologies that elicit feelings of forgiveness from subordinates and customers, respectively. Thus, in the second study, we endeavored to create a training session to teach participants how to craft organizational and supervisory apologies, which are persuasive in eliciting feelings of forgiveness.

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Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Study 1 (Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale)

Apology Source	M	SD
Pretreatment		
Friend	4.09	0.53
Supervisor	3.73	0.58
Organization	3.21	0.55
Total	3.66	0.66
Posttreatment		
Friend	4.31	0.49
Supervisor	3.94	0.70
Organization	3.60	0.65
Total	3.93	0.68

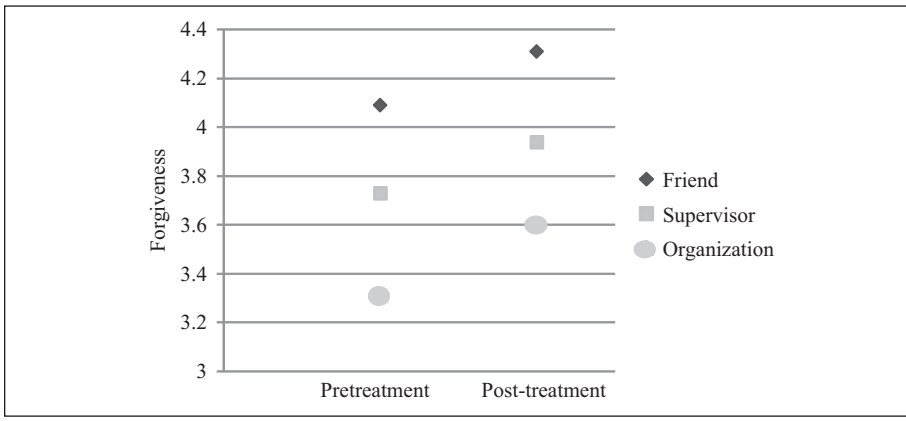


Figure 1. Four-component apology by pretreatment and posttreatment forgiveness (TRIM-12)
NOTE: TRIM-12 = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale.

Training. The training session included a handout and lecture containing (a) descriptions and examples of each of the four-components of persuasive apologies, (b) an example business apology, and (c) a diagram demonstrating how each of the four components was employed in the example apology (see Appendix B). While we suspected that those with training to craft four-component apologies produce apologies that are measurably more effective in eliciting feelings of forgiveness than those without training produce, we sought to test that assumption by proposing a second hypothesis and asking a second research question:

Hypothesis 2: Participants who receive organizational apology training craft more persuasive apologies in eliciting feelings of forgiveness than those who do not receive training.

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Research Question 2: Are participants who receive training more effective in eliciting feelings of forgiveness as a supervisor or as a customer service representative than those who do not receive training?

Method

Participants. To test our second hypothesis and answer our second research question, we collected a sample of 80 participants from our social networks. The sample included 46 females and 34 males, and the average age was 20.9 years ($SD = 2.02$), ranging from 18 to 29 years of age. Eighty percent of participants self-identified as White/non-Hispanic. Participants' work experience ranged from none to 13 years ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 2.65$). Participants were enrolled in university courses and received extra class credit for their involvement. Participants reported studying a variety of majors (e.g., advertising, business, communication, economics, education, health and exercise science, human relations, nursing, public relations).

Procedures. Participants met at a designated classroom in cohorts of 2 to 20. Then, they read and signed consent forms. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of two groups: control or training. Those in the control group were ushered to another classroom where they were asked to work quietly for 15 minutes before completing a questionnaire. Meanwhile, those assigned to the training condition were given the apology training described above (see Appendix B) and then asked to complete a questionnaire. All respondents were asked to provide demographic information.

Questionnaire. In addition to providing demographic information, participants in both conditions responded to one of two scenarios (based on the first study), which were also randomly assigned. Essentially, participants were asked to apologize either (a) to a subordinate as a supervisor or (b) to a customer on behalf of an organization (see Appendix C).

Apology evaluation. Three working adults (two females, one male; average age 35 years) were recruited to evaluate the persuasiveness of each apology in eliciting their feelings of forgiveness. These participants were *not* traditional coders, as the term is often applied by content analysts, because the evaluators were *not* trained coders. Evaluators were not told about the purpose of the research, told which participants received training, or made aware of the four components of effective apologies—such awareness would have invalidated results by making findings tautological. Evaluators worked independently and did not know one another. Apologies were transcribed prior to the evaluation stage to control for handwriting.

Evaluators were asked to begin by reading and rereading each apology. As a means of facilitating their evaluation, the evaluators were then asked to create five stacks of eight apologies ($n = 40$) per apology source (i.e., supervisor, customer service representative; for a total of $N = 80$). Each stack was to represent increasingly persuasive apologies in eliciting their feelings of forgiveness toward the author of the apology. This process aided evaluators in assigning a numerical value to each apology with 1 representing the *least* persuasive apologies and 10 representing the *most* persuasive apologies in eliciting their feelings of forgiveness. Therefore, the least persuasive eight apologies would be rated either 1 or 2 and the eight apologies grouped into the next

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stack would be rated either 3 or 4, and so on. Thus, at the conclusion of the evaluation stage, each apology had three measurements (one per evaluator). We averaged these scores to create a mean index for each apology. Averaging scores was appropriate given that Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$. The reasonable level of internal consistency among scores, indicated by the Cronbach's alpha, led us to believe the scores warranted combination into a single measurement index. The apology persuasiveness index did not violate assumptions of normality (range 1.00-9.33, $M = 5.06$, $SD = 2.46$, kurtosis = −1.18, skewness = −.09)—see Tabachnik and Fidell's (2007) kurtosis and skewness significance test methods for small to moderate sample sizes.

Results

A 2 (training, control) × 2 (supervisor apology, organizational apology) factorial ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the effects of four-component apology training (training, control) and apology source (boss, customer service representative) on persuasiveness of apologies in eliciting feelings of forgiveness. Means and standard deviations for training and control groups as a function of organizational and supervisory apology are reported in Table 2. Example apology messages from participants are shown in Table 3. The ANOVA indicated no significant interaction between factors, $F(1, 76) = 2.00$, *ns*. However, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for training, $F(1, 76) = 75.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .50$. There was no significant main effect for apology source, $F(1, 76) = 0.03$, *ns*. Thus, our second hypothesis was supported, as trained participants crafted more effective apologies in eliciting feelings of forgiveness as compared to the messages crafted by participants who did not receive training. In response to our second research question, these data did not support[1] the notion that the effectiveness of participants' training in crafting persuasive apologies varied as a function of composing apologies as either supervisors or customer service representatives.

Discussion

Experimental studies of organizational apologies are rare in the business communication literature. However, the need to seek forgiveness from an offended individual in work settings is likely a common communicative situation because offenses are likely commonplace in work life (Bolkan & Daly, 2009) and apologizing is widely recognized as a useful communication method for attempting to restore relationships after an offense (Kelley & Waldron, 2006). Unlike the major focus of much crisis communication research, we took apology in the workplace—those given by supervisors and customer service representatives—to be an important topic of internal and external business communication research, both practically and theoretically. The goals of this investigation were threefold: (a) to provide a unified heuristic, synthesized from cutting-edge research, on apology for business communication educators; (b) to determine whether the effectiveness of apologies changed when employed within work settings as compared to interpersonal contexts; and (c) to determine whether we could teach individuals to be more effective at crafting apologies on behalf of a business or as a supervisor. Each goal was achieved.

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Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Study 2 (Apology Persuasiveness Index)

Condition	Role	M	SD
Training	Supervisor	6.56	1.69
	Organization	7.05	1.28
	Total	6.82	1.48
Control	Supervisor	3.70	2.15
	Organization	3.08	1.84
	Total	3.38	1.98

In the first study, results revealed that individuals judged a similar offense to be more forgivable when committed by a friend or supervisor, as compared with an organization. Thus, our first hypothesis was supported. Why might individuals be less forgiving of a wrong done against them by a business as compared to a friend or supervisor? The context and nature of the relational history that can be cultivated with friends and supervisors are substantively different from the relational history that can be maintained with a collective. Such relational histories likely buffer negative feelings associated with being the victim of a wrongdoing (see McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 2009). Friends and subordinates can empathize with friends and supervisors, respectively, in ways that are distinct from customers' ability to empathize with a business. Such a finding has at least two implications for business communication practice and theory building. First, all things being equal, these findings suggest that organizations are at a disadvantage of sorts—as compared to individuals who speak on their own behalf—in terms of how individuals perceive the severity of wrongdoing offensiveness. This disadvantage should inform research by serving as a kind of baseline for aiding in interpreting field data. Also, this disadvantage should inform business practice by sensitizing customer relations professionals to the special difficulty created by boundary spanning and its attendant communicative situations. Second, these findings suggest that customer relations professionals should attempt to cultivate interpersonal relational histories with customers as a means of facilitating the buffering produced in empathic feelings toward interpersonal relationship partners, as described by McCullough et al. (1997; McCullough et al., 1998). Similarly, results support work by Bachman and Guerrero (2006), who demonstrated that apologies were strong predictors of forgiveness from relational partners.

A mixed-groups experimental design allowed us to compare the relative effectiveness of four-component apologies in interpersonal, supervisor, and organizational settings and thereby answer our first research question. The notion of effectiveness can be read in a number of ways. From one perspective, effectiveness may mean the ability to achieve some specified ends; in the case of apology effectiveness, a specified end could be to achieve a static and predetermined level of forgiveness. However, in the first experimental study, apology effectiveness was studied as a *relative* outcome in two senses: In the first sense, effectiveness was studied by comparing the change in feelings of forgiveness before and after four-component apologies were given. Four-component apologies were

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Table 3. Example Apology Messages Crafted by Study 2 Participants

Condition	Role	Apology
Training	Supervisor	Dear Employee, I am truly sorry for not having checked my funds, and as a result having not paid you for the complete hours you worked. I know those were hours and money well earned and I promise this will not happen in the future. I have since hired a payroll employee in order to check the paychecks so that this will not happen in the future. I will not only pay you the deserved $500, but I will also give you a day of paid vacation from work. I hope you can accept my apology. Sorry again, Owner at Top Tech
	Organization	Dear Customer, I am sorry that you did not receive your rebate in the time that was promised. Our company promised that you would receive it in a week and we failed to come through with our promise. I am so sorry for any inconvenience this may have caused for you. Our staff misunderstood the time needed to receive a rebate. I can promise it will never happen again because all of our staff has been informed extensively about the rebate policy. For your trouble our company would like to give you a $50 gift card to use in our store. Sincerely, Name, Owner
Control	Supervisor	Dear Name, On behalf of Top Tech, I would like to apologize for the bookkeeping error that prevented you from receiving your overtime compensation. The error should be fixed within a week at the latest. Sincerely, Name, Owner
	Organization	Dear Valued Customer, Allow me to express my concern on this subject by sincerely apologizing for this inconvenience. This miscommunication has caused troubles for you and I will do my best to help you receive your $500 rebate. I will talk with one of the laptop manufacturers and enlighten them on the situation. I will also give you their contact information so you can also speak with them to show your interest in the matter. If all goes, they will take an understanding approach and you will receive your money as soon as possible. Thank you for your time and understanding. We look forward to your interest in our electronics in the future. Sincerely, Name

consistently related to significant increases in feelings of forgiveness before and after four-component apologies were given; thus, four-component apologies are effective. In the second sense of the term, effectiveness was assessed by measuring this change in

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forgiveness and then comparing it across friend, supervisor, and organizational apology sources to determine if four-component apologies were particularly effective in eliciting feelings of forgiveness when issued from a particular apology source. Here, results did not support[1] the notion that four-component apologies were especially effective in eliciting feelings of forgiveness for any particular apology source. The implication of these findings are promising for business communication educators in that they suggest four-component apologies may be effective in eliciting feelings of forgiveness even when employed in work settings—a unique theoretical and practical contribution of this research to business communication pedagogy. Additionally, these results resonate with a field experiment of organizational responses to customer complaints conducted by Bolkan and Daly (2009), who reported that "using apologies is also likely to increase consumers' satisfaction with organizational responses and, importantly, intentions to do business with organizations in the future" (p. 37). These findings also offer a best practices approach to apologizing to subordinates, which could aid the enactment of Campbell, White, and Durant's (2007) business communication theory of rapport management. In their theory, supervisors are encouraged to attend to subordinates' face needs by apologizing (see p. 172). These findings call into question recommendations in some of the business communication textbooks cited here, which advocate to students to avoid giving apologies for small, routine claims (Ober, 2009) or if the error is small and if the mistake is being corrected (Locker & Kaczmarek, 2010). Since these data demonstrate four-component apologies can encourage customer and superordinate forgiveness, the question becomes the following: Why avoid such a positive relational outcome?

A second experimental study allowed us to compare the effectiveness of four-component apology training to determine whether such apology skills could be successfully transferred such that evaluators—who were unaware of the purpose of the study—would be more persuaded to feel forgiving toward trained apologizers than toward those who did not receive training. Results supported our second hypothesis that individuals can be trained to craft more persuasive apologies—and thus, the training was effective in creating apology-giving effectiveness. (Again, effectiveness can be read in a number of different ways.) Participants gave apologies both as supervisors and as customer service representatives. Results did not indicate that trainees were any less persuasive in eliciting evaluators' feelings of forgiveness when giving the apology in one hypothetical role or the other. Taken together, we contribute to the business communication literature by synthesizing disparate academic literatures on apologizing into a, heuristic model. The four-component apology model (called the "OOPS" method for short, see Appendix B) can be easily adapted to classroom instruction. Similarly, we believe it can be easily adapted for organizational training (Beebe, 2007). The two experimental studies presented here lead us to believe that this model holds the potential for improving business communicators' apologizing skill in work settings. Morreale and Pearson (2008) praised communication education as a central means to enhancing organizational processes. We believe the OOPS training method holds the potential to improve customer service and managerial communication processes in unison with their praise.

We situate this study within a larger program of positive organizational scholarship. Organizational scholarship is important to the study of business communication

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in that business communication occurs in the context of organizing. The growing field of positive organizational scholarship connects expressions of organizational and leadership virtuousness to enhanced systemic and business performance (e.g., Cameron et al., 2003). For example, Cameron, Bright, and Caza's (2004) study of 18 organizations suggests that organizational virtues like *forgiveness*, trust, integrity, optimism, and compassion produce resiliency in organizational systems resulting in beneficial organizational outcomes such as increases in customer retention and reductions in employee turnover. We argue that effective apology giving performs and enacts communication practice that embodies many similar virtues and reinforces positive organizational culturing (Bisel, Messersmith, & Keyton, 2010). In fact, Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, and Elving's (2006) research demonstrated that leaders who apologize are perceived to be more transformational and inspirational than those who do not. Such evidence suggests that expressions of virtuousness in business communication practices should continue to be important topics of business communication research. Finally, we are quick to recognize that many practical (Blanchard & McBride, 2003) and psychological mechanisms (Brown & Starkey, 2000) likely keep individuals within work settings from recognizing their need to admit fault and take responsibility; however, the heuristic model presented here represents a useful framework for teaching business communicators the prosocial skill of seeking forgiveness.

Limitations and Future Research

While Study 1 and Study 2 furthered our understanding of business apologies, greater insight will be gained when limitations of the current studies are overcome. Both samples were largely dependent on the authors' and the authors' students' social networks—although not entirely (see postcards mailed across one state in Study 1). Future investigations should strive for more random sampling. Also, future investigation could move from hypothetical experimental scenarios to interventions in natural and applied settings (i.e., businesses). Another limitation concerns the theme of the scenarios—money owed. While many participants could likely relate to this situation, each of the three scenarios necessarily dealt with the same broad topic and did not probe into other motives for apologizing. Thus, this study did not originate from a comprehensive inventory of the reasons businesses apologize. Indeed, compiling such a list would be a worthwhile effort if we are to better understand the types of apologies businesses regularly issue to customers and employees.

This investigation revealed that individuals are more willing to forgive an individual for committing a mistake than they are an organization for a similar mistake. This finding does not imply that an apology from an organization is less effective than one from an individual; it simply suggests that individuals are less tolerant of organizational offenses. Therefore, further investigation ought to measure individuals' perceptions in this regard. Future experiments might vary the source issuing the apology to a customer on behalf of the organization. Study 2 used a customer service representative to send the message to the customer (Appendix C). It is plausible that customers may respond differently to an apology based on the apologizer's role within the organization. For

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example, an apology issued by a manager or executive involved directly with (or knowledgeable of) the situation may be received differently from an apology issued by a customer service representative who may have no knowledge of the situation other than details listed in a company database. Investigating perceptions of the apology itself as well as perceptions of the person charged by the organization to apologize may have implications for not only *how* organizations train to apologize but also *who* they train to apologize. In light of the growing body of positive organizational scholarship, the relationship between business apologies and performance could be tracked longitudinally to determine whether businesses which apologize more frequently do indeed see differences in customer loyalty and satisfaction. A planned field study could capture this data. Similar to previous work by Bolkan, Goodboy, and Daly (2010) and Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996), who studied consumers' repatronage intentions, a pre-/posttest design could enable researchers to determine the effect on customers' behavioral intentions after having received an apology from an organization.

Conclusion

While reflecting on the meaning of positive organizational scholarship, Karl Weick (2003) noted that "mistakes and errors are inevitable in organized life. . . . Exceptional action in the context of fragile organizing consists of efforts that keep action going in the face of breakdown" (p. 67). We believe business apologies represent such exceptional action performed as practical communication efforts that can maintain and strengthen relationships in work settings. The four-component model of organizational and supervisory apology offered here is a practical tool for business communicators to mend and sustain relationships, which can keep action going in the face of potential relational breakdown.

Appendix A

Friend apology from "friend" to friend:

"I made a mistake. I owe you a $500 reimbursement. I am doing what I can to repay you as soon as possible; however, I can't repay you just yet. I sincerely apologize! I promise to do everything I can to make sure this doesn't happen again and I promise to reimburse you soon. What can I do to make this up to you?"

Supervisor apology from "boss" to subordinate:

"I made a mistake. I owe you a $500 reimbursement. I am doing what I can to repay you as soon as possible; however, I can't repay you just yet. I sincerely apologize! I promise to do everything I can to make sure this doesn't happen again and I promise to reimburse you soon. What can I do to make this up to you?"

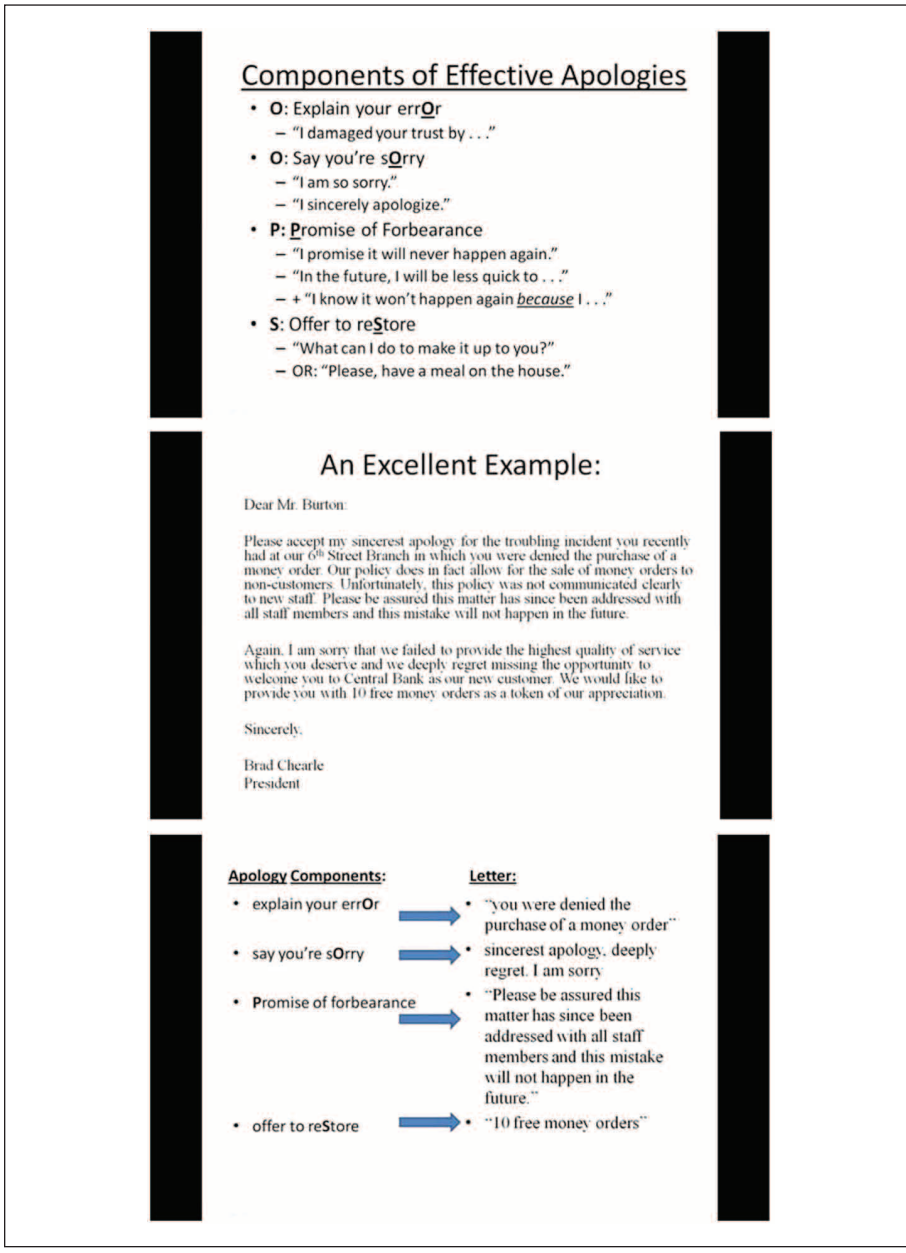
Organizational apology from "customer service representative" to customer:

"We made a mistake. We owe you a $500 reimbursement. We are doing what we can to repay you as soon as possible; however, we can't repay you just yet. We sincerely apologize! We promise to do everything we can to make sure this doesn't happen again and we promise to reimburse you soon. What can we do to make this up to you?"

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Appendix B

Screen Shots of Organizational and Supervisory Apology-Training Materials



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Appendix C

Supervisor scenario: You are the owner of Top Tech, a specialty retail store that sells electronics. Your employees' paychecks are deposited electronically into their bank accounts each month. Last month, one particular employee worked a lot of overtime. However, because of a clerical error on your part that created a lack of funds, you did not pay your employee for their overtime and you STILL OWE the employee $500 dollars in overtime. You checked with the bookkeeper and he informed you that you should be able to pay the employee in 1 more week at the latest. In the space provided—and acting in your role as the owner of Top Tech—please craft an *extremely* effective and appropriate apology to your employee in order to increase the chances of gaining the employee's forgiveness.

Organization scenario: You are a customer service representative of Top Tech, a specialty retail store that sells electronics. Recently, a customer purchased a laptop. The customer's purchase was eligible for a rebate promotion from your store. The customer completed the rebate form while buying the computer. At the time, you told the customer the rebate check would be sent in a week. After 2 weeks, the customer calls to tell you the store STILL OWES the $500 dollar rebate. You checked with the laptop manufacturer and they inform you that the rebate should be mailed to the store in 1 more week at the latest. In the space provided—and acting in your role as a customer service representative for Top Tech—please craft an *extremely* effective and appropriate apology to the customer in order to increase the chances of gaining the customer's forgiveness.

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Note

1. The phrasing here (i.e., "these data did not support the notion . . .") may read awkwardly to some readers. However, research convention holds that nonsignificant findings should not be strictly interpreted to be a demonstration of conclusive sameness (for a review of the logic of null hypothesis significance testing, see Levine, Weber, Hullett, Park, & Lindsey, 2008). Instead, nonsignificant findings are technically an inability to support the conclusion of difference. Thus, we adopted this phrasing in an effort to describe results and their implications for theory as precisely as possible.

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