

GUIDE TO HANDLING NEGATIVITY

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#GSMCON

****So, my PowerPoint doesn't really have much information in it...So I've put some of the key points in a text box like this on each slide to give more context.****

Georgia Technology Authority (GTA)

We'll go over what I do first to give some context. I work for the Georgia Technology Authority (GTA) – the technology arm of the state. GTA covers everything from computers to e-mail to cybersecurity to websites.

The screenshot shows the Georgia Technology Authority website. The browser address bar displays 'gta.georgia.gov'. The page features a dark blue header with the Georgia state seal and the text 'Georgia Technology Authority'. A search bar is located in the top right. Below the header is a navigation menu with categories: 'About GTA', 'News & Information', 'Services', 'GETS', 'Initiatives & Programs', 'Procurement', and 'Governance & Planning'. The main content area is dominated by a large graphic of interconnected hexagons representing various IT services: 'Portfolio Management', 'Policies, Standards & Guidelines', 'IT Security', 'Professional Development', 'Investment Management', and 'Planning'. Below this graphic is a section titled 'Enterprise Governance and Planning' with a 'Read More' button. A pagination bar shows '1 2 3 4 5'. On the right side, there is a 'Quick Links' section with links to the '2014 Annual State IT Report', 'GETS Services Integration Initiative', 'Georgia Enterprise IT Strategic Plan 2020', and 'Service Desk for Technical Support'. Below this is a link to 'Find Your Customer Relationship Manager'. At the bottom right, there is a 'Blog: Technology in Georgia' section with a featured article titled 'It's Time Once Again to Honor Agencies for IT Achievements'.

GeorgiaGov Interactive Team

Website

portal.georgia.gov/interactive/

GEORGIA GOV

Portal - Interactive

A service of the Georgia Technology Authority

Services Blog Our Work Web Standards Support Events Responsive Migration

We Make Websites Better.

It's no longer good enough to just have a website. Your users need to find information quickly, and you need a website that helps them achieve that.

GeorgiaGov Interactive provides design, content management and consulting services that will make your website useful, attractive and accessible.

Our Recent Projects

Twitter

PORTAL GEORGIA GOV

TWEETS 295 FOLLOWING 77 FOLLOWERS 139 FAVORITES 41

GeGov Interactive @GeorgiaGovTeam

The award-winning team behind GeorgiaGov. Design, development and consulting for state agencies.

Atlanta, GA
portal.georgia.gov/interactive
Joined September 2012

24 Photos and videos

Jeffrey Zeldman @zeldman · Apr 21

Teaching HTML & CSS? Use "How to Code in HTML5 and CSS3," a GREAT, FREE book by @varjs. howtocodeinhtml.com

Who to follow · Refresh · View all

GovExec @GovExec

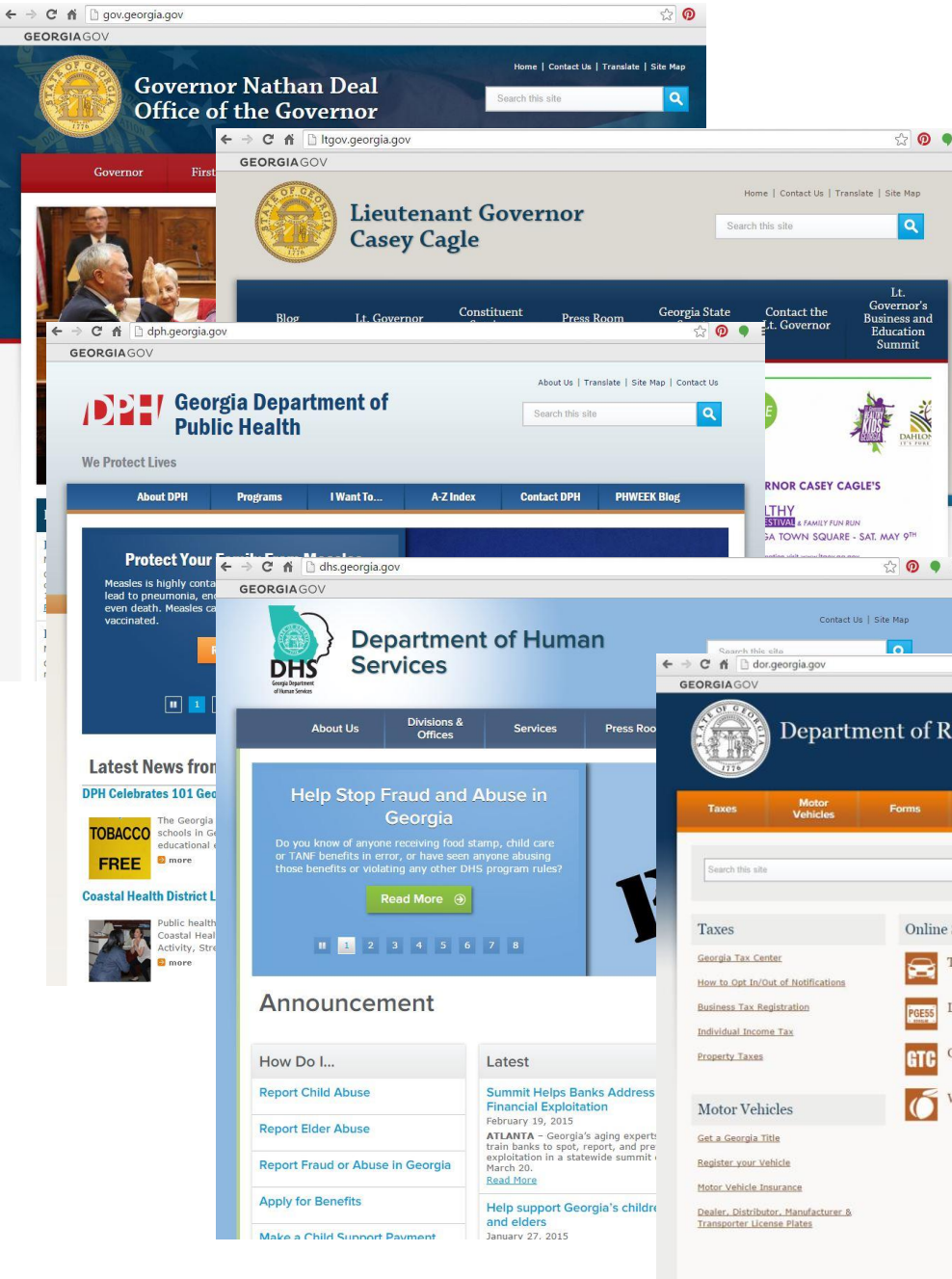
My team, the GeorgiaGov Interactive Team, builds websites. (follow us on Twitter to learn more about website design!)

GeorgiaGov Interactive

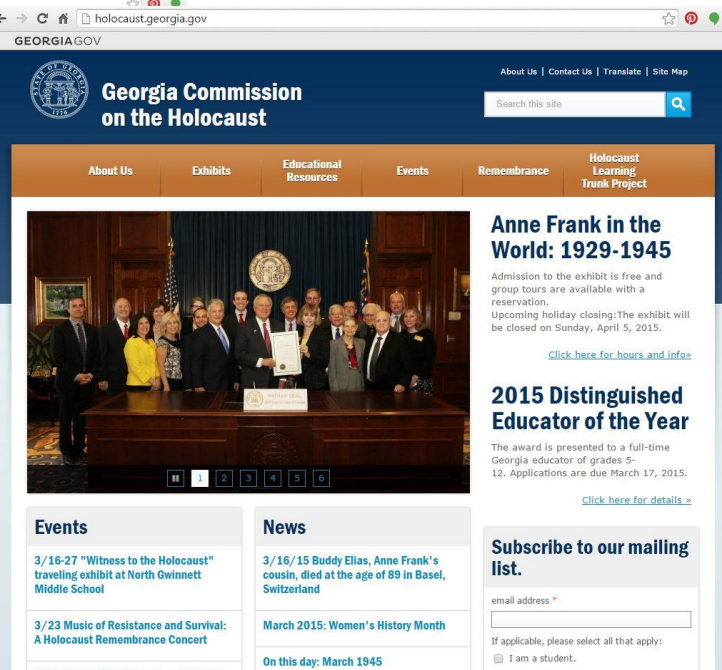
There are 9 of us on the GeorgiaGov Interactive Team. We're weird.

I think that sometimes being fearless is having fears but jumping anyway.
-Taylor Swift





We have about 75 websites on our platform. We build websites for state agencies, so we worry about all the technical aspects of a website. That way, the agency only has to focus on the content. I have three jobs. My first job is being the account manager for 7 agencies and their websites. Whenever one of my agencies needs a new function or help with their website, they come to me.





My team also runs (we built, maintain, and update) the state of Georgia's website Georgia.gov. We ARE in charge of the content here. This is my second job. I help keep all the content on Georgia.gov up-to-date, relevant, and useful for the constituents of Georgia. Georgia.gov is the front door to government in Georgia. We want it to be a verb (like Google or Wikipedia or IMDB). You should be able to find anything and everything about government in Georgia on Georgia.gov.

In 2012, we redesigned the platform and Georgia.gov. We moved to the content management system (CMS) called Drupal. We made our sites more accessible (to follow Section 508). We increased our SEO. We changed A LOT. While we were doing all these technical changes, we decided to update the content too. We looked at Google Analytics and the call logs from 1-800-GEORGIA. However, this just told us what people are calling about or searching for or clicking on. It doesn't actually tell us if people found what they were looking for. That's where social media comes into play.

Facebook

GEORGIA GOV
georgia.gov
Government Organization

Timeline About Photos Likes Videos

PEOPLE
3,869 likes

ABOUT
GeorgiaGov is your online access to Georgia government. If you're looking for more information, please visit <http://georgia.gov/>.
<http://www.georgia.gov/>

PHOTOS

georgia.gov
5 hrs · 🌐

Do you have a loved one in a state prison? Being distant from them for so long can be mentally taxing. Learn how you can visit and send them mail:

Contacting and Visiting Inmates | Georgia.gov
Visitation hours vary by facility, be sure to view the visitation schedule of the facility prior to your visit. Generally, private prisons, county correctional institutions and probation detention centers also follow the six-hour visitation schedule on Saturdays, Sundays and state holidays.
GEORGIA.GOV

Like · Comment · Share

georgia.gov
18 hrs · 🌐

Atlanta roads are getting a little makeover! Check out some of the new improvements coming to I-75 South, I-85 and the Northwest Corridor section of Metro Atlanta:

New Interstate Express Lanes | Georgia.gov
New express lanes are being added to interstates around metro Atlanta.
GEORGIA.GOV

Like · Comment · Share

👍 Susan Prater DeBeaugrigne and Haley Allison like this.

Twitter

GEORGIA GOV

TWEETS 7,317 FOLLOWING 452 FOLLOWERS 18.7K FAVORITES 231 LISTS 14 Edit profile

Tweets Tweets & replies Photos & videos

GeorgiaGov @georgiagov · 12m
April's almost over! How are those New Year's Resolutions going? Get some quick tips on how to keep them this year! ow.ly/LUZi9

GeorgiaGov @georgiagov · 2h
Farewell to a Georgia Hero: Commissioner Pete Wheeler 1.usa.gov/1HILiej

GeorgiaGov retweeted
GDA Food Safety @GDAFoodSafety · 5h
Happy #EarthDay2015 to everyone! How will you celebrate today? ow.ly/LXkR7

Who to follow · Refresh · View all

Celebrate EARTH

We created our social media accounts in 2008. But back then we were just a megaphone. We automated everything and disabled comments and messages. In 2012, we decided to change. We became a place for conversation. We wanted to know what people were talking about—what they had questions about. In turn, our social media accounts became a place for people to review our (Georgia government) service. Which is a polite way of saying, people yell at us. A lot.



Source: <http://pandawhale.com/post/16780/have-you-tried-turning-it-off-and-on-again>

We have this little joke in the IT world that people only acknowledge our existence when something goes wrong, like when your computer breaks. Then they call IT yelling (and it's always IT's fault) and IT just says, "Have you tried turning it on and off again?" and that usually fixes everything. I feel like this is how people treat the government too. Your average Joe, doesn't care that government exists. It's only when something goes wrong or something doesn't happen like they thought, that's when they come to us yelling. I've never gotten a message saying, "I got my food stamps on time with no glitches." No, of course not. Because people expect to get their food stamps on time with no glitches. People expect things to work smoothly. And when they don't, then they get angry.







Source: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2716375/Grumpy-Cat-lives-book-launch-face-says-d-else.html>



Welcome to my job.

This is my third job. My third job is to talk to really angry and upset people on Facebook and Twitter. So, along the way, I've learned a few tricks and tips that I want to share with you. The first thing I learned is a really sad truth. No one expects a response back. People are yelling at us to be cathartic (I guess?). So when I do respond back, they're completely blown away.



Here are a few examples that I quickly pulled. I blurred out their names because these were sent via direct message. But this is extremely sad. People have such low expectations for the government, they don't even expect a response back. I say, let's overachieve. Let's not only respond back, but let's give them the best response we can. But how do we do this?



 
thanks for you response.

 
I appreciate your response,

 
Thank you for responding.

 
Thank you so much for your prompt response and empathy in this matter. I look forward to someone reaching out to us, because it has

 
Thankyou for your reply.I h

  Fe
Thank you so very much for your quick response!

 
thank you very much for your reply and guidance. I will follow your instructions.

Bethany's Formula to Handling Negativity

Humanizing(Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

I realized after a while, I was following the same steps over and over. So I put it into a formula. Warning: This is NOT a standard. There are no cookie cutter answers (Article by Daniel Newman explaining this further <http://blog.newscred.com/article/there-is-no-one-size-fits-all-for-content-marketing/74382c959838e17346768a404d5a183c>). Every comment, tweet, message we get is unique and thus deserves a unique answer. Also, no need to follow this formula strictly. Sometimes I use Sympathy and Action or Action and Appreciation. Sometimes I start out with Appreciation and end with Sympathy. I used the Commutative Property on purpose for this reason. So this formula is a great starting place and wonderful guideline. We'll break it down piece by piece, starting inside the parenthesis.

Humanizing(**Sympathy** + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity



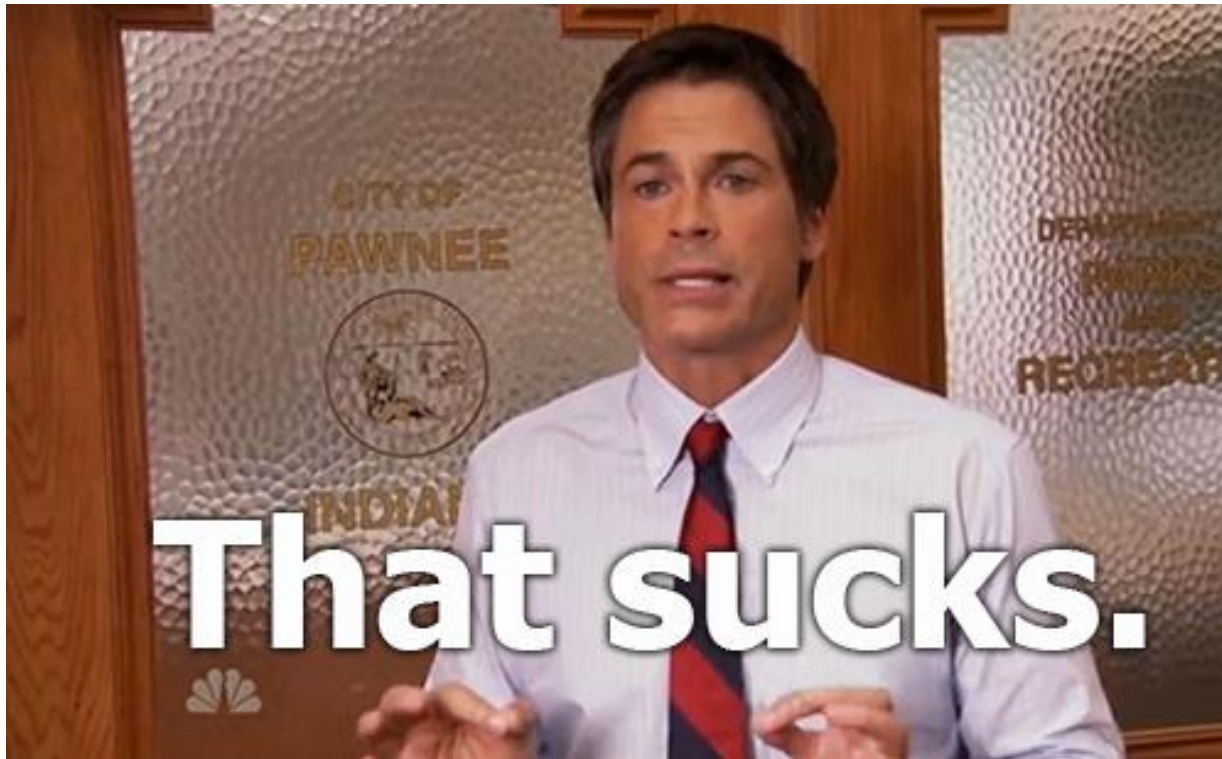
Typically, at the beginning of my responses, I like to convey sympathy. I want them to know I'm listening to them and that I understand they're frustrated. CAUTION: I'm not saying to apologize on behalf of the government. Instead, let them know that you understand. Which we all DO understand. We know how frustrating lines can be, how annoying filling out forms can be, how confusing directions can be. To explain further, let's learn from Chris Traeger.

Humanizing(**Sympathy** + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity



In the show Parks and Recreation, a character named Ann Perkins is having a really hard time. A lot is happening in her life and she's just struggling. So, Rob Lowe's character, Chris Traeger, wants to help. Every time Ann has a problem, he immediately fixes it. But no matter how many solutions he provides, Ann is never happy. She's still upset. So Tom, Donna, and Ron Swanson have to pull Chris aside and explain to him that Anne just wants some sympathy. All she wants Chris to do is say, "That sucks."

Humanizing(**Sympathy** + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity



So, the next time Ann complained about something, Chris listened and then said, "That sucks." And bam. Everything was fixed. That's all Ann wanted. Obviously, we can't say "that sucks" but we can have that sentiment. After Ann got everything off her chest, then they were able to move on to finding a solution. Which is the next part in our equation: Action

Humanizing(Sympathy + **Action** + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity



Secret: Most complaints are just questions in disguise. A lot (not all) of the complaints we get are due to people not understanding something. Which, imagine that. The twists and turns of our complicated bureaucratic system confuses people? Of course it does. It's frustrating. So this is where we can come in and provide clarification and then give an action. I always like to give them something they can physically do. So, give them an address, link, phone number, e-mail, etc. I can't look into specific cases (I'm like Google, remember?), so I can't actually fix people's problems directly. But I can direct people to places that CAN fix their problems.

Humanizing(Sympathy + **Action** + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

The screenshot shows the Georgia.gov website with a search bar at the top right and a navigation menu. The main content area features a blog post titled "How to Get Your Needs Heard: Contacting Your State Legislators" dated January 27, 2014. The post includes an image of a legislative session and text explaining how to contact elected representatives and senators. A sidebar on the right contains a "Select A Topic" dropdown menu and a "Most Viewed Posts" section with links to various articles.

<http://georgia.gov/blog/2014-01-27/how-get-your-needs-heard-contacting-your-state-legislators>

I have a cheat. If someone comes to me and says, "We should burn the state constitution and appoint a pony as queen of Georgia," I tell them to contact their elected officials. I send them a link to this blog post explaining how to find who represents you in the Georgia legislature. They're the ones who represent us and who make the laws in Georgia. If they don't know what you want changed in Georgia, how can they change it? This answer is kind of a cop out card, but at least we're still giving them and action and information about what they can do.

Humanizing(Sympathy + **Action** + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

- Dissect the complaint
- Find the question
- Provide a direction

To summarize, peel away the layers of negativity so that you can find the question that's hidden inside and then provide an action they can take. So not only do we want to respond, not only do we want to sympathize, but we want to do more. We want to provide an action.

Humanizing(Sympathy + Action + **Appreciation**) = Utilizing Negativity



Source: <http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/3651jp>

Then at the end (typically), I like to thank the constituent for reaching out to me. This is hard. And it can bite me in the butt. But I feel like it's extremely important. I find solace in the fact that they decided to take that first step and come to me. By letting me know they're having difficulty doing something, not only can I provide assistance, but I can also help change our service. I can rearrange the website or write a blog post for clarification. I don't know that they have a problem until they say something.



A customer who complains
is doing you a great service.

Humanizing (Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity



Picture of robot cyborg Barack Obama.

Your entire response should sound human. You do not want to sound like government robot. How do we do this? I have a few little tricks I use.

Source: <http://www.orwelltoday.com/readerobamabirtherrobot.shtml>

Humanizing (Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

- Lax AP Style
- We're, you're, isn't, etc.
- I, we, you
- "Oh dear!"
- Hi [Name],
- Complimentary close (initials & agency)
- Voice
- Tone

(GeorgiaGov's voice is to be Informative and Friendly. On Twitter, our Tone is very Informative with a little bit of Friendly. On Facebook, it's the exact opposite. We're very Friendly with a little bit of Informative – so we use more exclamation points, pictures, and the word "y'all" because we're in Georgia.)

Humanizing (Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity



However, you don't want to sound TOO human. You still want to be respected and you still want to prove that you're the expert. For GeorgiaGov, I always use proper grammar. I spell out words (even on Twitter). I have fun, but I still want to sound...educated.

Kathy Complaints

To help explain this, I'll tell you a story. For about a year, a woman named Kathy came to us on Facebook with a lot of complaints. Here are a few examples. At first I would reply back with Sympathy and an Action. But nothing worked. So, I dropped Sympathy and just gave Kathy actions. Still, no dice. Kathy actually helped teach me when and when not to respond.

- “70% of those you see are innocent as stated by the Chief Public Defender...so don't judge everyone you see...chances are they are one of the many innocent imprisoned...its all about money.”
- “We could come closer to having a real budget if he were rid the state of corruption..instead of providing defense for the corrupt officials with tax payers funds...just a thought”
- “unless you are a politician, elected official, court staff member or law enforcement they are exempt from the Law in Georgia”
- “There are homeless, starving people in the Corrupt State of Ga. Can we deal with that Mr. Deal...”
- “Nice to have..just wish the Georgia Judiciary followed them..Just a waste...”

When do I respond?

- Never respond. Ever.
- Always respond. Always.
- Sometimes respond.

There are three points of view here. Typically, most governments follow the first point of view of never responding. Typically, most companies in the private sector take the second point of view of always responding. We, at GeorgiaGov, take the third point of view of sometimes responding. If I can be Informative and Friendly in my response back to a negative comment, tweet, message, then I'll respond back. If I can't, then I won't respond back. If I know someone is trying to pick a fight or if they're just ranting, I won't respond. I know the information I give them won't be heard, so I won't meet my goal of being informative and friendly.

Humanizing (Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

- Kathy: “Tip--- Stay home and ride 4 wheelers with the kids.”
- GeorgiaGov: “Just make sure you and your kids are staying safe Kathy. Ice should not be taken lightly—no matter what vehicle you’re in.”
- Kathy: “You are correct, we don’t have ICE tho.. just about 4 inches of snow”
- GeorgiaGov: “Good! We’re glad to hear that! Is it beautiful? The Capitol in Atlanta is still just wet and cold—no snow yet. Please also keep in mind that snow can turn into ice. So keep your guard up, just in case! Feel free to message us pictures of the snow if you have any!”
- Kathy: “I’ll send yall a couple threw this pm.”

One week in January and one week February of 2014, Georgia was hit by two ice storms. Everyone freaked out and the negativity (from all over from all over the country) came flying towards me. Kathy was no exception. She commented on many of the statuses I posted. During the February storm, I shared a blog post we wrote about handling winter weather in Georgia. Kathy commented on it, like always. However, this time, I decided to change tactics. I was more human with her. (The conversation we had is listed above)

Later that day, I shared a status from another agency about offices being closed. Kathy commented on it (like always). But this time, it wasn’t anything negative. She just said, yeah it’s not safe for them. Many closed that day too. Since then (February 11, 2014), I haven’t received a single negative comment from Kathy. Obviously, correlation does not equal causation, but I choose to believe that Kathy stopped yelling at us because I treated her like a person rather than a problem.

Humanizing (Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

Be real.

In the end, be real. Be human. Don't be a robot.



Humanizing(Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity



Source: <http://www.movieweb.com/transformers-age-of-extinction-possible-plot-spoilers-revealed>

If we do this, if we're human and give them some useful information, then we can Utilize Negativity. Originally when I wrote this, I had the end product being "Circumventing Negativity." But when I got to thinking about it, I realized, we're not really getting around the negativity, we're not really evading it. Instead, we're using it. We're using a negative comment, tweet, message to do something useful.

Humanizing(Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity



The screenshot shows a Facebook post from a user named Joe Schmoe. The post text reads: "The Dept of Ag won't give me food stamps! Y'all r making my family starve! We haven't eaten in 2 weeks!!!!!!!!!!!!!!". Below the post is a reply box with the Georgia state logo on the left and the text "Write a reply...". To the right of the reply box are icons for emojis, video, and attachments, followed by the text "Press Enter to send" and a blue "Reply" button.

So here's an example. Let's put the formula into use. You get this in your Facebook inbox. Unpack the complaint. He's not really asking a question, but what is the question here? "How do I get food stamps in Georgia?" Can we answer back to this? Can we be informative and friendly? Yup!

Humanizing(**Sympathy** + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

Hi Joe,

We're so sorry you've encountered such difficulty while trying to get your food stamps—which can be quite a confusing process.

First part, Sympathy: That sucks.

Humanizing(Sympathy + **Action** + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

Hi Joe,

We're so sorry you've encountered such difficulty while trying to get your food stamps—which can be quite a confusing process. **We recommend checking in with the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). They can help you set up a Compass account to get you and your family on track to receive food stamps (dfcs.dhs.georgia.gov/food-stamps).**

Second part: Action. How do we get food stamps? Do we go to the Department of Agriculture? Don't know? Go to Georgia.gov. Ah, it's not the Dept. of Ag, instead is the Department of Human Services, namely the Division of Family and Children Services. So, no we can give him an action—a link—to take him directly to information that will tell him all about getting food stamps in Georgia.

Humanizing(Sympathy + Action + **Appreciation**) = Utilizing Negativity

Hi Joe,

We're so sorry you've encountered such difficulty while trying to get your food stamps—which can be quite a confusing process. We recommend checking in with the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). They can help you set up a Compass account to get you and your family on track to receive food stamps (dfcs.dhs.georgia.gov/food-stamps). **We hope you get everything squared away. Thank you for reaching out to us!**

Then to end it off, we thank him. If he hadn't come to us, he might have starved.

Humanizing (Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

Hi Joe,

We're so sorry you've encountered such difficulty while trying to get your food stamps—which can be quite a confusing process. We recommend checking in with the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). They can help you set up a Compass account to get you and your family on track to receive food stamps (dfcs.dhs.georgia.gov/food-stamps). We hope you get everything squared away. Thank you for reaching out to us!

BM

GeorgiaGov Interactive Team

The entire response should sound human. But what are some of the key points that make it human?

Humanizing (Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

Hi Joe,

We're so sorry **you've** encountered such difficulty while trying to get your food stamps—**which can be quite a confusing process**. We recommend checking in with the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). They can help you set up a Compass account to get you and your family on track to receive food stamps (dfcs.dhs.georgia.gov/food-stamps). **We hope you get everything squared away**. Thank you for reaching out to us!

BM

GeorgiaGov Interactive Team

*-Name, very personal
-contractions
-"which can be..." → agreement (we understand)
-"We hope you..." → It's like we're invested too
-Initials (not required and depends on your preference/policy but I like having my initials there for further evidence that they're talking to a human)*

Humanizing(Sympathy + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity



A screenshot of a social media comment and reply interface. The comment is from a user named Joe Schmoe, who has a profile picture of a man. The comment text reads: "Oh! Thanks for the quick reply! I didn't realize DFCS did food stamps. I'll check in with them." Below the comment is a reply box with the placeholder text "Write a reply...". To the left of the reply box is the "GEORGIA GOV" logo. To the right of the reply box are icons for emojis, replies, and shares. At the bottom right of the reply box, it says "Press Enter to send" followed by a small square icon and a blue "Reply" button.

And voila! We were able to handle this negative comment with grace while providing useful assistance! We overachieved.

Humanizing(Sympathetic + Action + Appreciation) = Utilizing Negativity

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@GeorgiaGovTeam