

My name is Ines, and work for Automattic. I am a Happiness Engineer in the WooCommerce department and spent most of my time thinking about ways I can improve my communication with our users and replying to tickets. I used to do this even before becoming part of the Automattic team, because I am also an admin the WordPress.org support forums and used to do support for WordPress plugins. So support really is something that I am passionate about and want to tell you something about today.

So, let's say you're a developer. You've created a product, maybe a plugin. You've spent weeks, maybe months, working on it. Thinking about the code, designing the interface, dreaming about how users are going to use your product, tweaking and editing, pouring all of this energy into your project. And then the moment finally arrives: you release your plugin, people start using it, buying your license, you're making money, *nice*.

And then the first emails start arriving. It's going to happen, no matter how great your product is. No matter how much time you've spent bug hunting. Those emails from customers who need customizations, who are missing functionalities, who are running into problems that you hadn't thought about. They are going to come in.

And this is the moment where a lot of developers realize that they have missed a step in their preparation. So much energy is put into creating this product, but not so much energy is put into the question: "how are we going to communicate with our users?"

How many of you have sat down before releasing your product, with yourself or with the team you're working with, to try and answer this question? How are we going to communicate with our users?

Alright, so promise me this: before you release anything else, do this. Sit down, and try to answer this question: how are we going to communicate with our users?

Now, let me tell you why this is important.

The graphic designers present here today will agree with me. For a brand to work properly, it needs to look synchronously across the platforms that you use. The same colors, the same logo, you know, people need to recognize that they're talking to you specifically.

It therefore stands to reason that the same thing needs to happen with your communication. Communication needs to be synchronous across platforms for it to have a great impact. And the only way that you are going to achieve this is by sitting down and having a conversation about it. Sit down by yourself or with your team, and think about: how are we going to approach this?

What language are we going to use? What is our tone of voice going to be? How are we going to deal with angry customers? Will we give discounts, or offer free licenses to certain groups (like non-profits)? How do we approach this?

It comes down to three different areas that need attention:

1. Tone of voice
2. Platform
3. And Rules of Engagement

Let's go through these one by one.

Tone of voice is not so much about *what* you're saying, and all the more about how. Using an appropriate tone of voice underlines your company culture, and people will recognize you more easily.

It's the same as using your logo everywhere, and using the same colors. If you keep communicating in the same tone of voice over and over again, people will appreciate it. We're creatures of habit, so knowing how I'll be treated when I contact you makes it a lot easier to do so.

Creating a tone of voice that fits doesn't have to be hard. There are a few things that you can ask yourself when deciding on one.

1. Are we formal or informal with our users/clients?
2. Which words suit us, and which don't?
3. Do we use humor?
4. Do we use long sentences or short ones?

One company doing tone of voice very well is MailChimp. They have a special website where their whole tone of voice guide has been recorded, called voiceandtone.com.

On to 'Platform': by this I do not mean the platform that you use to sell your product. I don't mean your website, or the sales you get from the newsletter you sent. Those belong to tone of voice.

What I'm talking about is the software you'll use to deal with incoming tickets, or emails. While you could use something like Gmail, scalability is something to keep in mind. If you're working in a team or plan on growing your company in the future, you need a platform that allows for multiple people to work in the same space.

There are a lot of different choices out there. Here are the main ones that I have personally worked with. Slack is in there because it allows you to combine different things. Because with WordPress products you often get tickets coming in from different places (email and the WordPress.org forums for example) it is nice to see everything in one stream.

You really should take a look at what these different platforms have to offer, and how it suits you. Help Scout, Kayako, and Zendesk are all very solid choices, but there are more out there and I suggest you try them out.

So the third area that we'll discuss is 'Rules Of Engagement'. This covers pretty much everything from "how do we engage angry customers" to "what do we say when people ask for too much" to "do we give away free stuff, or grant free licenses to non-profits".

Giving thought to these questions will spare you the difficulty of having to decide how to respond when big emotions come into play. Trust me when I say that there will come a point where you get frustrated, or even angry at your customer. Having a plan to fall back on is a really great way to prevent problems.

For example, if you run into a customer who is exceptionally rude, it's easy to become offended and reply aggressively. I've seen this happen quite a lot. But if you have a backup plan in place that you can reference, that will give you the opportunity to take a deep breath and still reply in the same tone of voice as you would engage a friendly customer.

This is not easy to do. In fact, it is one of the hardest things to do when supporting your product. Do not get discouraged when it happens, just look at your backup plan and remember to breathe.