



Persistence pays

Raymond Yuen examines some common excuses that potential clients may give to reject your firm's services – and how to overcome them.

For an accountant, technical skills and a professional attitude are essential. However, if your aim is to move into senior management, you must also learn how to find clients and win business for your firm.

There are countless books on how to be a good salesperson, but coping with being turned down requires persistence, courage, creativity and understanding. A true professional can turn rejection into opportunity.

The usual excuses

In many situations, a prospective client may prefer to delay, rather than give a true reason for turning down your business. Do these excuses sound familiar?

- I need to talk to the boss
- Your fee is too high
- I need to consider the matter further
- I need to consider the offer of two other firms
- I am satisfied with the service of my current firm
- I have used up the budget for this year
- I'll contact you in six months' time

When you hear excuses such as these, it's time to ask yourself some hard questions, to find the real reasons behind the excuse, so you can sow the seeds for success next time around.

Interpreting the response

“I need to talk to my boss”

This excuse may well be true, but equally, it could be a delaying tactic. Analyse the situation by considering the title and position of the person to whom you are speaking. Consider whether they have the authority to decide the deal, and whether you need to make your case directly to the boss. If that proves impossible, think about how far your prospect is buying in to what you are saying. This will affect how the person sells your message to his or her superiors.

“The fee is too high”

This is a popular excuse for turning down business and can cut negotiations dead in their tracks. But the response can imply different underlying reasons. These might include, “I cannot afford the fee,” and “I do not believe in the value of the service offered.” If the problem is simply affordability, it should be possible to find a solution, such as separating the fee into a few smaller instalments. If it’s a more fundamental issue about value, then you need to work harder to communicate your credentials and the benefits you can deliver.

“I need to consider the matter further”

The most important thing is to identify and overcome the true reason for this delaying tactic. For example, if the prospect is busy, they may not have had time to compare you against your

competitors. Alternatively, they may have some legitimate concern about whether they trust your service, or how you would fit with their existing arrangements. If you keep talking, you may help one another overcome this concern and speed the process along.

“I need to understand and consider the offer of two other firms”

This is a typical response from large companies that have clear purchasing policies. They may require a tender process or quotes from at least three competing firms. Even if the prospect thinks that your product is very good, they may be obliged to make comparisons. The best thing you can do here is to thoroughly understand your competitors. Put together comparison tables to show the merits of your service against those of competing firms.

“I am satisfied with the service of my current firm”

This is a difficult hurdle. If your prospect is very satisfied with the service provided by the current firm, take the opportunity to evaluate that firm’s strengths. If the prospect is simply too lazy or risk-averse to take on a new client, you’ll need to exercise patience and keep working on the relationship.

“I have used up the budget for this year”

Large companies usually have a financial control department, which will restrict the spending of other departments and ensure everything stays within budget. If you are talking to senior management, they may be able to adjust budget limits or allocate money from another area. Otherwise you may need to explore a deferred payment plan or agree to work towards a date in the future when they schedule their next budget approval meeting.

“I’ll contact you in six months’ time”

This could be the worst response you get, but at least you have the time to reflect on your presentation and to consider your next move. Did you make any big mistakes during the presentation? Is there something you must learn? Give the customer some time and then call them back; it may help you to understand the true reason for the rejection and allow you to move ahead again.

If you want to advance in a professional firm, being able to communicate the value of your services and persuade clients to think like you do is a valuable skill. If you believe in the value and power of what you and your firm can add, then let your motto be:

“who persists, wins.”



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SOX-compliant spreadsheets: Input validation steps

By Carson Cheng

Many spreadsheet designers focus on formulas, but fail to consider data validation, neglecting the famous computer axiom: “Garbage in, garbage out.”

SOX-compliant spreadsheets: Input validation steps

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Simple validation of totals

There are several ways to validate input data in Excel. The most simple is to use IF() to display an error message if the defined condition fails. In the example below, the possibility exists that we forget to change the ranges in the SUM() formulas when we add more years or plants. To ensure that the SUM() formulas are properly set, we can cross-foot the totals at cell F5. Instead of adding only the columns or the rows, we check if the totals of columns and rows are the same before showing the result.

	F5	=IF(SUM(F2:F4)=SUM(B5:E5),SUM(F2:F4),"Error")				
	A	B	C	D	E	F
1		2006	2007	2008	2009	Subtotal
2	Plant A	334	343	454	434	1,565
3	Plant B	233	254	293	212	992
4	Plant C	123	187	132	137	579
5	Subtotal	690	784	879	783	3,136

IF() does not stop users from entering invalid data so the user should treat it as a rather weak control.

Data validation by cell

Excel provides other convenient ways to validate and control input data. As the following examples show, it allows you to set up messages to prompt the user or even reject an input altogether.

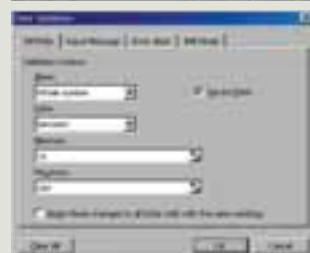
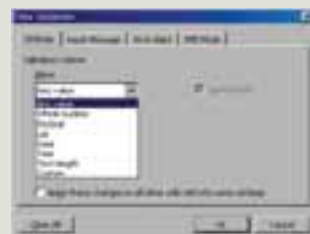
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Example 1

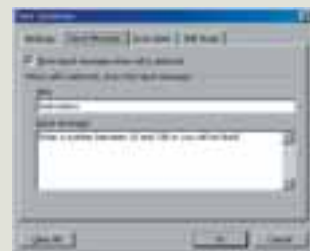
Integer within a range

To ensure the user enters an integer between a range, for example between 10 and 100, follow these steps:

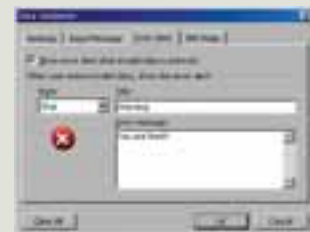
1. Select the input cell(s)
2. Choose “Data, Validation.” Note that the default validation criterion is allowing “any value.” Excel has seven built-in criteria for you to explore
3. Under the “Settings” tab, select “Whole number” under “Allow”
4. Fill out other fields as shown



5. An input message is the prompt that pops up when the user moves the cell pointer to this cell. The validation criteria can be clearly stated here. Click on the “Input Message” tab and enter the details as shown



6. You can also specify the action and the error message when the user enters invalid data. Click on the “Error Alert” tab



7. In the “Style” field, you can select among:

Stop – The user cannot enter any invalid data and will be forced to re-enter

Warning – The user will only be warned, but can still enter invalid data

Information – The user will be told of the error with an Information icon. They can still enter invalid data



When the cell is selected, the input message is shown. If an invalid data is entered, the error message will be shown. The options available for the user will depend on the style chosen. Both the input message and error alert are optional.

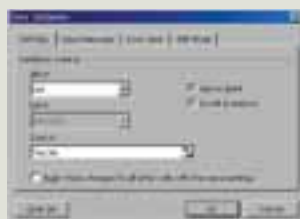
Example 2 ▶ List of choices

Validation can be achieved by limiting the user to choices in a preset list. The user is automatically blocked from entering any invalid data.

Are your spreadsheets SOX-compliant?

In this example, we want the users to enter either "Yes" or "No"; i.e., "Y", "N", "YES", and "NO" are all unacceptable.

1. Select the input cell
2. Choose "Data, Validation"
3. Choose "List" under "Allow"
4. In the Source field, enter all allowable options, separated by commas



Data Validation - List	
1	
2	Yes
3	No
4	Are your spreadsheets SOX-compliant?
5	
6	Company A
7	Company B
8	Company C

When you select the input cell, an arrow will show up on the right. You can activate the in-cell drop-down menu by clicking on the arrow.

You can switch off the drop-down menu by unchecking "In-cell dropdown" in the previous step.

Are your spreadsheets SOX-compliant?

If the same list of options applies to a range of cells, it is not desirable to enter the options cell by cell, as this may create data integrity problems. Instead, put the options on the spreadsheet as follows:

1. List all options in a range (B3: B4), preferably right on top of the input range for clarity and easy management. Note the options must be on the same worksheet as the input cells unless range names are used
2. Select the input range, e.g., B6:B8
3. Choose "Data, Validation"
4. Under the "Settings" tab, choose "List" under "Allow"
5. In the "Source" field, enter the range with the choices, e.g., B3:B4 and click "OK"
6. Hide the options by selecting the relevant rows (3:4) and "Format, Row, Hide"



Data Validation - List	
	Are your spreadsheets SOX-compliant?
Company A	Yes
Company B	Yes
Company C	

Example 3 ▶ Using a custom formula

There are cases where the built-in validation criteria cannot meet our needs. Then we need a formula to precisely define our conditions.

For a cell that accepts only integers, you can take the following steps:

1. Select the input cell (B3 in this example)
2. Choose "Custom" under "Allow"
3. Enter this formula: =B3=INT(B3). INT(n) rounds n down to the nearest integer. If n is an integer, it will certainly equal to itself after rounding

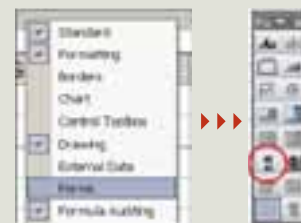


Example 4 ▶ Using tools in Form

Besides using data validation, you can also consider using the tools in the Form toolbar to limit the user's input. They include option buttons, check boxes and scroll bars. While validation criteria can be applied to a range of cells with data validation easily, Form is for one cell only.

In this example, I set up a scroll bar for the user to enter an integer from 10 to 100 in cell B3.

1. Right-click on the toolbar area and choose "Forms"
2. Click on the scroll bar button
3. Drag on your spreadsheet to create a scroll bar
4. Right click on the scroll bar and choose "Format control"
5. Enter the range in the minimum and maximum values
6. Since we accept only integers, the value of the scroll bar should increment by one
7. Enter "Page change," which defines the increment of each scroll
8. Specify the cell link, which will contain the value of the scroll bar, and click "OK"



Note that you can apply data validation to B3 to ensure users cannot enter invalid data manually.