



A poor choice of words

Mother Nature bates you. Deal with it.

That was the headline atop a promotional email sent out by **Backcountry.com**, an online seller of clothing, equipment and accessories for folks who like to spend their leisure time traipsing through dense forests, climbing the sides of snow-covered mountains or kayaking down rapids that make the most daunting roller coaster look like a ride in a kiddie park.

So a headline like the one above is actually somewhat fitting, given the company's clientele. These people enjoy testing themselves in extreme conditions — bone-chilling cold and extreme heat — in areas well known for not being well traveled. These people know what Mother Nature has to offer, and they “deal with it” on their terms.

There was only one problem with the email. It was sent a day or so after one of the worst tornado outbreaks in nearly four decades. Nearly 350 people died because of Mother Nature's fury. The intensity and ferocity of this cluster of storm activity devastated entire communities. Thousands were injured. One estimate suggested more than 1 million homes and businesses went without power.

No matter what outdoor activity you engage in, no matter how rugged you are, no matter how good your survival skills, you don't go test yourself during a tornado.

Receiving an email suggesting Mother Nature had it in for them smacks of poor taste. Granted, the marketing copy was likely written long before the storms hit, but failing to put a stop to hitting the send button left the company looking uncaring.

Backcountry did the right thing. CEO Jill Layfield immediately sent an email apologizing

for the bad timing and seeming bad taste. The mea culpa email began, appropriately, with the words, “We messed up.”

Accepting responsibility for your screw-ups is one of the most important steps on the road to forgiveness. Backcountry did just that:

Please accept our sincerest apologies for this mistake. What was intended to be witty marketing copy may have been when we wrote these words two weeks ago, but in light of current events and the suffering of people affected by Mother Nature's wrath, it is not only not witty, it is completely unacceptable.

At another time, the original headline and email would likely be considered clever. Arriving in an inbox the day after storms ravaged six states, it seems, at best, insensitive. I don't fault the folks at Backcountry for their choice of words. Headlines, whether they top newspaper stories, magazine articles or marketing materials, are meant to capture a reader's attention. This headline certainly did that — perhaps too well.

In the publishing business, these things are a bit of an occupational hazard. Articles and headlines are often written weeks in advance of when they are published and arrive on readers' desks. And that interval can lead to some embarrassing moments.

My guess is there have been moments in your business as well that you'd take back if you could. Maybe it was a marketing piece or an off-the-cuff comment to a customer. Even as the words leave your mouth, you wish you could snatch them out of the air. The look on your customer's face turns to one of dismay or disgust, and an uncomfortable silence swells.

Do the right thing. Apologize. Offer a sincere and heartfelt mea culpa for your indiscretion. And then get back to business.

Editor's note: A tip of the hat to freelance writer and avid outdoorsman Curt Harler for bringing the issue to our attention.