

Count to Ten



Almost everyone has seen this joke on a sign at some business or another: “This firm requires no physical-fitness program. Everyone gets enough exercise jumping to conclusions.” Like most humor, it’s funny because it contains a grain of truth.

Jumping to conclusions is easy — and kind of fun in its own way. Really, what’s more cleansing than getting up your dander over someone else’s action? And yet, what happens when we’re wrong?

Relationships are ruined and enemies made for no good reason. Usually, it’s best to step back for a minute, or a day, and be sure you have the facts of the situation.

I was recently in the middle of such a circumstance. A reader sent a letter to *PDB* in which he shredded a manufacturer. Its product had failed, according to the reader, who was on the hook for replacing it or suffering lasting damage to his reputation. The manufacturer wasn’t answering or returning phone calls. The reader wanted to warn other deck builders to avoid this company. It’s hard to imagine a better case for righteous indignation.

When an editor is presented with such a letter, the responsible course of action is to contact the company and give it a chance to respond. I started digging. I had a phone number for the company in my database, which I called. It turned out to be the cell number of a former employee, who provided me with a new phone

number for the company, which, as it turns out, had moved to a different state. It began to seem likely that the reader who had written me couldn’t reach the company because he was calling an old number.

Now, never mind questioning the wisdom of moving a company without also moving the phone number or having it forwarded. I called the new number, and when I spoke to a company representative, he admitted that a manufacturing issue some years ago could have caused the failure that the reader was having. The company seemed very interested in addressing the reader’s problem, so I put the two parties in touch and stepped aside.

As of this writing, the issue isn’t entirely settled, but it seems headed that way. I’m pretty happy that I decided not to publish that letter. Sure, I could have had a juicy editorial page, but at a cost to a company’s reputation. There was little risk to the magazine, as there was nothing libelous in that letter — it’s not libel if it’s true. The product had failed. The reader had called the company’s number and had not gotten a response. But the whole ordeal now seems to have risen entirely from a genuine mistake that was exacerbated by miscommunication, and not from any ill intention. The reader seems likely to receive satisfaction, and the company’s reputation won’t be harmed.

So, step back. Count to ten. Be certain of your facts before you speak. We’ll all be better off for it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Andy Engel".

Andy Engel
Editor

Unlike most of the people you know, we want your two cents.

While it’s nice to hear about what we’re doing right, it’s more interesting to hear about what we’re doing wrong. If you saw something you loved or hated, or if you’ve got a tip that could help out other readers, we want to know.

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