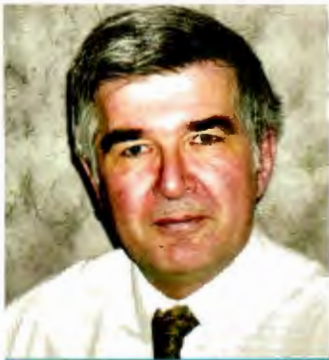


# Coffee with Mrs Angry

More can be achieved by friendly contact (and a hot beverage) than through confrontation, says **Richard Barr**



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**S**he was furious. Her lips were spitting out a stream of invective.

So was our new coffee machine. It was grinding and hissing and (heaven forbid) belching. Eventually, after considerable effort, it trickled out a small amount of very dark liquid. Then came the foaming phase, and the dangerous process of inserting a steaming tube into an unsuspecting glass of milk, while the machine made noises not too dissimilar to a space rocket taking off before rendering the glass too hot to handle and giving me third-degree burns on my fingertips.

So began the first production from Barrbucks café. I cannot yet claim to be an expert barista, but at least I have started to learn to tame the very expensive present that my wife and I gave each other for Christmas.

Before further extolling my coffee-making prowess, let me return to the local post office. Behind the glass screen, the

counter staff were not exactly cowering, but they were taking it in turns to try to placate Mrs Angry, who was still in full flow and not to be mollified. A delivery intended for somewhere in Ireland had not reached its destination, and she was determined that the beleaguered staff were to be held responsible – and that they should not only pay for the failure but personally set off across the Irish Sea to put the matter right.

I had arrived a few minutes earlier with my handful of letters, plus one special and a brace of recorded deliveries. There are certain government departments (I will spare their blushes) that are constitutionally incapable of answering letters, and occasionally even deny that they ever received them.

Tedious though it is, I now write to them by recorded delivery so that I can, when told that the letter never got to them, produce the little slip from the post office which confirms that it was not only delivered but also signed for (though, as often as not, a spider would write a more legible signature).

Over the years, I have come to know by name the people who work at our post office (largely through my inability to arrive more than a few minutes before closing time), and I felt for them as they tried to grapple with Mrs Angry. This was probably the first time they felt relieved that they had the anti-bandit screen, as

North Walsham, Norfolk, sees little crime.

I then asked myself whether I had ever been as unreasonable as Mrs Angry, and I answered that, yes, I probably had. Fortunately, my little private conversation with myself was not conducted out loud or in the post office, or I suspect that the staff would have shut up shop and gone home in despair.

Be honest: I expect that you too have ranted unpleasantly to the disembodied voice of a telephone company representative when your broadband ceased to function or they decided to disconnect you a week before your move. Who has not, just occasionally, disputed the paternity of the ticket inspector who has to break the news that a leaf on the line has brought Southeastern trains to a standstill, or at least contemplated removing the hat of an errant traffic warden and stamping on it?

Even in professional dealings, solicitors do occasionally become so wrapped up in their clients' cases that they lose sight of the fact that their (legal) opponent is not the same as their client's opponent. I once met, in the flesh, the solicitor with whom I had been having a long and difficult correspondence. I assumed that, face to face, we could be a little more civil, but as soon as I introduced myself, she turned her back and refused to speak to me. It sometimes works the other way round too – the author of those

irate and unreasonable letters can sometimes turn out to be pleasant and amenable in person.

Nonetheless, despite my own occasional lapses, I have found over the years that you generally get a better outcome by using charm rather than anger and smiles rather than frowns: more can be achieved, and blood pressure reduced, by friendly contact, even in the most hard-fought cases.

In this respect email has its advantages. You can write a perfectly friendly email: "Dear Geraldine, please see attached letter. I await hearing from you." Then, in the attached letter to her firm, you can pour out all the vitriol you like, but somehow still preserve the cordiality of that personal exchange.

I doubt if Mrs Angry was appeased by the combined efforts of the post office staff, and I could hear her still ranting long after I reached the street. For times like this, post office bureaucrats should at least consider installing a coffee-making machine. A well-brewed cappuccino would do wonders to remedy the problem when a parcel fails to reach its destination. Or, at the very least, a cup of tea. If a coffee-making expert is a barista, should not then one who prepares fine cups of tea be called a 'solicita'? Something to think about in 2015 for those contemplating alternative careers. I know a post office that might be able to use your services. **SJ**