

A Word about Technology Marketing

And Now Let's Hear From Our Customers

6 Ways Customer Endorsements Can Help Convert Sales Leads

Michael J. Selissen
Case Mountain Communications, LLC



Summary

When it comes to convincing new sales leads to buy your B2B product or service, the right words from your existing customers might just be the spark you need. Why? Because new prospects rely on credible and trusted sources to validate what you promise to deliver. And your current customers are the best source of that validation.

Most B2B websites include a sprinkling of customer quotes and offer a few case studies illustrating “customer successes.” But, do these testimonials always have the intended impact? Do they accurately describe each customer’s situation? And as a marketing professional, are you taking advantage of all available channels to present your customers’ flattering words?

Read on to learn six ways to present customer stories, testimonials and quotes that will connect with new prospects and demonstrate your company’s value proposition.

Introduction

In their report titled, *2008-09 Business Technology Marketing Benchmark Guide*, the marketing research firm MarketingSherpa took a look at the top influencing factors in each of four phases of the technology sales cycle: Awareness, Research, Negotiation and Purchase. **It turns out that technology buyers rank “word of mouth” as either the number one or number two influencer in every phase of the cycle.**

Word-of-mouth communication occurs among customers and prospects in a variety of formal and informal ways, including:

- Trade association meetings
- One-on-one personal conversations
- Online communities and forums
- Public speaking venues
- Contributed and professional articles
- Consultant engagements

Although you have little control over the conversations of others, you can certainly act as an intermediary and impartially present your existing customers as reliable and credible third parties.

Here are some objectives to keep in mind when compiling and organizing customer endorsements:

- Include endorsements from across a variety of customer roles and organize them accordingly on your Website. For example, where you have a Web content section that speaks to CIOs, highlight the endorsements from CIOs of your current customers.
- Organize endorsements along geographical and industry lines too
- Focus on technical or business benefits and use real customer data when possible
- Present customer stories and testimonials using multiple formats and media to match your intended audiences

Now let's take a look at some specific ways you can create customer endorsements that work.

Number 1: Case Studies

B2B customers consistently point to case studies as being among the most influential types of vendor-supplied content. Why? For two reasons: First, case studies provide third-party validation of vendor claims. Even if the reader is unfamiliar with the people featured in the case study, the fact that they are real and willing to go on-the-record is reassuring to the reader.

Second, stories are a powerful way to communicate and reinforce any message because they establish emotional and intellectual connections with the reader. Stories enable, for example, an IT Director to see a vendor's product or service through the eyes of another IT Director who understands the goals, challenges and limitations of the job.

Unfortunately, many vendors create case studies that are little more than veiled advertisements, highlighting themselves instead of their customers. The most effective case studies describe how the solution benefitted those customers. Where possible, case studies should cite specific improvements in performance metrics such as cost savings, efficiency, or customer satisfaction.

Here are some things to consider when writing a case study:

- **Create two versions of each case:** a summary version suitable for a web page, and a long version that you can email as an attachment or have professionally printed for trade shows or as a "leave behind"
- **Target your case studies:** Create case studies relevant to each geographical area and vertical industry into which you sell
- **Speak to the reader:** Write each case study for a particular technical or management role, such as data architect, IT Director or CFO. Interview customer personnel in each of these corresponding roles and highlight the business or technical benefits relevant to those roles.
- **Consider a "news feature" format:** Case studies written like newspaper feature stories carry weight because they are interesting to read and engage the reader both emotionally and intellectually

Number 2: Customer Testimonials

Customer testimonials, or quotes, reinforce your company's credibility and expertise. They tell prospects that you have a broad and satisfied customer base.

Reuse quotes from your case studies or press releases and display them throughout your website and on a dedicated page titled something like, "What Our Customers Have to Say About Us." Link each quote to the case study or press release in which it first appeared. This will help drive prospects to read more about what led your customers to make such statements.

Select quotes that sound real, like someone actually spoke the words. Too often quotes from press releases don't sound authentic because they are made up by the press release writer. So pick out quotes that are genuine.

Try to stay away from general quotes because they can be ineffective and don't resonate very well. The more specific your customer quotes can be in terms of benefits and results, the more impact they will have. Here is an example:

Good	"Xyportal's product and service exceeded our expectations. Their sales and professional service teams are world class."
Better	"Xyportal's UniCall software significantly contributed to improving our customer satisfaction scores."
Best	"We saw positive results almost immediately after installing Xyportal's UniCall software in our call center. It is the reason our customer service satisfaction scores increased by 30% in just six months."

If you do not have enough usable quotes in your existing material, by all means ask your customer to send you written feedback on your product or service. Let them know you would like to publish their quotes. Just make sure to get a signed approval before using the quote. Also be sure to give full attribution to all the quotes you use, including the speaker's name, title and company.

Number 3: One-on-One Reference Meetings

Once in a while you will come across a prospective customer who just cannot commit to purchasing your product or service. Often the customer simply had a bad experience in the past or is just uncertain about which vendor to choose. Bringing in one of your top customers to meet with this prospect can often turn the tide in your favor because the meeting will allow your prospect to hear firsthand how well your product or service ranks compared to your competitors.

A face-to-face meeting with a satisfied customer gives your prospect the opportunity to ask the questions about important issues such as product quality and reliability, service and support, installation and integration, and training. As a secondary benefit, these meetings can confirm your company's credibility, not only as a solutions provider, but also as a trusted advisor in your market.

Be respectful of your customers' time though. Asking a customer to attend reference meetings is something you must do only when absolutely necessary. And make sure that you offer each favored customer something in return, such as regular access to your chief executives, an opportunity review of the upcoming product features list, or a mention in your company's newsletter.

Number 4: Conference Presentations

Industry conferences and tradeshows bring vendors together with dozens of existing customers, prospects, competitors, consultants, analysts, journalists, bloggers and inquisitive sightseers. The potential to create awareness, present an industry vision and strengthen credibility is a good reason why many vendors pay handsomely for the opportunity to sponsor such events, give keynote presentations and lead panel discussions.

Although tradeshows can be costly, particularly when compared to webinars, they do provide a venue for you and your customers to spread the word about your product or service and to meet face-to-face with important prospects and partners. If you have one or two willing customers (and assuming you have been careful in your preshow planning) you can take advantage of industry events in several ways:

- Tell one or more customer success stories, using specific quotes, in your presentation
- Arrange to have one of your customers participate in your presentation or product demonstration
- Ask a customer who is presenting to include a story about your product or service during his or her presentation in exchange for equal mention during yours
- Invite one or two customers to attend private receptions for key prospects and talk about your product or what it is like to work with your company
- Make sure that everyone who comes to your booth walks away with appropriate case studies in addition to product collateral
- In your post-show follow up, include links to customer stories when you email your new prospects

Once again, you will need to be cautious in the amount of time you request from your customers because they will certainly have full schedules of their own during the event.

Number 5: Audio Podcast

Podcasts offer many of the same benefits as a printed case study. For example, because they are downloadable to a portable MP3 player, people can take podcasts anywhere and listen to them at any time – at home, in the office, while traveling, or just sitting on the beach. **But unlike written case studies, a podcast carries the impact, nuance and personality of the human voice – your customer's voice.**

There are several ways you can take advantage of podcasts:

- Create recorded versions of your written cases, just like a “book on tape.” However, reading out loud is a special skill, so you may want to consider getting some outside help.
- Supplement your written case study with a more in-depth conversation among the people featured in the written version
- Focus on a complementary benefit. For example, if your written case study highlights the process improvements your customer achieved, create a podcast about the corresponding financial advantages.
- Lead a peer-to-peer discussion with the CEOs, CFOs, or IT Directors from your company and your customer's
- Interview an outside expert familiar with your company and your customer's, such as an analyst, consultant or journalist

One thing you can do more easily with audio than with the written word is to create an industry-based or benefit-based story. For example, using an in-depth reporting style such as you might find on your local public radio station, you can interview multiple customers and produce an audio story that stitches the interviews together as part of a story about how your company solves a business problem.

So should you consider podcasting for your case studies? The answer depends on a few factors.

- If you already have a broader podcasting program in your company, then definitely begin building a library of case studies

- Equipment cost is very low. However, producing a podcast takes an investment of time and a level of knowhow.
- If you plan to host the podcast yourself, ask others for an honest assessment of your “radio voice.” Alternatively, look to professional announcers or students at the communications department of a nearby college.

On the positive side, once you have learned the ropes, the job of producing each new podcast will proceed much more quickly. And if you decide to produce a companion podcast for each written case study, you will already have the research material on hand from which to ask questions and direct the flow of the conversation.

Number 6: Video

If an audio podcast has the power to command more attention than written case studies, then video can outshine them both. A well produced video can tell a story in pictures, words, and music that is as compelling and memorable as it is informative. Technology marketers often neglect the emotional aspect of their messages, yet what we recall of a company is often based more on gut feel and simplicity of message than it is a litany of product features and functions.

As with audio, video lends itself to a feature-based approach that lets you tell stories about particular topics using interviews with multiple customers. For example, if your company makes software that controls automatic drill presses, you might produce a 5-minute video featuring a few customers recounting how the product minimizes waste, lowers production costs and contributes to a greener environment. You might produce another that demonstrates how well you understand the manufacturing industry and are able to customize your software rapidly and accurately.

There are, of course, downsides to using video for customer stories. First, they are costly if produced professionally – although not nearly as costly as a tradeshow. One way to justify investing in video is to take a close look at the historical cost of some of the marketing programs in your repertoire. If it turns out your investment in some of those programs is not yielding quality leads, consider realigning your budget to include a series of short videos instead.

The second downside to including customers in a video occurs if your customer is no longer happy with your service or decides to move on to one of your competitors. Under such circumstances, it is easy to pull the document from your collateral library. But the loss can be greater if you have to re-edit a video or pull it altogether.

The bottom line is: give video serious consideration and don't underestimate its potential... but above all, plan well.

Start Telling Some Stories

Customer endorsements reassure new prospects by creating impressions that are more indelible than most standard product collateral. They are part of the “word of mouth” experience that communicates your company’s value and expertise within your prospects’ peer group.

Endorsements are also important because your customers can tell your story better than you. After all, your existing customers already invested in your solution – they have laid the groundwork for your prospects.

To take proper advantage of customer endorsements, start by learning how your prospects prefer to receive information. Focus on both the medium and the message. Target your endorsements as narrowly as possible. For example, write each case study with one specific takeaway, such as your product’s technical advantage, ROI results, or process improvement. Develop a set of endorsements for each industry you serve.

Be open to the potential of nontraditional media such as podcasting and video. These forms are just as portable as written case studies and, if properly produced, can have substantially more impact.

Promote your endorsements with vigor by offering them via email to your prospects at specific points during the sales cycle. Place a “Client Success” menu item at the top of your Website as a clear starting point to your library of endorsements.

Finally, it’s never too soon to ask your customers to consider telling their stories. Start setting expectations during the sales process. This can be a signal that you want them to have a positive experience.

About Case Mountain Communications

Case Mountain Communications helps companies identify and convey the strengths of their technology and vision using clear and concise writing.

We reach beyond the ordinary and create a point of view that speaks to the technical, business, and market needs of each audience.

Visit us at www.casemountain.com

