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Solicit, develop and promote powerful customer testimonials

Posted on October 27th, 2015 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



When you're considering the purchase of a new home or vehicle, an expensive toy or even where to go for your family's next vacation, I bet you solicit opinions from trusted friends, family or colleagues.

I do. Regularly. In fact, I just returned from a weekend getaway at a beachfront spot recommended by my friend John Wooldridge, Yachting editor-at-large, who responded to a question I'd posted on my Facebook page. I'd never have considered it without his recommendation but I trusted his judgment, scoped it online and booked my escape.

When it comes to seeking opinions through social media, I'm not alone. An SDL Corporate Survey tapping consumers in the U.S., United Kingdom, Australia and Singapore found that more than half the population — 58 percent — will ask family and friends for recommendations through these popular platforms. Nielsen reports that those opinions are valued, with 84 percent of consumers claiming to “completely” or “somewhat” trust the recommendations of their personal influencer groups.

I imagine that you venture online to do these searches, visiting any number of websites, blogs, product review sites, networking pages and message boards or forums. A few keystrokes serve up a plethora of insider perspectives on everything available for consumption.

Customer testimonials have the potential to boost or diminish the confidence factor among site visitors, most of whom are growing more adept at discerning the legitimacy of such content.

Online opinion gathering on products is up from 61 percent in 2007 to 68 percent today, according to Nielsen. Seventy percent of those who review online testimonials will “always” or “sometimes” base their actions on what they've read.

This means testimonials and reviews have enormous influence over buying decisions. In essence, word-of-mouth clout is perhaps stronger

today than ever before, thanks to the massive amounts of feedback readily accessible. Incidentally, both boomers and millennials rank word of mouth No. 1 in influencing the purchase of big-ticket items.

People considering the purchase of a boat, a yacht club or boat club membership, electronics or anything else under the vast marine umbrella will likewise rely to a great degree on word of mouth and customer testimonials.

This begs a few important questions, the most important of which is: What are you doing to harness the power of positive testimonials from your customers to influence the buying decisions of your prospects?

Do you have a robust, easily accessible testimonial trove for those researching your company? When your company or brand is searched, do positive opinions and reviews pop to the top?

Does your website feature written or video testimonials that are easy to find and prominently positioned?

Are customer testimonials continually being mined and uploaded to your site — and cross-promoted through social media and communication channels?

Considering the proven power of testimonials, I'm surprised that more marine marketers don't focus resources on acquiring them. Not only do legitimate customer accolades build credibility, but they also strengthen search engine optimization (SEO) while simultaneously deflecting the darts of irate customers.

The potential rewards of dedicating resources to a customer testimonial initiative are great. It does require planning, work and commitment, but based on consumer purchasing it should be a priority.

To this end I've outlined three essential strategies for soliciting, developing and promoting powerful customer testimonials.

ASK FOR IT!

Every business should have at its core a team of loyal brand enthusiasts who are willing to share your good word. However, it's unlikely that even the most faithful fan will send in a video or write a love letter without a prompt. To gain valued testimonials, you must ask for them.

Where, when and how to ask? Identify your "known" and most vociferous brand champions. Make a personal call and ask.

If you publish a regular newsletter, ask.

Does your CRM (customer relationship management) system allow you to personalize an e-blast template to explain the purpose of the request and why it's important, complete with a link to a form?

Your website should include a dedicated page featuring testimonials, complete with a viewer invitation to link to a form and write one. Some sites sprinkle testimonials throughout.

Ask colleagues to make recommendations on your LinkedIn business page.

Host special events for customers. Set up a special area on-site and nab happy customers for a quick commentary.

Do you send thank-you notes on delivery of a product? Ask.

Post requests (and share testimonials as appropriate) on your Facebook page, blog or other platform.

As a way to stimulate participation, some companies offer incentives — discount coupons, small gifts, etc. I'm not a fan because I don't find it necessary, but others believe such offers will motivate greater response.

Always ask for permission to share a customer testimonial, and ask to use it on an unlimited basis. Never use an unsolicited testimonial or letter without your customer's permission.

KNOW WHAT TO ASK

Some make an effort to ask for testimonials. However, the results often fall short of what they'd hoped. Many sound the same, with little substance or originality. Bor-ing! Others seem to have been written in a plug-and-play format.

Such dry, lackluster comments are guaranteed to fall on deaf ears. For your customer's testimonials to resonate with real credibility, they must be authentic and tell their own story.

The best-kept secret to getting your customers to provide testimonials is simple. First, don't simply ask for a testimonial and leave the request open-ended. Rather, move to steer the conversation by asking smart, thought-provoking questions. Navigating in this manner allows your customers to share responses that will ring with authenticity.

Here are some questions my marketing team and I ask our boat club members. They can be packaged in an online testimonial form or posed by an individual when conducting a video interview. Note: Be sure to confirm the customer's name and spelling, along with city and state.

What were your early or initial concerns or objections about our company's (products or services)?

How would you describe your experiences since using our (product or service)?

What has been the biggest surprise about our (product or service)?

What do you like best about our (product or service)?

What would you tell someone who asked you about our (company or product or service)?

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

PRINT OR VIDEO?

Which are better, print or video testimonials? When produced properly, either does the trick.

Personally, I prefer the sheer impact of video. I like to see and hear customers tell their stories with the full benefit of tone, facial expression and body language. However, for video testimonials to be most effective, a few special requirements must be met.

Shooting is a breeze with a smartphone or combo video/camera, but you or someone on your staff must be tech-savvy and capable of handling basic editing functions. The good news: There are plenty of editing programs out there, and today's consumers prefer simple vs. slick commercial productions.

Yet another challenge involves shooting in a public space (such as a boat show or party) with lots of ambient noise and distractions. Often the microphone built into your device is insufficient for this setting. Invest in an inexpensive lavalier plug-in for better-quality sound.

Practice makes perfect. Take time to experiment with colleagues. Try to replicate the space and conditions in which you will shoot. Test and dial in the requirements until you achieve the right balance and quality. You want to avoid engaging customers and shooting great testimonials, only to discover that an unanticipated problem has made the footage unusable.

When planned properly, print testimonials can likewise deliver a powerful punch. When asking for them, however, be sure to provide a list of questions for customers to answer, such as those I recommended.

Once you've collected customer responses to the questions — whether in video or print format — it's time to weave them together into one fluid testimonial or pluck out the best and strongest statements to feature. Always include the person's first and last name, as well as the city and state. I've always distrusted testimonials that carry only a single name. Never change the content or edit inappropriately, and never ever fabricate a testimonial.

If all the rationale I've presented hasn't convinced you yet why testimonials should be a marketing priority, here's my last-ditch effort. When are people most likely to share or post strong opinions — after a positive or negative experience?

An early (2008) book on the power of social media by Pete Blackshaw focused on what he first dubbed the emergence of "consumer-generated media." The title tells the story: "Satisfied Customers Tell Three Friends, Angry Customers Tell 3,000: Running a Business In Today's Consumer-Driven World."

Through the potent mix of personal contacts and social media, today's consumer reach can far exceed 3,000. With that in mind, it's more important than ever to deliver an exceptional customer experience, quickly take care quickly of the disgruntled and cultivate testimonials you can share with the world.

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