

Marketing With Case Studies:

The Plot Thickens: Why Case Studies Create New Customers

How to Sell Your Products or Services Using Story-Telling Techniques



By Charles Brown
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Introduction

Charles Brown is a freelance copywriter who specializes in writing case studies, white papers and SEO¹ web content for business clients. The author of over 200 articles, Mr. Brown lives in Fort Worth, Texas.

For more information, please visit him at <http://dynamic-copywriting.net>, where he writes extensively on:

1. Educational marketing techniques that generate leads and get return web site visitors by delivering free, problem-solving information to prospective customers in the form of white papers, valuable web content, tip sheets and other information products.
2. The use of story-telling techniques to market products or services and capture reader interest and attention.

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¹ SEO, or "Search Engine Optimization," is a method of writing web content that emphasizes certain keywords in order to give the site higher search engine results.

"In the beginning was story. The caveman rushed back to his tribe and excitedly acted out his encounter with some Paleolithic beast. This was his story and forever after he would be remembered by this story."

The Way of the Story
By Catherine Ann Jones

Tim Jennings leans back into his chair. His broad smile turns grim as he remembers the events of four years ago. "Those were dark days here at Data Corp. The Securities and Exchange Commission was convinced we had done something illegal and nothing we could say could convince them otherwise."

"If it hadn't been for our law firm, Sheldon, Warren and Hale, some of us here would be spending the next decade in jail."

So begins a fictional case study that might typify how a law firm could use one of its clients' success stories to attract more corporate clients.

It certainly begins with a serious problem, doesn't it? But it also foreshadows a successful outcome for Mr. Jennings' company. And in

Mr. Jennings' own words, it was his law firm that got him out of trouble.

In its simplest form, a case study is a Before and After story that just happens to sell a product or service.

The "Before" scene depicts a company (your customer) facing a dire situation. In the "After" scene, the problem has been resolved and the customer is happy.

Between the "Before" and "After" scenes is the "Journey," which shows how your company's product or service played an essential role in bringing about a positive change for the customer.

*The first problem all marketers face is getting their message **noticed**.*

*The second is getting it **believed**.*

*And the third is getting buyers to **take action**.*

Because a case study is a story, it gets noticed; because it is a third party testimonial, it is believed; and because it provides valuable information and shows a successful solution, it gets acted upon.

A well-written case study is all this and more. It has all the power of a compelling story, but it is also a sales message that is told in the words and experiences of a real customer.

Rather than you or your ad proclaiming the benefits of your product or service, you quote the customer talking about the benefits you offer.

Getting Through The Noise

Depending on which study you listen to, it has been estimated that the average American is bombarded with over 10,000 marketing messages every day. Far more than the human mind can take in.

So we ignore the marketers' cries for attention. We screen their calls, we flip right past their magazine ads, we run to the refrigerator during commercial breaks and we throw their junk mail away before opening the envelopes.

In desperation, traditional marketers use methods that amount to little more than "*shouting louder*," in order to get us to notice. But still their messages barely register.

And even when they do get us to notice their commercial messages, we

are hardened and skeptical. We do not trust or believe their claims and boasts. If it sounds too good to be true, we know it isn't.

A case study is simply a customer success story, with your product or service playing a featured role as the catalyst for change.

Finally, even if their marketing message has made it past our notice and skepticism, we may or may not take action. Very few of these messages are crafted to get past our "what's in it for me" radar.

But look back up to the Tim Jennings and Data Corp. paragraph. Because it is a story, it easily gets through all the noise and clutter that distract us from traditional marketing messages. From the first paragraph we are interested in finding out what happened, how the executives at Data Corp. avoided going to jail and how their law firm helped them prove their innocence.

Moreover, since the benefit statement was presented in the form of a direct quote from a satisfied client, it was highly believable.

If you or your sales literature makes a claim, it is suspect. But if all of your benefit statements are expressed as direct quotes from real, satisfied human beings, a reader is far more likely to accept it as truth.

Beyond Testimonials

Why are we willing to watch a two-hour movie or read a 500-page novel rather than read a two-page plot summary or watch a 60 second trailer? Because we want to *experience* a story.

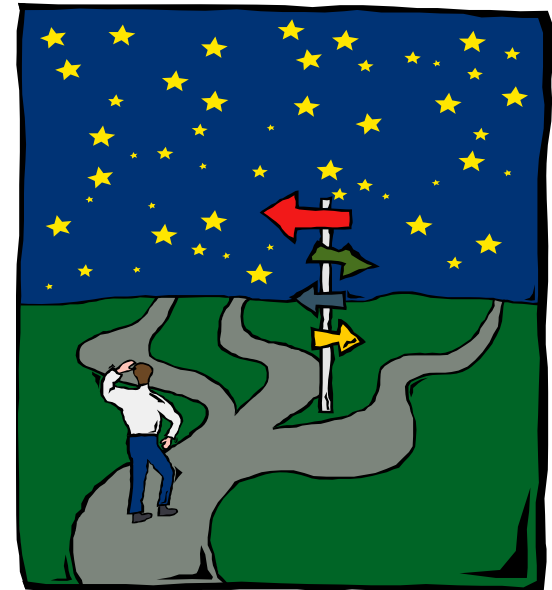
Raw factual data leaves us unmoved. But stories are coded into our DNA.

Consider the building blocks of case studies - testimonials. Not only do we accept third party endorsements as proof of a product's or service's benefits, we also find them interesting because we realize the person is speaking from experience with that product or service.

But often we want more than a mere testimonial, because behind almost every testimonial is a story. A story that we, as buyers, want to hear rather than just reading creative ads and slick sales literature.

What if Tim Jennings had just written a one or two sentence statement of how pleased Data Corp. was with the work of their law firm? It certainly would have been helpful, but not nearly as compelling, as a two-page story of how the SEC raided their offices one day and seized their financial records, leaking allegations of fraud to the press. And how their law firm had worked diligently on their behalf and won a convincing court case that exonerated them of all wrongdoing.

What impact might such a case study have on another executive who is looking for a new law firm to handle her company's legal matters? Conventional wisdom says that top executives make their decisions based on cold hard facts, so that a mere *story* would have little impact on them. But the truth is that stories communicate the same information a factual document would convey, only in a way that involves the reader and allows her to *experience* the effectiveness of your company's service or products.



This other executive does not have to be in the same business as Data Corp., nor does her situation have to exactly parallel Data Corp's and involve overly aggressive government regulators in order for her to identify with Tim Jennings' story. What she takes away from this case study is an acceptance of Sheldon, Warren and Hale's diligence and expertise.

When Are Case Studies Most Effective?

Case studies are rarely used as an isolated marketing tool. They may be posted on a company's website, or included in a press release packet, or abbreviated to fit into a large ad, or taken out into the field by sales people, but they are usually most effective as one part of a total marketing toolbox.

There are specific times and situations that are ideally suited for the power of case studies. For example:

1. When what you sell is comparatively expensive.
2. When what you sell is new, or represents a new way of doing things.
3. When the customer may not easily understand the benefits your product or service offers.
4. When adopting your solution would require significant change for the customer's company.

Be sure to present your major benefits in the form of direct quotes from your customer.

To get these quotes, all you have to do is ask the right questions.

"A real estate developer who produces a picture book of the history of the land from school children's drawings has a better chance of getting a permit than a developer with a PowerPoint presentation on economic development."

**Whoever Tells The
Best Story Wins**
By Annette Simmons

5. When the customer's company is entrenched in an existing relationship with a competitor, even though your new product or service offers substantially better benefits.
6. When selling your product or service requires educating the customer.
7. When selling your product or service involves making difficult concepts more easily understood.
8. When you need to inspire a champion within the customer's company, because there are many gatekeepers who can all say "No" and derail your entire sales process.
9. When your customers tend to be blissfully unaware or in denial about a potentially devastating problem.
10. When your own company is not well known.

There is a famous ad by David Olgivy that illustrates the obstacles that all marketers must overcome and, to me, sums up how case studies are uniquely equipped to get through to potential customers. It features a stern-faced executive saying: ***"I don't know who you are. - I don't know your company. - I don't know your company's product. - I don't know what your company stands for. - I don't know your company's customers. - I don't know your company's reputation. Now – what is it you want to sell me?"***

How Case Studies Are Used ²

Case studies can be used in many ways to market your products or services. For example, several companies have created a successful print advertisement based on case studies, which have produced better results than their previous ads.

1. **Use it in a press release.** An abridged version of a case study can be written as a press release. You can also inform editors and journalists that expanded versions of the case study can be obtained at your website or by contacting you.
2. **Mail or email it to prospects and customers.** All lists of customers and prospects must be maintained in order to keep them responsive. By providing your list with valuable, informative material like case studies, you build relationships with the people on your list.
3. **Give it to sales.** Salespeople need proof of a product's benefits in order to demonstrate its effectiveness. Few sales pieces are as persuasive and compelling as a case study in which a real customer voices these benefits.

"Surprisingly, clients don't leverage their case studies nearly as much as they should. Some, in fact, do little more than just post it on their websites. What a waste."

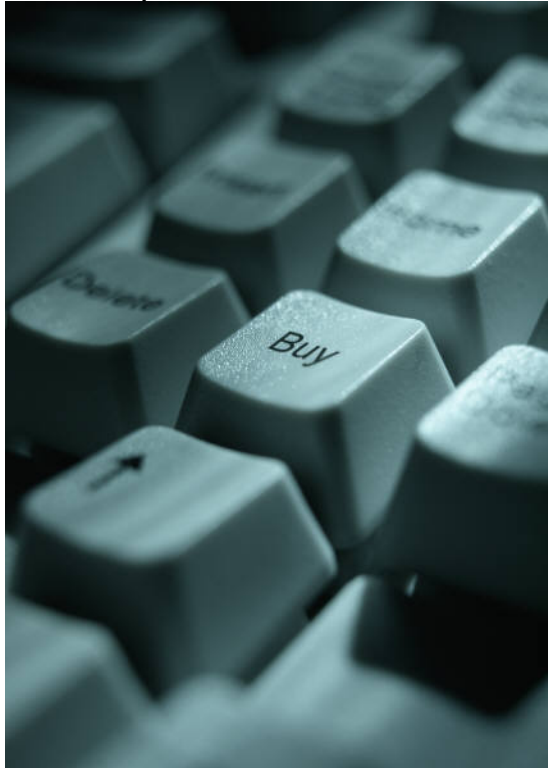
Steve Slaunwhite

² Note: This list is based on a similar list of ways to use case studies written by Steven Slaunwhite in his ebook, "Cracking the Case Study Market." A copy of this excellent ebook is available at his website, www.ForCopywritersOnly.com. CB



4. **Include as Content for your website.** Web content that educates visitors and gives them problem-solving information establishes your site as a resource, and gives visitors reason to bookmark it and return to it regularly.
5. **Rewrite as a speaking topic.** When an executive needs to give a speech, few topics beat a case study about a real world situation. Moreover, the case study can easily be made into a PowerPoint presentation. Additional mileage can be gained by using the full printed version of the case study as a handout.
6. **Use as a lead-generation device.** An effective lead generation campaign relies on a valuable, free giveaway to induce people to opt onto your list. A case study that provides readers with important problem-solving information makes an excellent tool to get prospects to "raise their hands" and subscribe to your permission marketing campaign.
7. **Hand them out at trade shows.** Trade shows are highly charged environments where marketers engage in a fierce competition to put something in customers' hands that will encourage future business. Case studies stand out among all the golf balls and slick sales literature. In fact, some inventive marketers have even printed blown up versions of their case studies to post on their exhibit walls.
8. **Include as a companion piece to a white paper.** Case studies and white papers go together to make the ultimate "show and tell" marketing impact. White papers are objective presentations

of a product or services' merits, while a case study demonstrates those same merits through the experiences of another business. I would even argue that short, abbreviated case studies can be written into a white paper to increase its impact.



Creating the Case Study

An easy way to frame a case study is to remember the old advice given to resume writers: Demonstrate your accomplishments with the PAR formula: Problem – Action – Results.

Look for a really satisfied customer who had a dire problem before your company intervened with a product or service that made all the difference.

Remember that at its heart, a case study is a story, and a story needs a challenging problem to overcome.

The second thing to look for is a resolution that yielded tangible, measurable results. What actually changed in a definable way for this customer?

Finally, fill in the gap between the Problem and the Results. What actions did your company take that led to those results? How did your product or service make the difference for your customer?

If you've ever interviewed a well-prepared job applicant, you probably know how effective this format can be. It is a demonstrative way for that person to present his or her accomplishments without just saying something bland like, "I managed a staff of 100 employees."

Cut the Preamble

The beginning is by far the most important part of your case study. Unfortunately, most case study writers begin the same way 99% of all public speakers begin - with long-winded preambles. If you've ever heard a speaker who took five minutes thanking the audience for the opportunity to stand before them, you know exactly what I mean.

James C. Humes, who wrote speeches for five American presidents, referred to such slow, tedious openings as "throat clearings." Don't begin your case study with the written equivalent of throat clearing. Instead, jump right into the action. Begin with a quote, a startling fact, an action or even a foreshadowing of impending doom.

One speaker says to use "tornado" openings. Stir up trouble, talk about a problem, mention something that disturbs or even angers the audience. Then present the rest of your discussion as the solution to all the trouble you've stirred up.

"It was a dark and stormy night
Suddenly a shot rang out. A
door slammed. The maid
screams."

"Suddenly a pirate ship appears
on the horizon."

Snoopy

Aka Charles Schultz

Admittedly, Snoopy's writing style has often been cited as an example of purple prose, but at least he cannot be accused of wasting time introducing his subject.

"Stop writing as if your audience has unlimited time and attention."

Your Attention Please

By Paul B. Brown

and Alison Davis

Story-Telling Techniques

Beginning in the 1960s, a controversial new form of nonfiction and journalism emerged that came to be known as "Creative Nonfiction." This new literary form blended the meticulously-researched material of nonfiction with fiction techniques. One of the first examples of this technique was Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood." Modern book-length examples include "The Perfect Storm" by Sebastian Junger, "Black Hawk Down" by Mark Bowden and "Seabiscuit" by Laura Hillenbrand.

Today creative nonfiction is quite common. In fact, if you read the Wall Street Journal, I'm willing to bet that you read the famous "Middle Column" articles more than any other section. (It's a safe bet because the Journal's own reader feedback tells them that the middle column is by far the most popular part of the paper, year after year.)

The middle column articles are usually feature articles, *many of which are case studies about companies that faced severe challenges and overcame long odds*. These pieces lack none of the essentials of serious, reporting - they merely tell their stories in ways that involve the reader more than the bare, "Who," "What," "When," "Where," "Why," and "How" style of traditional journalism.

Can these same "creative nonfiction" techniques be incorporated into case studies? I'm sure some would disagree with me, preferring to stay with a more "serious" format. But I would argue that a case study that is not interesting and compelling will not accomplish its purpose of persuading and selling.

"Even the Harvard Business Review (HBR) - not a publication anyone would accuse of being lighthearted, frivolous or even remotely New Age - uses storytelling to engage readers and convey information. The centerpiece of HBR's use of story is a regular feature called, 'The HBR Case Study,' which presents a fictionalized account of a business challenge, and then asks real-life experts to provide advice on how to solve the challenge."

Your Attention Please

By Paul B. Brown and
Alison Davis

Admittedly, these creative techniques can be used in excess to the point that they become a distraction to the aim of a case study. They should not get in the way of persuading the readers to buy your product.

The Narrative Question

A narrative question is a question you force your reader to mentally ask. It could be something like, "What will happen next?" or "How will Jack Bauer get out of this one?" or, "Why does Miss Marple ask such odd questions, and will she solve this crime?" or "Will this company be able to turn around from the brink of bankruptcy?"

The narrative question is what creates suspense in good story telling.

Key Point: While you should cause readers to mentally ask narrative questions throughout your case study, it is particularly vital in the introduction. (By the way, did my introduction about Tim Jennings and Data Corp's

troubles cause you to ask a narrative question? I hope so.)

A neat trick for creating a narrative question is to leave out, or delay, revealing a vital piece of information.

For example:

- You can leave out the "who" as in a whodunit mystery.
- You can leave out the "how" as in how is this executive going to turn this situation around?
- You can leave out the "what" as in what product or service saved the day.
- Or you can leave out the result as in "will Data Corp. executives be able to prove their innocence?"



You can take this further by using the "Cart Before The Horse"³ technique. Simply list a string of benefits or warnings but withhold the name of the thing that gives these benefits or the thing that can cause these problems.

Here's an example: *Did you know that there is a single food item that tastes great, is packed with vitamins and nutrients, and that eating this food three times a day will cause you to shed weight at a rate of 2 to 3 pounds a week? And if all this were not enough, this same food provides so many other health benefits that it can literally add years to your life? ----- It is the apple.*

Interviewing Your Customer

Interviewing your customer is an essential step to creating a case study. Obviously, you must get the customer's written permission to use their story in a case study, but it is not often that a company will

³ For more on the "Cart Before the Horse" technique, check out an article I wrote for my blog called, "A Ridiculously Easy Way to Lock in your Readers' Attention" at <http://dynamiccopywriting.blogspot.com/2006/10/freelance-copywriter-secrets.html>.

refuse. It usually means free publicity for the customer's company and, since they are your customer, pains are taken to cast them in a positive light.

"Direct quotes from a satisfied customer are the single most powerful thing you can include in a success story."

Case study writer
Wade H. Nelson

Before you conduct the interview, you should first prepare questions that will pull out desirable quotes. If you recall, the goal you want to shoot for is to have all of your benefit statements appear in the case study as direct quotes from key people within your customer's company.

But you also want to get quotes that amplify how bad their situation was before your company helped them, and how much of a change has occurred as a result⁴.

Sometimes, even after carefully crafting your questions beforehand, the answers you get do not turn up the quotes you were looking for. Close, maybe, but not exactly on target.

What do you do then?

Marcia Yudkin⁵, marketing consultant, speaker and the author of eleven books and dozens of excellent ebooks on marketing and freelance writing, developed an excellent solution to the problem of the "not-quite-right" quote. She suggests going back to the person to get more material that you can edit

⁴ For an example of how quotes can bring about this kind of amplification, read Richard Stoker's article, "How to Sell More Through Marrying the Power of Testimonials to "Once Upon a Time," which appears in the appendix section of this ebook.

⁵ Marcia Yudkin is truly a marketing and copywriting guru. I highly recommend her weekly email newsletter called, The Marketing Minute. You can subscribe at <http://www.yudkin.com/markmin.htm>.

together with what you have already gotten from him. You may also condense the quote and change the grammar so the wording will make more sense. (She does not suggest that you change the quote beyond this; if the person didn't say what you wanted, it would be unethical to put words into his mouth). Then run the finished version past the person you interviewed for his review.

Explain that you edited what he said slightly to make his wording fit your format and ask if the new quote still represents what he said. It is usually proper protocol to send a follow-up copy of the interview to the interviewee anyway, so this will not be out of the ordinary. Once he agrees that the new wording accurately reflects what he meant to say, it becomes a legitimate quote with the person's blessings.

"Stories are about how people respond to something that has changed in their environment. We like stories of how people handle changes in circumstances and what their choices reveal about their characters."

Beyond Bullet Points
By Cliff Atkinson

How to Differentiate Your Company, Product or Service

One of the frequent issues I run into when writing case studies or any other project for business clients, is that they often have trouble defining what it is about their company that sets them apart from their competitors.

I get a lot of descriptions about their experience, or bland generalizations about "quality." Or worse, I get a laundry list of what they do or what products they sell.

It should be no surprise that finding ways to differentiate ourselves is such a struggle. We are bred to conformity, both in life and in business. But without a clear way to show potential customers and clients how we are different and how those differences can benefit them, we are just another fish in the pond.

Here are some ideas to help you find ways to distinguish your business, service or product from all the others out there.

1. What benefits do you offer that others are overlooking? Dominos Pizza realized everyone else talked about how good their pizzas tasted. So Dominos focused on their fast delivery instead.

Every copywriter's loftiest dream is to someday create a positioning statement as concise and powerful as Domino's Pizza's on-time promise, *"Fresh, hot pizza delivered in 30 minutes or less, guaranteed."*

Until some unfortunate accidents involving some of their delivery drivers forced them to soften their message, Dominos rode this 10-word statement to the top of their industry. That is the power of differentiation. When possible, emphasize the things that set your company apart in your case study.

2. Make a clear promise that you will deliver a benefit. Your benefit statement, that you bring out in the form of a quote, should promise to solve a vexing problem or bring about a desired change. If your statement does not make a promise, or if it promises something other than a solution or a change, chances are you are talking about a feature instead of a benefit.
3. Avoid making a "me-too" type promise. You are trying to create your own category - your own pond. The goal here is not to dive into someone else's pond and to out-muscle the competition.

"In the animal kingdom, the rule is, eat or be eaten; in the human kingdom, define or be defined."

Thomas Szasz

4. Talk about your edge, your advantage over the competition. What can you promise that no one else can do? Or, in the alternative, what is no one else talking about? Dominos was not the first pizza chain to deliver pizzas quickly, but they were the first to make that their claim to fame.
5. If you are still having difficulty, think of how you want people to think about your competition. Put the emphasis on repositioning the other guys. Dominos did this to their competition and placed the idea in people's minds that the other guys were slow. Avis did this by making people think their chief competitor, Hertz, was too big to try as hard to please its customers. And M&Ms positioned its competition as the candies that left a sticky mess in your hands.
6. What needs do your products or services address for the human who work within your customer's company? Regardless of their title or position within a company, decision makers still make their buying decisions based on human emotions. Don't overlook the human needs of the people who make up an organization.



A case study gives your company the unique opportunity to avoid trying to compete as a small fish in a big pond. Instead it gives you the opportunity to create your own pond and become the one big fish in that pond.

Call to Action

Because they are soft sell marketing pieces, case studies present a unique problem when it comes to making a call to action to your readers. If you suddenly go hard sell, you risk losing them at this crucial moment. But if you fail to move your readers at all, your case study will fail as a persuasion tool.

"After you have answered all standing concerns, you need to move the dialogue from, 'Should we do this?' to 'How can we do this?'"

Presentations That Change Minds
By Josh Gordon

Your first concern is to decide what action you want your reader to take. Do you want her to contact you to set up a consultation? Do you want her to subscribe to your newsletter or RSS feed? Or is the next logical step to buy now?

With this in mind, clearly spell out to the reader what action you want her to take.

One way to do this is to leave the reader wanting more. In one short, final paragraph, shift from writing in the third person and speak directly to the reader in the second person. List a few useful tips, mention additional resources or offer some how-to information that will help him apply what he has learned from the case study.

The reason this works is that few readers can get enough valuable, problem-solving information. This will motivate them to contact you to continue the dialogue.

Which leads to the second way to get readers to take action. Simply tell them what to do. Spell out what action they must take in order to get the same benefits your case study customer got.

Use action verbs that spell out the steps they must take in order to receive the benefits they want:

“Type in your name and email address in the box below to receive your free copy of X.”

“Visit our web site today to find out how your family can receive free gasoline for a year.”

“To get your free report, simply click the Download button at the bottom of this page.”

“To receive more information, subscribe to the RSS feed in the upper right corner of my blog.”

The third way is to paint a picture of a possible future for your reader. Just as the company you portrayed as the subject of your case study needed to experience a change, so do most of your readers. Make a dramatic promise, and paint a possible future, by asking questions that begin with phrases like, “Imagine,” or “What would it be like if.”

This third step is more than a benefit statement, it is more accurately called a "what is possible" statement. It is also a way of causing your reader to visualize a better future. A future in which a pain has been removed or difficult problems have been solved.

When you place your reader into this future, "what is possible" situation, telling her to take a certain action and leaving her wanting more, you have created a call to action that is hard to resist.



Conclusion

I wouldn't be a very good copywriter if I didn't follow my own advice and give you a call to action as well.

Many of you reading this need my help. You have stalled or under-performing marketing campaigns that need better results - which is why you just read 25 pages on how to market with case studies.

Some of you are also scratching your heads wondering why your web sites aren't making money or whether a white paper will help you sell a high-end product or service.

So let me paint a "what is possible" picture for you. What would it be like if you had several case studies that multiplied your marketing and PR results? What would it be like if potential customers came flocking to you because they had already *experienced* the quality of what you offer through a success story about one or more of your previous customers?

If that "what is possible" picture appeals to you, pick up the phone and call me today at 817-501-6892 or email me at chbrown@dynamic-copywriting.net.

I also want to encourage you to visit my blog, <http://dynamic-copywriting.net> often to keep up on new ideas to help your business. When you visit Dynamic Copywriting, be sure to click the "Subscribe" button in the upper right to subscribe to my RSS feed. This will allow you to benefit from my future blog articles while allowing me to benefit from your occasional comments and insights.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Charles Brown

Appendix

How to Sell More Through Marrying the Power of Testimonials to “Once Upon a Time”

By Richard Stooker

Most marketers understand the power of testimonials. What too many don't realize is that telling an extended testimonial as a story ramps up their power.

"Better marketers understand that their prospect really craves the story behind the testimonial."

Richard Stooker

All of us hunger for stories. We love to follow along as likeable people solve interesting problems. We love satisfying conclusions (maybe because they're so few and far between in our real lives!).

All too often marketers content themselves with typical lame testimonials such as: "Loved your weight-loss product, it's great."

Better marketers understand that their prospect really craves the story behind the testimonial.

"I was so overweight my husband and kids laughed at me. I weighed 385 pounds. I was ashamed to leave my house. But the more miserable I felt, the more high-calorie food I wanted to eat. Then one day I got your letter in the mail and decided I didn't have anything left to lose."

"When the package arrived in the mail, my fingers were so fat I could barely open the little cap on the bottle, but finally I popped it off and took my first few capsules.

"Frankly, nothing happened the first few days. I might have stopped, except your directions warned me not to expect instant miracles. The second week, I noticed that my clothes weren't as tight."

...and so on.

Don't you start to feel happy for her? She had a problem, she found a solution (your product) and therefore is now on the road to a healthy body weight.

Suddenly your prospect can start to think that she can lose weight too. She's probably no worse off than the woman in the testimonial.

Now she can start to believe that she can lose weight without dieting or exercising too.

So customer success case studies help dissolve what's often the biggest unstated prospect objection to any problem: "It wouldn't work for me."

Sometimes this is a deep psychological defect on their part. Sometimes they just really believe that ordinary testimonials are written by people who aren't like them,

"For those of us whose business depends on being able to persuade others - which includes all of us in business - the key to survival is being able to cut through all that clutter and make the sale.

The good news is that the secret to selling is what it has always been - a good story. It's that simple. Stories sell."

The Elements of Persuasion

By Richard Maxwell &
Robert Dickman

that somehow the deck was "stacked" in favor of the testimonial writer. (And sometimes they're right.)



But when you give them plenty of personal detail, document efforts and mistakes and eventual triumph over real obstacles, you help them visualize a solution to their own problems.

Case Studies are often used in business-to-business marketing, especially in the high tech industry, to verify that a company can solve another company's problems.

The truth is, every company that sells a worthwhile product should use these extended testimonials or case studies to sell their products – to businesses and consumers.

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