

Testimonial Tactics

From graphics to hospitality events, six tried and true strategies for using customer testimonials at your next show.

-- Linda Armstrong --

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Testimonial Tactics

If customers aren't getting your message, maybe you're using the wrong messenger. Learn how 11 closed-mouth marketers are using customer testimonials to add validity to their claims and how you can adapt one of six tried-and-true strategies for your next show. *By Linda Armstrong*

In today's world, it pays to be skeptical. Without at least a small dose of skepticism coursing through our veins, we'd all own Amway Corp. stock and "Famous replica Rolex watches." But for businesses in general and exhibit marketers in particular, this skepticism poses a significant challenge. For no matter how well your marketing and product messages are communicated or how accurate they might be, they all pass through prospects' cynical sieve, where they're accepted at face value, rejected, or as in most cases, relegated to communication

purgatory, where prospects reserve judgment until they obtain additional facts and experiences.

Of course, prospects have every right to be skeptical — especially when they're purchasing for their companies, not themselves. For these people, getting snookered by a false claim can mean a multi-million-dollar purchase gone bad — and an entire career gone south. For business-to-business prospects, then, skepticism isn't merely a prudent personality trait, it's a mandatory job skill.

So how does a marketer cut through this curtain of caution? How do you help your messages cross over from communication purgatory into the pearly gates of believability? According to many marketers we've seen, the answer is to stop talking and turn over the microphone. Rather than spouting their gospel longer and louder, successful marketers let their customers, people who already have faith in their products, proselytize for them.

"One way to build trust and increase sales of your product or service is by the use of testimonials, brief endorsements by a satisfied customer," says Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, founder and editor in chief of Web Marketing Today in his article "How to Use Testimonials to Increase Your Conversion Rate." According to Wilson, "You'd



ILLUSTRATIONS: MARK FISHER

think that since testimonials are so easy to fake, people wouldn't believe them. But used carefully, the opposite is true. They work."

For exhibit marketers, that means that rather than finding a new way to say the same old thing, scattering customer testimonials throughout your program can add validity to your claims. When prospects receive your messages from someone just like them, someone facing the same challenges and purchasing risks that they are — as opposed to hearing it from a sales- and profit-oriented corporation — those messages are suddenly more authentic, and your product claims take a giant step toward believability. And when your messages are believable, increased exhibit-related sales are sure to follow.

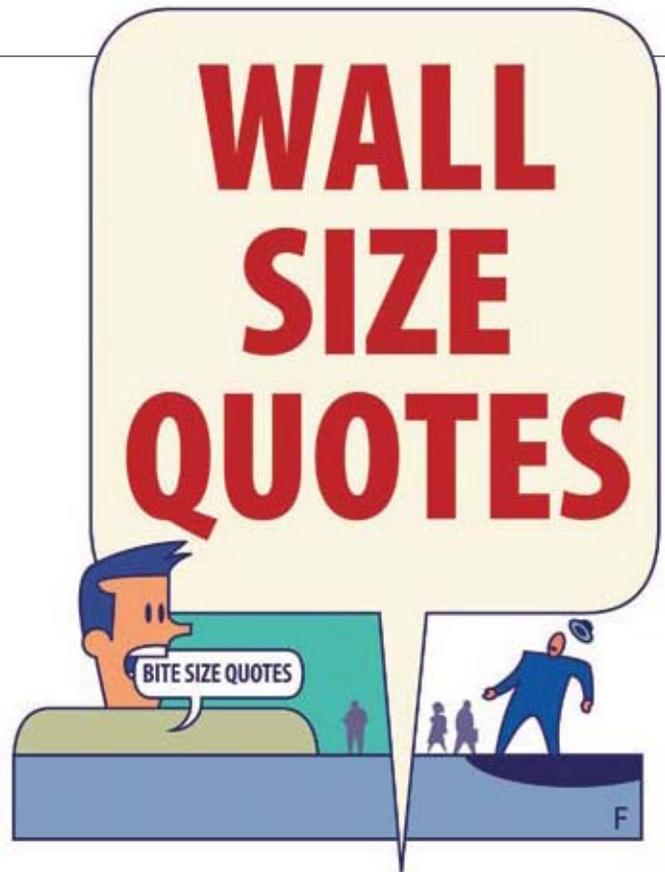
Here, then, are six different ways that exhibitors have incorporated customer testimonials into their programs. (If you're starting from scratch and haven't documented a single commendation thus far, see "Collecting Commentary" on p. 61 for tips to help get started.) Whether your customers sing the praises of your company's response time, quality service, or product reliability, their testimonials will help ease prospects' concerns, mollify their misgivings, and transform skeptics into true believers.

Stationary Print Mediums

An obvious yet effective way to integrate customer testimonials into exhibits is to print bite-size quotes on graphics. EXHIBITOR found three ways of doing just that — but with a noticeable twist.

At the 2007 Car Care World Expo, ACW Equipment Inc. didn't just toss up a quote here or there in its booth, it printed an entire customer letter on two 3-by-2-foot poster boards. Makers of the Aquamizer, a water-recycling system for car washes, ACW positioned the inexpensive foam panels atop easels and placed them on two corners of its 20-by-20-foot exhibit.

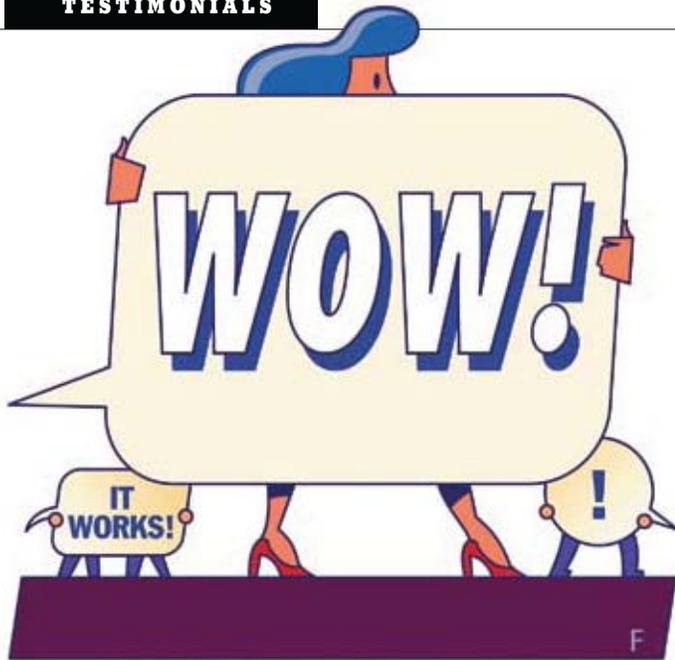
While some people might argue against this relatively lengthy testimonial letter, the additional length afforded ACW several benefits. Signed by the CEO of Cactus Car Wash — the C-level title adding credibility in itself — the letter not only touted water-bill savings attributed to the product and mentioned not one, but six, purchases the customer made as a result, it also indicated how the product eliminated problems the customer had with other brands and suggested that Cactus Car Wash would continue to recommend and purchase ACW products in the future. All



in all, it addressed several customer pain points in a single read.

For exhibit and event company George Fern Co., testimonials were literally a moving part of the company's back wall at TS² 2007. The internally lit back wall of George Fern's exhibit featured six rotating triangles organized into two equal groups, with customer testimonials displayed on all three sides of each triangle. Positioned vertically, each set of triangles was dissected by a metal rod and then inserted into the back wall. The combined effect was that of an eye-catching, interactive display, as attendees could rotate each triangle to discover even more testimonials from satisfied customers.

At the Healthcare Convention & Exhibitors Association's 2006 show, installation-and-dismantle provider Willwork Inc. took the interactivity concept one step further. Like George Fern, Willwork covered the back wall of its exhibit space with customer testimonials by simply printing the text on graphics panels. However, it also encouraged booth visitors to add their own comments by writing on the back-wall graphics using colorful markers. Throughout the show, passing prospects stopped by the booth multiple times to jot down their thoughts and see what others had added since their last visit — generating not only additional traffic, but additional customer testimonials to boot.



2 Testimonials With Legs

While featuring testimonials on static, stationary graphics is certainly one option, an alternative is to offer similar printed testimonials in more portable mediums, allowing attendees to take your testimonials with them.

For the 2007 World of Concrete show, Procore Technologies Inc. created a giveaway/press-kit hybrid to tout its online communication tool. Procore printed eight customer testimonials on simple letterhead. It then placed the sheet along with a press release atop a notepad, slipped the pages inside a branded notepad holder, and bundled the entire contents together with transparent shrink wrap for easy readability. Distributed to journalists and prospects in an easily transported format, the giveaway/press-kit validated Procore's messages and

offered attendees a valuable tool they likely used long after the show.

Along these same lines, exhibit house Expotechnik America Ltd. handed out printed testimonials in its exhibit at EXHIBITOR2008. However, rather than printing testimonials on plain stationery, it combined case studies and customer testimonials into a glossy magazine-like handout called Expoworld. Booth staffers also collected customer testimonials and posted them on the company's post-show Web site.

After the show, Expotechnik sent booth visitors an e-mail inviting them to visit the Web site, where they could add their own testimonials or comment on those already posted. Of the 900 e-mails sent after the show, 89 percent of recipients opened the message, and 91 percent of that group clicked through to the post-show Web site.

3 Video Presentations

If printed testimonials are effective, imagine how valuable looping video testimonials can be? Volvo Construction Equipment North America Inc. took this tact but advanced the frame one step further at ConExpo-Con/Agg 2005 in Las Vegas.

Volvo wanted to create a theme that centered on customer satisfaction. Thus, it created a satisfaction-based tagline — "More Care. Built In." — that revolved around a series of 90-second videotaped customer testimonials.

Prior to the show, Volvo interviewed and filmed 32 customers. At the show, it played their testimonials on a total of 50 plasma and

glass-fire screens in its 31,500-square-foot booth.

Every 20 minutes, the booth lights changed colors, and all of the screens, which had been playing various company- or product-related videos, went to black before they started playing the same customer testimonial simultaneously. The effect signaled to booth visitors that something exciting was about to happen, while positioning the video testimonials as something worth stopping and watching.

Tellabs Inc. took a slightly different video-testimonial approach for GlobalComm 2006. The company was hoping to sell its network equipment to attending telecom service providers who were currently responding to the market demands of echo boomers — the children of baby boomers, who were weaned on video games and



view their laptops as integral to brain function. So to show those providers that its products match up with their end-users' needs, Tellabs needed a fresh, equally savvy approach. Thus, it nixed typical product demos and presentations in favor of MTV-style documentaries featuring a variety of testimonials given by echo boomers, all customers of attending telecom service providers.

Within the series of mini-movies dubbed "Inspire the New Life," these end-user customers discussed today's technology and the importance of speed, reliability, and personalization — Tellabs' key differentiators. The continuous-loop videos ran on four 20-inch monitors in the booth and on a 72-by-72-inch screen above it. Plus, attendees could view the video of their choice in the booth's café area and at two in-booth workstations.

Conveying a subtle "we know your customers" vibe, the documentaries not only communicated the company's key messages via a method and medium echo boomers and telecom service providers could understand, they helped increase leads by 10 percent compared to the previous year's show. Plus, the documentaries were downloaded more than 200,000 times from Tellabs' Inspire the New Life Web page, and via sites such as YouTube and iTunes.

4 Booth Staffers

Integrating customer testimonials into an existing program via printed materials and video is certainly effective, but for the 2008 Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) show, Siemens Medical Solutions USA Inc. cranked it up a notch by not only building its entire exhibit-marketing strategy around its customers and the good things they had to say about its products, but by using customers to staff its booth as well.

"Given the life-or-death nature of the health-care industry, hospitals and clinics are skeptical of new IT solutions," says Rita Sprenkle, marketing communications manager at Siemens. "Prospects want to know which other companies are using your IT system, what challenges and benefits they've had, and what value the system has brought to their hospitals and clinics." So rather than merely including customer testimonials in presentations and literature, Sprenkle developed a three-pronged exhibit strategy built around videotaped and live customers.

Phase one was a taped, 10-minute video presentation held in a 20-seat theater at the front of the exhibit. While a booth staffer facilitated the presentation, content was solely focused on four customers, which

appeared via video on an 8-foot-high- by-24-foot-wide intelligent-glass screen. "Prior to the show, we selected four customers to appear in the video, choosing a wide range of people so that at least one of them would appeal to each member of the audience," Sprenkle says. "But no matter whether they

thread woven throughout each presentation, however, was how Siemens' system helped them personally and professionally. After each presentation, the customer hosted a question-and-answer session, addressing any issues not covered in the presentations.

Attendees could attend as many presentations as



were from a large urban hospital or small rural one, each customer talked about how they're using Siemens' solutions to get ahead of the health-care IT curve."

After the theater presentation, staffers funneled attendees to two stations where a total of 15 Siemens customers offered informal presentations during the three-day show. The presentations featured product-specific data and industry information, such as next-generation revenue-cycle management and consumerism. The common

they chose, after which they moved on to the demo stations — the third and final phase in the strategy and the only one hosted by Siemens' employees. If attendees wanted to meet privately with a rep after the demo, they could request that an in-booth customer be brought into the meeting to provide client-side input as well.

By show's end, more than 1,700 prospects had visited Siemens' booth, spending an average of 10 to 15 minutes speaking almost entirely with Siemens' customers rather than its internal staffers.

5 Hospitality Events

While many exhibitors host hospitality events in conjunction with their exhibits, few take advantage of the power of testimonials during this type of informal — yet oh-so-apropos — networking event. MG Design, a Pleasant Prairie, WI, exhibit house is one of the few.

In conjunction with its Idea Kitchen-themed exhibit at EXHIBITOR2008, MG Design hosted its “Wine. Dine. Design.” event. Held at the Creative Cooking School of Las Vegas. The private evening event brought together a carefully chosen mix of invited guests, including both customers and prospects, along with a handful of MG Design staff.

The dining area at the cooking school was set to accommodate four to six

people at each table, with MG Design assigning one staffer, one or two customers, and two to three prospects to each table. Diners at each table then worked together to cook some of their courses, rolling out gnocchi, for example, which sparked a few flour fights, before they sat down to enjoy their meal.

While customers weren't encouraged to offer testimonials during the event, that's exactly what they did, pointing out to prospects that MG Design delivers this type of collaborative experience for their own exhibit programs. Plus, according to MG Design, due to the fun, informal nature of the event, many customers and prospects struck up relationships of their own, becoming peer-to-peer sounding boards and MG Design evangelists.



6 Educational Presentations

An effective way to establish your company as an industry expert is to recruit company personnel to present educational sessions at your trade shows. The strategy not only brands your company as an authority, it also adds an additional avenue to foster company and product awareness among attendees. Plus, the tactic offers opportunities to cross promote, as your speakers can promote your booth to attendees and your staffers can promote your presentations to booth visitors.

However, if you plan to offer a presentation, why not ratchet up that effectiveness even more by co-presenting with one of your clients. The mere fact that a client has taken the time and energy necessary to co-present with you sends a subtle message to attendees that your company has earned his or her loyalty and trust, so much so that he or she is willing to invest time and energy to help you succeed. In essence, co-presenting is a subtle, but effective customer testimonial.

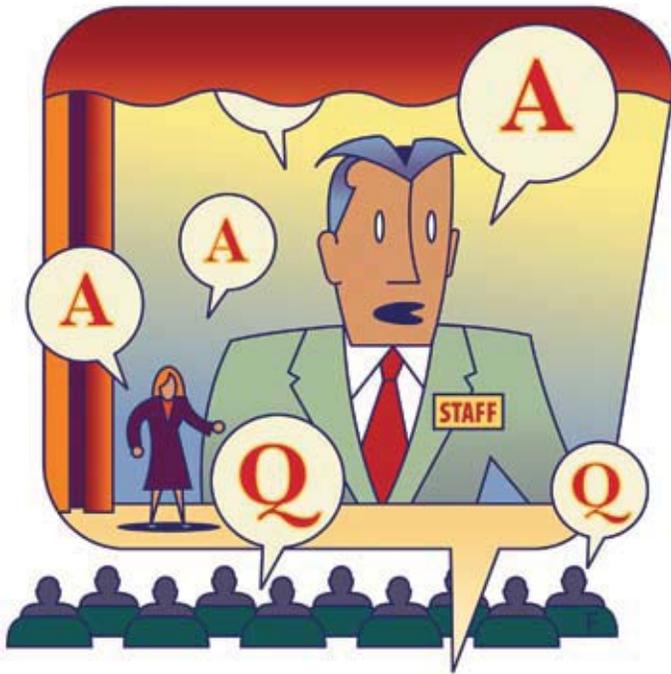
Opus Solutions, a Beaverton, OR-based integrated event management company, took advantage of this strategy at EXHIBITOR2008. In the session, “Cisco Systems: Successfully Leveraging the Outsource Staffing Model,” Opus Solutions’ vice president of business development, Kim Kopetz,

along with Kathy Sulgit, director of corporate events at Cisco Systems Inc., spoke about how Cisco had outsourced its event staffing, allowing its internal team to focus more on strategy.

A previous EXHIBITOR Show presenter, Sulgit approached Opus Solutions and asked Kopetz if she'd like to work together on a presentation. Kopetz quickly agreed, and the two women worked together to create an outline of the topic, and determined who would speak to each point in their outline. Both presenters felt that attendees would be most interested in what a client-side presenter had to say; thus, during the actual presentation, Kopetz and Sulgit contributed about 30 and 70 percent of the content, respectively.

While the show prevents speakers from overtly plugging their companies, the co-presented session was a subtle customer testimonial, but one that was no doubt noticed by attendees. Plus, given the notoriety of the Cisco name, the association lent even more credibility to the presentation — and to Opus Solutions.

Susan Shuttleworth, marketing manager at TransCore, employs a similar co-presenting strategy that offers dividends going and coming. TransCore, a provider of transportation-management systems with offices in Dallas, sells RFID-based transportation



systems such as toll tags, which can change the way an entire city transportation system works. So prospects are particularly wary of change and want solid evidence that TransCore's products have worked well for other customers. Thus, testimonials have become a large part of the company's marketing efforts.

"Third-party validation seems to ease the minds of our risk-averse target audience," Shuttleworth says. "Testimonials are extremely beneficial in that people hear about product benefits directly from the end user, not from our salespeople."

For its annual TransCore Channel Partners conference, TransCore sought out several key clients to offer educational presentations. One such client was Deborah Taylor, director of information technology/CIO at the Eastern Virginia Medical School. In exchange for

Taylor's time and efforts, TransCore paid her flight and hotel charges to participate in the conference. That's money well spent for what was effectively a 30-minute testimonial.

After the conference, TransCore made the most of this already effective situation by pulling quotes from Taylor's presentation and transforming them into callouts in booth graphics and pre- and post-show promotions for various shows throughout the year.

So the next time you've got something to say about your company or its products, let your customers speak for you. From subtle schemes to customer-centric exhibits, these testimonial tactics prove that sometimes it's not merely about what you say, it's also about who's saying it. **E**

By Linda Armstrong.

Questions or comments? Email editorial@exhibitormagazine.com.

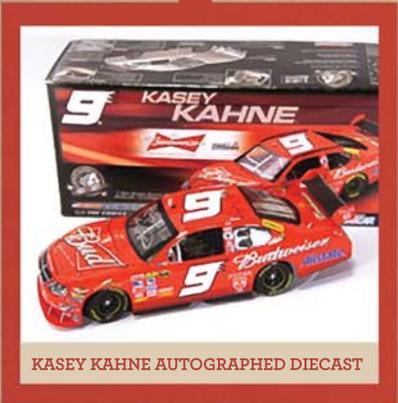
Collecting Commentary

Before you can integrate testimonials into your program, you've got to have at least a handful of customer commendations to choose from. If your hand is empty, first ask your company's management and department heads for any testimonials that might be lurking in their files. But if your internal search still leaves you empty-handed, try one or more of the following tactics to secure some customer comments for your next show.

- ▶ Offer a free or limited trial of your product or service with the stipulation that the recipient provide product or company feedback after the trial period. Granted, you may get some negative comments, but even a smattering of positive endorsements is probably worth the effort.
- ▶ Incorporate short satisfaction surveys that include space for "additional comments" into as many customer/company transactions as possible, such as booth surveys, online account processes, customer-service surveys, etc. Then cull the responses for possible testimonials or potential sources for testimonials.
- ▶ Gather the positive unsolicited e-mails your company has received via its Web site, salespeople, customer service, etc., and/or request that all such correspondence be forwarded to you in the future. Many companies receive a wealth of testimonials via the aforementioned channels, but if there's no formalized process for what to do with them as they come in, they are quickly forgotten. Considering the value testimonials can bring to your exhibit-marketing program, that means a significant asset could be sitting in your customer service reps' in-boxes, just waiting to be discovered.
- ▶ Call and request written endorsements from new or VIP customers, many of whom will be thrilled that your company values their opinions. You can even consider offering them a small discount on future purchases to thank them for their favorable endorsements.
- ▶ Hold a contest for the best testimonials submitted by customers via your company's Web site, a pre-show e-mail promotion, or an in-booth activity. Granted, you might get somewhat inflated accolades if customers know they're competing for a prize, but if you're trying to implement a testimonial-centric exhibit strategy and you have no testimonials, the first step is to get people talking. Worst-case scenario, you need to tone down their glowing praise a bit to make sure it sounds more authentic and less overstated.

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The holidays are here and Switch is back in the "giftaway" mood. But its more than holiday spirit that has us unloading our schweet swag ... this time WE'RE MOVING! As our two St. Louis locations join forces under one roof, we're shedding some office heirlooms for a great cause.

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