

Proof Positive: A Good Story Can Be Telling

by Chip Eichelberger



In today's business world, boring facts and empty stats simply won't make the impression on customers that a story about someone "just like them" will. True stories are much more compelling and better-remembered than other information. So to get coveted word-of-mouth advertising, start by telling your company or product story. When you do, you'll find that story-telling is a powerful tool that differentiates you from your competition.

Story-telling your way to greater profit is based on the idea of "social proof." When people are unsure what to do, they look at others' behavior and ask what others have done previously in the same situation. A behavior seems more correct to the degree that we see others doing it, and the more people doing it the better. Social proof comes into play in all buying decisions, from the most basic to the most expensive. This includes everything from what movie to see or restaurant to eat at, to what car to buy or contractor to hire.

Whatever your industry, you can essentially *get your customers to write your best stories for you* by documenting your successes through testimonials and pictures. Do what your competition fails to do effectively. To develop powerful stories that sell your customers, follow these ten simple steps:

1. **Identify your positioning.** If you don't position yourself advantageously, your competition will position you and your product in a way you do not want. What is your unique selling proposition (USP)? What added value do you deliver that your competition won't? Get your customers say "wow!" Maybe it's your unique expertise, free installation, or free delivery. Whatever you offer, it should be low-cost but have high perceived added value.
2. **Define your ideal customer.** Contrary to popular belief, your customer base isn't "everybody." While you may have customers across all spectrums, who's going to be the *most profitable* customer for you, and how can you attract more of those? You don't want to be always selling to everybody. Be proactive, and let your competition suffer the consequences of giving their sales force too broad of a brush.
3. **Identify what's different about you.** Different is good. Create a point of differentiation between you and your competition with a story. You may have noticed this recent trend at retail when you're looking for a BBQ sauce or a bottle of wine. To get customers to pick their product off the shelf, companies use their product packaging and web sites to tell an intriguing story. Check out www.ilovestubbs.com (Mr. Stubbs – my favorite BBQ sauce) and www.workinggirlwines.com for good examples.

4. **Draw them to you.** If you've done the first three steps well, the customers you want will be attracted to you. Rather than pursuing customers, learn their key issues/pains/problems and how you can solve them. For example, top mortgage brokers work to build a good reputation and thereby attract a lot of the business. They don't have to go out and pursue clients; people come to them. Do the little things that make for a great story so your customers will sing your praises and bring the business to you. Ideally, you'll be able to choose your customers, instead of begging them to choose you over your competition.
5. **Show, don't tell.** One of the main principles of story-telling is to *show* the details of the story, and let those details speak for themselves. Effective story-telling is in the details, and the more the better. Leaving out a minute detail, which you feel may not be important, could turn out to be the deciding factor from the customer's point of view. Paint a picture with your words to bring your story to life for the reader or listener. You don't have to be a master fiction writer to tell a powerful story. Set up a problem, then work through and resolve it by offering specific benefits to the customer.
6. **Feel their pain.** You can use your stories to help overcome common objections you receive, such as cost. You don't want to compete on price but on customer experience and your unique ability to solve customers' problems. In life insurance and financial services, for example, many people haven't done what they should do in terms of planning. In this case, smart advisors tell their customer's, "Don't feel bad. Last week I met with *someone just like you* who had that same problem. Here's how we worked together to solve it..."
7. **Keep 'em coming.** Dog-eared, over-copied success stories from seven years ago won't do the trick. Document everything and keep it current! Develop a system to follow up with satisfied clients because you can't have too many stories at your disposal. Utilize the Web, phone calls, letters, and e-mail to generate new stories, and then put them on your website in the form of written, audio, and video testimonials. Have them organized and ready to send out with e-mails to prospects.
8. **Use pictures.** A picture is worth a thousand more words. A testimonial with a photo shows that there is a real person behind the name, enhancing your credibility. Build your testimonials one at a time, asking clients, "If I can exceed your expectations, get the work done in time and at the budget we set, would you give me a testimonial so I can share your success with other customers?" The majority of your customers will happily say "Yes!" Then you can create a Raving Fan book that will let you **select** the jobs you want to do. Home improvement contractors, for example, can fill it with before-and-after pictures plus testimonials saying that they showed up on time, stayed within budget, etc. On future jobs, other bidders will show up with no social proof—just a napkin with an estimate on it—but the smart contractors will have ten success stories, impressive photos, and raves from past customers. Even if their price comes in 10 – 20% higher, if they've proven that

they can meet the customer's needs, the customer is likely to pick the professional who provided social proof!

9. **Utilize product reviews.** Vendor ratings and product reviews such as you find on eBay, Overstock.com, and Amazon.com can tell your story and offer social proof even without personal contact. The combination of customer rants and raves is highly believable.
10. **Create a personal marketing sheet.** Tell a good story about who you are, especially if you're self-employed. It should feature a picture of you and your product and tell who you are and what your USP is. On it, list some of your customers and include the right quotes as well as detailing your number of years' experience, special training or certifications you and your team have, and any community involvement.

Tell Yourself a New Story About Stories

Many people are hesitant to sell themselves and their product or service with stories because they don't want to feel "pushy," as if they're forcing their clients to do their marketing for them. A simple paradigm shift is all you need to see the benefits of this practice, for you and for your customers. Consider this: you're cheating people if you *don't* share what a great experience you offer customers. They'll go somewhere else and get an inferior product and experience.

In the end, it's simply a matter of utilizing the power of social proof: Tell your story, attract customers to you, deliver what you do best, and you won't be able to *stop* them from talking about their "lucky find," sending others to you and coming back again and again. Remember: A good story can change the way people think. A great story can change the way people behave.

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