

Testimonials: Let your customers do the talking

By ADINA GENN

If your business were a movie, and your promotional material featured movie ads, which quotes would you pick from the critics to entice potential viewers into the theater?

Chances are you'd select the blurbs that attested to your company's value, commitment to service and high-quality output.

Long Island is a far cry from Hollywood, but you can still shoot for acclaimed reviews by cultivating customer testimonials on the Web, in brochures, at your place of business and verbally.

Done correctly, testimonials serve as third-party endorsements. So said Robin Bernstein, proprietor of Melville-based Write Time Communications. "Clients value knowing that other people thought I did a good job," she said. "It's like eBay. If you see a bad report, you don't want [that person] to do work for you."

Well-chosen reviews help educate prospects about products and services. With varied testimonials, owners can highlight company attributes.

But incorporating customer praise can lead to certain vulnerabilities, so it's important to consider the dos and don'ts.

When planning to incorporate testimonials, consider your mission.

"There are three things you need to sell. You must demonstrate overt benefits, differentiate yourself from the competition and give reason to believe that what you're saying is true," said Jacquelyn Gernaey, a Port Jefferson-based management consultant and a facilitator of The Alternative Board, a peer advisory group.

And though unsolicited praise may reveal the most heartfelt acclamations, there's no reason to wait for the accolades to roll in. Think about which clients you have the best relationships with and ask them for testimonials.

Bernstein did just that when she decided to post blurbs on her Web site, www.write-time-communications.com. "I chose people with whom I have ongoing relationships," she said. "Everyone was willing to be quoted. Most people are happy and flattered and

willing to help me out."

By listening to your clients, you can keep the testimonials coming. "You'd ask someone any time they give you a statement or comment [expressing] that you've done terrific things for them," Gernaey said.

Such timing enables willing clients to write down something valuable. And that's key, especially with busy customers that want to help but don't know what to say.

That's why Mike Chambers, president of Plainview-based Central Business Systems, is a big fan of customer surveys.

Aside from helping the company to better serve clients, the surveys prompt clients with their testimonials. "We provide customer surveys to all our clients," Chambers said. The survey provides "questions on how we're doing, if they're pleased with our products, and whether they'd utilize us again and are willing to provide us with a testimonial. The survey feeds the testimonial. It's like a warm-up for them if they're willing to provide us with one."

When a client has writer's block, Bernstein asks them, "Would it be fair to say XYZ, get your approval and save you some time?"

With her clients' permission, Bernstein includes their name, title and company to make the testimonials more credible. And because she's confident in the value she brings to clients, she wasn't too concerned about becoming vulnerable to her competition.

Gernaey said companies that deliver products in a one-time transaction generally are less vulnerable than those providing continual service when divulging contact information in testimonials. Those in service industries should feel they are in full partnership with clients before revealing their sources.



APT TESTIMONY: Robin Bernstein, proprietor of Write Time Communications, says client testimonials are the perfect tool to showcase your talents to clients and prospects.

Bob Giglione

Jeffrey Siegel, president of Port Washington-based EZ Data Solutions, includes company names only on the testimonial portion of his Web site.

"Most people don't want their names up there. They're picked up by search engines," he said.

Siegel brings copies of reference letters when meeting prospects and delivers testimonials that way. Other ways to tout client praise include hanging testimonials on the wall and posting them throughout a Web site. "Not just on the testimonial page, but a smattering here and there, giving reason to believe throughout," Siegel said.

Another option: Consider asking a client to attend your next informational meeting or product display and give a verbal testimonial, Gernaey suggested.

Before printing brochures or incorporating testimonials in a marketing video, get the client's approval in writing. "If someone gets mad and says, 'I don't want you to use my testimonial anymore,' you might have to redo the whole piece," Gernaey warned. "It gets expensive."

To Bernstein, however, the benefits of testimonials outweigh the risks. She's noticed a subtle edge since she started including them in 2001. "It's made people more comfortable," she said. "It makes the initial contact go more smoothly."