



Reference Point

a newsletter for customer reference professionals

November 2004

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Here's the November issue. In case you experience formatting issues with the email version, or problems with links, here's a link and URL to the newsletter, [click here](http://www.lee-communications.com/ci.htm):

<http://www.lee-communications.com/ci.htm>

Best regards, Bill.

Reference Point is a Lee Communications newsletter about customer reference (CR) programs and how to improve them. To subscribe, please contact me (contact information is below or just respond to this email). To unsubscribe at any time, just reply to this email with "unsubscribe" in the subject line. This email list and your name will never be made available to anyone else, not even to others on the list, unless by mutual request and agreement.

Thinking Things Over: Do Buyers Believe Your Success Stories?

Recently a colleague of mine was presenting at a marketing conference and mentioned the importance of customer success stories. A participant in the audience questioned this, saying that "everyone (in his industry) has great stories and, in any case, no one believes them." Another colleague, Steve Hurley at the IT Services Marketing Association agrees that's he's seen signs of skepticism about success stories as well. Yet, at the same time, we know from research performed by ITSMA and other sales and marketing organizations that buyers place high importance on customer references in general.

The disconnect here is, I think, pretty obvious. Customer success stories are meant to serve as an antidote to excessively "hyped" marketing materials. They're supposed to be more credible. After all, the accolades in a customer story are coming from the mouth of the customer himself. But far from reading like a new, more believable form of marketing communication, a lot of stories read like the same old hype. They contain nothing but good news, praise, peaches and cream. The hardware was state-of-the-art, the software fit seamlessly into the customer's systems and improved every process it touched, and professional services were real team players who leveraged the new system for optimal results while putting the customer's interests above all else. End of story.

Every IT buyer knows better -- they're a pretty sophisticated group. They know that every installation of complex IT solutions has problems. And they know that no vendor relationship is perfect. To the extent that our stories paint too rosy a picture, we risk losing credibility with future buyers.

I worked on a story earlier this year in which my client and I worked hard (perhaps a bit too hard!) to get the customer to provide quotes and results that fit my client's messaging. But as we asked question after question meant to probe for the desired responses, we got nothing from the customer. Then about halfway through the interview, he said, "Let me tell you what I really liked about your company and the job you did." Which he then proceeded to do.

Now I'd like to say that the story that emerged was even stronger than the one we hoped for but that wasn't the case; it was weaker. But it was also more credible. And that's the tradeoff we face with customer reference collateral, because a "strong" story that lacks credibility is going to be worth less and less than a more modest story that's believable.

I have a feeling this may be an issue of growing importance and expect I'll be addressing it again in future issues, together with suggestions on how to protect the credibility and power of customer reference materials. But for now, I think the way to approach success stories is to remember the basics. Ask, "What does the customer want? What can we do that adds value for the customer?" In this case, the primary "customers" for success stories are future buying prospects. What do they want? What can we provide that adds value as they make a buying decision?

What buyers want are references who candidly tell the whole story: the good, the bad, the indifferent. And they want to know what the actual impact of your solution was on your reference's business, explained in plausible terms that are measurable, as much as possible. I'm not suggesting that customer stories should "air the dirty laundry." I'm just suggesting that they must give buyers what they want or risk becoming another obsolete marketing tool.

Your thoughts? Let me know (by replying to this email) and I'll share your thoughts in an upcoming issue.

Upcoming Event: Using References to Gain Credibility with Analysts

Tekrati, a news source covering high tech industry analysts and firms, is hosting a half hour interview next Thursday that includes Ian Campbell, CEO of the highly respected analyst firm, Nucleus Research. The topic is customer references and their credibility with analysts. Maryfran Johnson, former Computerworld editor-in-chief and now an editor and vice president at TechTarget, will also be interviewed.

It's being held next Thursday, November 18, 2004 at 4:00 p.m. Eastern, 1:00 p.m. Pacific.

The discussion will focus on similarities and differences in media and industry analyst perspectives. Specific topics will include:

- Implications of customer voice for vendor credibility with journalists and analysts
- How journalists and analysts currently source and use customer references
- Common mistakes in promoting customer references

You'll be able to email or call in questions as well.

Click [here](#) to get more information and register:

Ideas and Tools You Can Use from Previous Issues

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Just click the specific issue that interests you:

[March Issue](#)

Success Stories: The Top Five Mistakes (and How to Avoid Them)

Based on our research into success stories at 25 top technology and tech-related companies (no names mentioned:)

[April Issue](#)

Anticipating - and Improving - ROI from Customer Reference Collateral

Also, click [here](#) for to download an Excel-based ROI calculator based on the article.

[May Issue](#)

Everything Success Story Writers Should Know About Sales

Up to 90 percent of marketing collateral is never used by sales. Based on our own research, that may well include success stories. Article gives your marcom writers the information they need to write stories that sales will use and benefit from.

[June Issue](#)

Tips on Getting Customers to Disclose ROI

Article urges you to challenge the notion that customer references won't disclose this information -- after all, they're going public with the fact that they use your solution, and how they're using it. This article provides several tips, based on my own experience, in getting customers to "give it up."

Bonus: A Platform for Getting Customers to Take Reference Calls 24x7 -- and Like It

[July Issue](#)

The One Number That Drives Growth -- Customer References

July's featured article turns from tactical issues to broader strategy. What are new ways in which Customer Reference programs can add value to their companies? We look at one new way in which Customer Reference programs can do so and this one is potentially a biggie. Plus it is based on relatively recent research you should know about, on the (often untapped) importance of customer references to a firm.

[August Issue](#)

Persuading Customers to Become References

August's featured article examines the best ways to persuade a customer to become a reference. You start, of course, by providing great products, services and solutions. That said, even happy customers may require a touch of the persuasive arts to sign up for your program. People persuasion is actually a subject of serious scientific study-the most famous expert in the field is behavioral psychologist Robert Cialdini. August's featured article presents six tips from Cialdini's extensive research that will help improve your odds the next time you pop the big question to a customer: "Will you be my reference?" Indeed, if you have an extensive pipeline of potential customer references, it's a very good bet that these techniques will measurably improve you "close rates."

[September Issue](#)

Tips on Getting Sales People to Support Your Customer Reference Program

In September's issue, we interviewed Barbara Khait, Director of the Client Reference Program at Lucent. We continued the discussion she began in her well- received Web briefing hosted by ITSMA in August on Building an Effective Client Reference Program. Barbara's presentation sparked a great deal of interest - clearly customer reference professionals want to communicate with each other! Here we focus on one topic that seemed to generate a particularly large amount of interest: how to get sales people participating enthusiastically in your CR program

October Issue

Making the Business Case for Your Customer Reference Program

In October's issue, we reviewed a report from ITSMA (The IT Services Marketing Association) called "Best Practices in Reference Management: Presenting Evidence of Value Delivered," by Naomi Steinberg and Steve Hurley. One of my favorite things about this organization is that it performs very good research and it shows in this report. The report provides useful insights on building and improving Customer Reference programs and is especially useful if you need guidance in justifying budget dollars for your program.

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