

Testimonials: Making It Easy To Buy Again

By Kathy Gillen

The president of a company called me to help improve their sales. They had spent thousands of dollars in training their reps, and still were not getting the results they wanted. Their sales presentations were polished, and the reps were continually "hunting" for new business, convinced there wasn't a lot of business with past customers. Alarm bells started going off when I heard this and when we looked closely at their process, I could immediately see why.

This company followed up a sale with a "customer survey". The few forms that were returned had simple, yes/no questions or ratings that were scaled (1-5) with a space for comments.

Thoughts From The Coach: On a personal level, how many "customer satisfaction surveys" do you fill out with your real thoughts? If you express dissatisfaction, do you ever hear back from the company? Occasionally, especially with a new car purchase, you'll get an extremely short phone call from a very nice hourly worker asking if you are happy with your purchase. Does it leave you with a "warm-fuzzy" feeling that your business is appreciated? Does that mean testimonials/customer-satisfaction surveys don't work?

Companies are missing the message. Your customers want to explain how happy they are but don't have the time to fill out a form. They may have an issue that needs resolving, and once this is handled they move into the "happy-camper" category, if someone takes the time to help them.

A client bought a closet organizer system, and was amazed and delighted with the results. She had to call the company and chase down the sales rep to report how happy she was with the product. The rep told my client to "fill out the survey" she would receive, and left it at that. My client was disappointed at the response, and when the survey showed up three weeks later, she just tossed it in a pile that later was discarded. The sales rep called six months later asking for more business and my client's response was lukewarm at best. What happened? The sales rep had done a great job making it easy for the customer to purchase the product to begin with, then dropped the "ball" when the opportunity arose to make it easy to get a testimonial, future sale and loyal customer.

There is a solution!

Thoughts From The Coach: There is a simple solution to this issue. Add two steps to the sales process. Yes, it will add about 15 minutes of extra "work", maybe more if the customer isn't extraordinarily happy with the results. But this step could easily add a 25 percent increase in future sales (actually more according to my clients!) for this 15 minutes of time. If you consider how long it takes to develop a new client, it's time well spent.

Think of testimonials in the same category as employee reference checks. Smart companies do reference checks over the phone rather than expect people to fill out forms. It is easy to hear nuances in the tone of voice in response to the questions being asked. Experienced hiring managers easily pick-up whether past employers are happy with prospective employees, and the same thing happens with testimonials. The psychology is especially powerful--if your client is happy with your product/service and expresses it to you.

Why don't we all call our customers when doing satisfaction surveys? Fear. We are afraid that our customers won't like our product or service. So what? If they don't like it, we now have the opportunity to make it right and then get our testimonial! Ignoring problems absolutely guarantees that you will never get the repeat business, nor will you get the referrals businesses crave.

Smart employees and salesreps shadow the sale through completion, making sure the customer (internal or external) is informed along the way. They tie-up loose ends and make the follow-up testimonial call. Leaving this call to an untrained hourly worker for this survey closes the door to future sales, so don't let it happen! The

final comment to the customer prior to delivery of your product/service is: "I'll call you one week after your product is delivered to make sure everything is the way you expected. That would be the morning of the sixth. Does that work for you?"

Step 1

You've made your follow-up call and resolved any issues. Now ask for your testimonial. Have a list of questions ready, and take copious notes. Write down what your customer says, possibly repeating some of the phrases as you write, then go "deeper" e.g. "How much (time, money, effort) is saved because of this new product?" Read back the entire summary and ask, "Is this correct?"

Step 2

Tell your client you will type up their testimonial and send it to them for final approval. Ask if you can use their name, company and contact info. If they say no, then suggest that their initials, title and company be used, but try for the full disclosure. This is the perfect opportunity to say, "I'm delighted you are so happy--would the (marketing/sales/other) manager also appreciate the kind of service you received? Would you let them know I'll be calling them?"

When you send the testimonial for approval from your customer, you can either ask to have the information put on their letterhead and mailed back or simply ask them to approve the E-mailed version.

That wasn't so bad, was it? Try this process and watch the results! I would love to hear of other questions you've used successfully, so let me know what is working for you.

Sample Testimonial Questions/Statements:

Congratulations on your purchase of our product/service!

Key questions:

Why did you choose our business?

How does our product compare with others you looked at?

Did the installation/implementation go the way you expected it? Why? Why not?

How easy is it to use our product/service?

Tell me more...(get specific stories)

How are you using our product/service?

Tell me more...(get specific stories)

How has it saved you money/time/effort?

Tell me more...(get specific stories and dollar amounts)

Is it working the way you expected?

Why/why not? What can we do to improve?

Is there anything else I can do for you?

I'll type this up and send it to you for your approval. Would you print it on your letterhead and sign the bottom and send it back?

(if you mail the testimonial, enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope for the return piece; emailing the final letter is also acceptable)

Would you be willing to talk to future clients if they want to verify your support of our product?

You are so pleased with the money/time/effort you've saved--who else in your company would appreciate the same results?

Or , "I'm delighted you are so happy--would the (marketing/sales/other) manager also appreciate the kind of service you received? Would you let them know I'll be calling them?"

May I send you our newsletter/e-zine with tips and ideas of using your new product/service more effectively?

More tips:

Watch for "what's in it for the customer" stories, e.g. does the customer "look good" to the boss and peers because of your product/service.

Get specific stories that back up the claim. In other words, paint the picture!

" Kathy Gillen is smart, intuitive and terrific to work with! She has played a key role in our business growth, which has been approximately 300% over the past year. -Scott Davis Web Developer"

Do get permission to use the testimonial. Date it and keep it on file. The last thing you want is an unhappy customer because you've used their name without permission. Occasionally, a client won't want their last name used. Document everything, get permission to use their quote with the first name, last initial and keep everything in your files. Example: "Scott D., Web Developer"

Group testimonials on your web pages or brochures.

Authors Note:

Strategic Management Partners, Inc. is an executive coaching company that helps companies go from "outstanding to brilliant". We help our clients develop their skills, hire superstars, break through the glass ceiling and make the most of their future. For a complementary 30-minute coaching session, please call Kathy at 763-241-8010, or by E-mail at kathy@gillengroup.com.

Copyright 2003, Strategic Management Partners, Inc. All rights reserved. Please do not duplicate this information without written permission.