

Testimonial Marketing: Pros and Cons

Breanna deMontigny

AAD 617

University of Oregon

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The use of testimonials and customer reviews are statements given by a customer or supporter of the product or service a company is supplying. These can come in many different forms, such as star ratings, videos, or even Facebook likes. Testimonials can be a powerful tool in the hands of a capable marketing team, as it showcases real people using a company's service and commenting on it. However, it can also be a double edged sword in today's integrated online social scene and things can just easily get out of hand. I will be addressing lexicon terms that work with testimonial marketing, describing the different types of testimonial marketing, and then presenting cases where testimonials have gone wrong.

Lexicon Terms

In this essay, I will be using several lexicon terms to help describe this marketing strategy. Before delving into the content of the paper, I will define them here so that they may be used more freely in the body below with a better understanding. The first of these terms is *visual impact*, which relates to how something seen can affect an intended audience through marketing. This is a concept that is easily used in testimonials that are intending to strike a specific opinion as to how their product works, such as creating before and after photos or videos, to create a visual impact on the viewer that will further compel them to invest in a product or service.

The second term I will be using regularly is *social media*, which are the websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.

Social media has become ingrained in the testimonial process, and has created an easy access platform for companies to interact with input from customers.

The third term is *networked society*, which relates to the social, political, economic and cultural changes caused by the spread of networked, digital information and communications technologies. It also acts in relation to the impact of social media, and how ingrained it has become in the testimonial process. Having a networked society means that not only do companies have access to customer input, but the whole consumer population has access and uses those as a resource.

The fourth term I will be using will be *emphasis*, which is special importance, value, or prominence given to something. Companies will often use positive reviews from long time customers to create emphasis on their products and message. This will help further instill a sense of trust with any prospect consumers interested in the product or service being offered.

The last term I will be using in this essay is *content*, which relates to the subject matter of what is presented. Many companies will feature reviews or testimonials with specific content to either emphasize certain features of their company, or to frame expectations of what their service is like.

Effectiveness of Testimonials

Using testimonials in a marketing strategy is a great way to incorporate elements of word of mouth promotion. When reviews and testimonials are coming from customers, it helps strengthen your brand by creating a sense of trust. It shown that 88% of people trust online reviews written by other consumers as much as they trust recommendations from personal contacts. (Taber, 2016) Not to mention, the more reviews and testimonials a company gets

builds a sense of *social proof*, which is when a positive influence is created when your audience can see that “everyone is doing it.” (Da Cunha, 2017) This gives a sense of authenticity with a company’s product or service by emphasizing that a company has *real* customers, and 39% of consumers said they read reviews on a regular basis to determine whether a local business is a good business (Taber, 2016)--so the better a company’s social proof is, the more likely it will turn a profit.

Different kinds of Testimonials

As technology continues to have an influence on how we do business, it has become extremely ingrained that companies have some sort of online presence. With that, it has also become increasingly easier to incorporate testimonials and reviews into the process. Below are a few of the effective methods of testimonials we see most often.

Social Media. The total Facebook audience in the United States amounted to 214 million users as of January 2017. ("Number of U.S. Facebook users by age 2017 | Statistic," 2017) Whether it is Facebook, or any of the other platforms out there, it is no longer a trend, but rather just a part of normal life--creating a networked society. With the arsenal of tools that are constantly improving, more than 60 million businesses now have a Facebook page (Yeung, 2016) Social media opens up an easy and accessible way for companies to connect with their customers, and it is also considerably easy and organic to do.

It also adds a level of transparency when people can tweet, comment, or message companies with praise or concerns and have these be responded to. There are even 5 star rating systems on most Facebook business pages, which allows for anyone to look at reviews prior to buying or going to a business.

Industry Insider. These testimonials feature the “expert” opinion of someone within the industry or business. It showcases knowledge and expertise, and is often used for *business to business* companies, which do their commerce with other businesses rather than customers on an individual scale.

Satisfied Customers. Most obvious type of testimonial--a quote from the customer explaining why the product or service is so great, an image of the person, and their name. These are great to feature on websites--especially if there is a picture with the quote, as having a face to apply to the testimonial helps the prospect customer to form a connection with the individual being quoted.

Testimonials from satisfied customers can be used in varying degrees as well. This can be as simple as a screenshot of a text review, it can include a photo (as stated above), or it can include both of these plus information about the customer who left it. Such information can include name, job title, age, and even how long they have been patrons of the company. The more information you include with the customer testimonial, it helps builds the trust that a prospect will form.

Websites such as Yelp and Angie’s List have made a business of using customer reviews to rate other businesses. These can be great resources for prospect customers searching for the right business, especially since 85% of consumers said they read up to 10 reviews before feeling they can trust a business. (Taber, 2016) We can also examine commerce websites like Amazon, which have a 5 star system alongside reviews for every product available--which can be useful and overwhelming for a huge company such as Amazon. However, it has been shown that 90%

of respondents who recalled reading online reviews claimed that positive online reviews influenced buying decisions. (Taber, 2016)

Video Testimonials. Rather than using just text with an accompanying photo, companies can also invest in creating video testimonials. Shoppers who view video are 1.81X more likely to purchase than non-viewers (Taber, 2016) and using video gives brands much more creative license to show how happy their customers are to further entice future prospects. (Shewan, 2017) Video can move beyond text to create stronger content by showing prospects how the company's product or service works and what those effects are. It should generally be short enough to get to the point, but long enough to be compelling to the service being provided.

Video testimonials have also become very common in television, as consumers are bombarded with commercials for lawyers and weight loss supplements where a supposed client or real customer are spouting their praise for the service provided. These can be questionable, which I will discuss later in this essay. It is important for any testimonial to focus on being genuine.

Testimonials Gone Wrong

One of the issues with testimonials is that there will always a question as to whether the review was real or genuine. People can hire actors for video testimonials, and fake profiles can leave reviews that can damage a company's reputation. The downside to testimonials versus actual word of mouth is that by filtering the review through technology, it removes the personal touch and allows the prospect to always be questioning if the review is disingenuous.

Sia's Laundromat Fiasco. For example, musician Sia had a bad experience at a laundromat in Manhattan and took to Twitter to ask her fan base to bombard the business with

bad reviews. Soon, the laundromat found their Yelp page drowning in false reviews that were driven by a mob of angry Sia fans. (Ayers, 2014) This had nothing to do with the business, and they had no control over this happening. Thankfully, Yelp has had issues with this before and has content guidelines against reviews that are biased and non-objective. (Clark, 2014) All the reviews that came flooding in were removed shortly after.

The Internet Ruined My Life. With the introduction of social media, it has become increasingly integrated into the customer review process. With that comes a responsibility of how to respond appropriately to concerns, and also just individuals seeking to be difficult.

An interesting example of this is from a very short lived television show titled *The Internet Ruined My Life*. A restaurant chef got involved in an argument between a pro foie gras restaurant and some animal rights activists. (*Food Fight – The Internet Ruined My Life – Watch | Syfy*, n.d.) This argument had been going on via Facebook and Yelp where protesters would flood the sites with bad reviews and comments objecting to the use of veal and foie gras on the restaurant, called Terrine, menu. A chef from the Tam O'Shanter restaurant in the L.A. area interjected, a fight escalated, he said some choice expletives towards a protester, and then the conversation went viral. The protesters then turned toward the Tam O'Shanter, flooding their Yelp and Facebook with bad reviews. Soon the restaurant was harassed with phone calls and emails, and then it hit the internet newsstands-- the demand had reached a new high, which forced the restaurant to fire the chef. (Elliot, 2015)

With a higher dependency on the internet for recommendations, we have been introduced to how quickly people can get up in arms and form to action for a cause. This is not a unique case of the internet making something viral and having a business affected and an individual

fired. This has rapidly become normal in today's world, and it is something to take into consideration.

Weight Loss Supplements. There are an overabundance of weight loss supplements in the world today, and there is very little chance that anyone has not seen a commercial with a before and after testimonial. This is effective in that it showcases "proof" of how a product works and attempts to bring credibility to the company.

These "testimonials" have recently become easily recognizable as false, despite an effort to cover them up with celebrity endorsements. An example of this manipulation is done by the fact that participants in the weight loss commercials either a.) did not lose the weight by using the product, or b.) it was a fluke and they did not keep the weight off. Below is an excerpt from an interview from an actor who participated in a weight loss ad:

"I don't know much more about it, because none of us were allowed to follow the actual DVDs we were selling. The very first time I watched any of the exercise DVDs was six hours before the final "after" interview with our producer." (Evans, 2014)

Between these and the rise of scripted reality television, audiences have become more cynical about the nature of what is a genuine testimonial and what is regurgitated from a paid actor.

Conclusion

Testimonials, when used effectively, are a great marketing tool. General audiences respond well to them and it helps create a sense of trust associated with a company's brand. However, testimonials, particularly in today's social media and internet obsessed culture, can easily go wrong and damage a business and their reputation. It always best to act responsibly and treat each review as a chance to put the customer first.

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