

Use Customer Testimonials as Marketing Tool

What people say about a product or service can have a big impact on a business' success.

“No matter whether the purchase is large or small, consumer behavior often is directed, if not driven, by what we hear from others about a specific product or about a business,” says Glenn Muske, the North Dakota State University Extension Service’s rural and agribusiness enterprise development specialist. “In the world of marketing, we have been influenced by a ‘customer testimonial.’”

Muske and his family are a good example of customer testimonials at work.

“My family and I are probably headed out to a new restaurant this weekend,” he says. “Our choice was not influenced by the commercials we heard. Our choice was driven by the positive comments others have offered about the restaurant.”

Customer testimonials have been used in marketing for years.

“Whether informal, such as word-of-mouth, or more formalized through print media, online or video, hearing what others say has a tremendous influence on our behavior,” Muske says.

However, customer testimonials are more prevalent today than ever before. Consumers can leave comments on business websites, post them to social media sites of the business, use a third-party review sites such as Trip Advisor or Yelp, or simply make a post to their own online social media site.

“What comes as a surprise to many business owners is the general acceptance of such posts as legitimate,” says (Insert name and title) of (Insert county). “Whether you know the person making the comment or not, research suggests that well in excess of 50 percent of those seeing the reviews accept the comments as accurate. And nearly one-third of respondents indicated they have been influenced by those comments.”

Yet less than 30 percent of businesses include customer testimonials in their online marketing, and even fewer include them in their traditional advertising, according to <Insert last name>.

The use of customer testimonials in marketing often is perplexing to small-business owners. Common questions include:

- How do you get those testimonials?
- When can you get them?
- Where can you use them?
- What if the person does not offer positive comments?

“The answers to these questions are surprisingly simple,” says <Insert last name>. “Getting them is simply asking. You can ask anytime you interact with the client, especially if he or she had a positive experience. Then you use them everywhere: online, in-store, in printed material, in advertising, etc.”

Make providing a testimonial easy for the customer. The simplest way is to offer comment cards just as the customer is leaving. Better yet, ask if they would do a short video. Adding a visual element strengthens the impact of their words. Give them a disposable camera to take pictures or ask them to share their videos and pictures.

To effectively use customer testimonials, you want them to be authentic and specific. You also want to have a diverse set. Change them periodically. And let your clients know that you have used their comments.

“It is important that business owners remember one thing, and that is to get written permission to use the testimonial and any pictures,” says Muske. “Also ensure the claims are truthful as outlined by the Federal Trade Commission rules and avoid misleading claims. For example, don’t promise ‘everyone will have the same experience.’

Customer stories or testimonials are a powerful marketing tool, so consider using them when developing your marketing strategy.

For more help on developing this tool, check with your local Extension Service office at [insert phone number and email address]. Also visit NDSU’s small-business support website at www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness and sign up for the monthly newsletter. Or check out Facebook at www.facebook.com/NDSUextsmallbiz or Twitter at @gmuske. Another online resource is www.eXtension.org/entrepreneurship.

The Small Business Administration and its related organizations, such as the Small Business Development Centers and Service Corps of Retired Executives, also can be valuable resources.

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For more information, contact glenn.muske@ndsu.edu or call (701) 328-9718. You also can visit our website, www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness.