



Can you enlist customers to tell your story?

Labor Day, 2010

Dear friends and colleagues,

I recently read Robert Cialdini's *"Influence: the Psychology of Persuasion."* In it, he makes the point that social networks wield much more influence than paid advertising because people find other people, speaking from their own experience, much more credible than organizations and their hired advocates.

The outfit I hired this spring to remodel our powder room is certainly onto this. Instead of a slick brochure, Brillo Home Improvements sent me a list of more than 100 customers -- including addresses and phone numbers -- who had consented to serve as references. It's hard to imagine a more powerful piece of marketing.

Of course, the value of third-party endorsements hardly qualifies as news. But web-based social media are dramatically amplifying the power of so-called "peer reviews." (Think Angie's List, whose paying members now number more than a million.) Distrust of marketers is fueling the trend, according to an August 2009 study by Forrester Research. Study author David Frankland notes, "People trust people they've never met more than they trust marketers, and social media give them a way to connect."

So what should your organization be doing about the growing influence of peer reviews on decision-making?

I'm not going to suggest you start tweeting or set up a Facebook page, since most of us aren't engaged in the kind of work that people find enthralling. Instead, I want to encourage you to consider enlisting your own best customers (or members or donors or employees, depending on your target market) in your marketing program. If you've earned their enthusiastic loyalty, their stories about your organization will be far more credible than yours.

And *stories* is the operative word here. A quote that reads like advertising copy won't have anywhere near the pull of a little story that recounts -- in the person's own words -- what the need was, how you met it, and why they feel you're something special.

Attribution is the other key to credibility in this skeptical age. Anonymous quotes will always be suspect. If your product or service truly *is* something special, don't be afraid to ask people who have benefitted if they're willing to say so publicly. In my experience, a good share will say yes.



As an example, about half the executives and professionals interviewed for the recent brand planning project I did for Baird & Associates, a coastal engineering firm, agreed to let us use excerpts from the interviews on the new web site that resulted at www.baird.com. So instead of the old web site's reliance on generalities ("People...innovation...action"), the new site features story-telling quotes attributed to clients including Leo Brewster, director of coastal zone management for the Island of Barbados. On the site, he talks about what Baird has done for Barbados, saying among other things, "The project has brought new dynamics to a coastline that was starved for developmental ideas. It has lifted the entire area to a whole new standard."

Here's the take-away thought for you to ponder: Why would your organization settle for puffery about "setting a new standard of excellence," "providing world-class service," being "an employer of choice," or some other marketing cliché if you're good enough to earn that kind of concrete, credible endorsement?

I recently asked myself the same question. The result is a new web site, debuting today, at www.curleycommunication.com. It features eight clients of mine who tell the story of Curley Communication much better than I ever could. Hope you'll take a moment to check it out!

Best wishes for a wonderful fall,

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