

Using the Voice of the Customer in Brand Communication

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My family and I just returned from a wonderful vacation in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, over-indulging in food, touring and sun. We booked our hotel and airline package months ago after scanning the thousands of customer reviews, tips and ratings on numerous travel sites such as Trip Advisor, Expedia and Costco Vacations. While a recent Gallup poll suggests that “Americans say social media have little sway on purchases,” our experience with listening to customer stories had a large influence on the ultimate buying decision.

My personal experience mirrors my professional beliefs about optimizing your product or service through a robust and authentic customer messaging approach: Companies need to listen to customers and learn how to use their voices.

Early in my career, I worked in health care and was fortunate to meet one of the nation’s first heart transplant patients along with a number of caregivers who were fearless in caring for patients with all kinds of serious illnesses and disorders. My company was a 90-year-old non-profit that began as a charitable organization based on Florence Nightingale principles. We had limited funds for promotions and few resources for getting our story out to the public. Even though we were the largest home health care provider in the market, it was a challenge to promote our broad range of services and merits. It wasn’t until we started using the voice of the customer in our messaging and branding that people really started understanding the company’s mission.

During the time we cared for the heart transplant patient, I convinced my boss, the nursing team, the patient and his family that hosting press in his home on his birthday could be fun and help tell the story of a miraculous recovery while giving the public an inside view. That day, we had multiple reporters from local TV, radio and newspapers come out to meet him and share his story.

As a result, the coverage helped build the company’s reputation and brand.

People want to tell their stories

If you give customers a voice, they will use it. If you don't, they'll find their own venue to share their experiences.

How many times have you seen someone ranting on social media about the poor customer service they received while flying? We've all seen the tweet: "Thanks, XYZ Airlines for losing my luggage!"

But there are also social media posts that say something like, "Thanks, XYZ company, for giving my family great service and making our trip memorable."

Opinions count and they influence the way others think about products and services.

Mitigating negative coverage

If they're positive, customer comments can give the company instant credibility. If they're negative, the message can take the company on a downward spiral.

In negative situations, you can use the voice of the customer to counter the story by offering a different perspective. For example, I've received calls from "problem solver" TV reporters who were preparing a testimonial featuring a negative customer experience. In these types of crisis situations, I try to spend most of my time listening, taking notes and agreeing on a reasonable time frame for the company to respond. When I get back to the reporter, I sometimes offer an opposing story from a local customer, which can potentially provide balance and soften the blow to the company. I realize this is hard to do, but it helps if you are prepared with a database of regional customer stories that are ready to go in a crisis.

How do you engage the customer?

Create content on your social media channels that encourage customers to tell their stories. If you don't yet have social media channels ready for that kind of exchange, then reach out directly to the people in your organization who have direct contact with the customers, such as those who work in your call centers, operations, customer care or patient care. Everyone will know of success stories, or times when the company dropped the ball and then went to great lengths to fix the situation.

Also, encourage your employees to submit stories and consider rewarding them with some type of recognition. Most important, don't be afraid to follow up directly with the customer. I know it may be awkward to call a customer directly (especially if it's outside of your direct responsibilities), but most of the time they will appreciate the call. Let them know you are following up to see how they are doing today. Be prepared to spend a lot of time on the phone and take a lot of notes. There may be follow-up actions that you may need to take or information you need to share with others. After you've heard their story, you may offer them the opportunity to share it with others through the media or video. My experience has been that the majority want to share their story; only a few shy away due to personal reasons or because they didn't want the attention.

How authentic are customer stories?

I typically try to sit down or connect by phone with customers to help them understand what to expect from the press. My goal is to remove myself as much as possible to prevent over-managing the interview process. Reporters will appreciate it. Always keep in mind that there are risks associated with putting a customer out there, but if you do your homework

upfront, those risks will be minimized. In other words, make sure that the customer had an exceptional experience with your product and is comfortable talking about it.

My final advice to engaging customers in your messaging: Have fun with it!

Getting back to the Gallup study

A key piece of advice can be found in the following quote from Gallup's 23 June 2014 *State of the American Consumer* study: "Consumers appreciate the highly personal and conversational nature of social media sites, and they prefer interacting in an open dialogue as opposed to receiving a hard sell. And companies' use of social media to provide timely responses to questions and complaints accelerates brand loyalty and, eventually, sales. When it comes to social media efforts, businesses stand to benefit when they utilize a more service-focused approach rather than one dedicated to simply pushing their products."



Robert Herta

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