



**WRITE INTELLIGENCE™**

We're writing the book on customer stories that sell<sup>SM</sup>

An *Intelligence Brief* from WriteIntelligence

**Customer Stories:  
Mission-critical Collateral**

## Introduction

Customer stories (also known as case studies, customer success stories, or simply success stories) are the most critical component of a successful marketing collateral strategy.

***Customer stories outrank every other type of collateral in their power to influence buying decisions.***

In a game of cards, a royal flush beats every other hand. And in marketing, customer stories beat data sheets, brochures, and white papers in their capacity to influence the buying decisions of prospects. Customer stories are the Ace-high straight of collateral. As one eloquent marketing executive put it, “If your customers ain’t talkin’, your prospects are walkin’.”

In spite of this, many marketing professionals place customer stories near the bottom of their collateral hierarchy and priority list – nice to have, but first we’ve got to develop the corporate brochure, the product family brochure, some data sheets, and a couple of white papers to demonstrate our thought leadership.

Wrong!

***Prospects want proof that a vendor’s products will solve their problems.***

Descriptions of product capabilities, features, and benefits are important. But what prospects seek most earnestly is independent confirmation, proof, corroboration that some organization just like theirs facing the same challenges successfully used your product or service to solve their problems. And this is precisely the information that effective customer stories can and should deliver – and why it is so important to put customer stories at the top of the list of must-have collateral, and to ensure they are optimized for prospects.

## What Prospects Say

Listen to what prospects say about the importance of customer stories. WriteIntelligence surveyed actual customers to determine how important customer stories were to them as prospects making buying decisions about a vendor’s products. The survey asked:

What weight did you place on customer stories  
in the process of selecting vendor X?

***24.8 percent of prospects’ buying decision was based on customer stories they read.***

Participants responded that, on average, 24.8 percent of their decision was based on the customer story or stories they read. Considering the plethora of vendor-related documents and information available to them (data sheets, brochures, white papers, corporate overviews, technical documentation, Web copy, Q&As, press releases, etc.) 25 percent is a significant number. Significant enough to shift a purchasing decision from one vendor to another.

## The Short-list Barrier

Marketing efforts aside, virtually every company relies on its sales force (direct and/or channel partners) to supply prospects with the information they seek, and skillfully guide them through the buying process. This personal attention should offset the absence or ineffectiveness of customer stories – or does it?

***The short list can often be the biggest barrier vendors face in closing a sale.***

In the typical sales cycle – which includes research, short list, formal evaluation, and decision – the short list can often be the biggest barrier vendors face in closing a sale. Prospects “Google” the field of potential vendors, research vendor Web sites, review industry analyst reports, and query listservs or fellow members of user groups. Based on this research, prospects assemble a short list of vendors who appear to meet the basic requirements.

Quite often, prospects *only* contact those vendors they have chosen for their short list. In other words, vendors who don’t make the “cut” may never know that a prospect was a prospect because the prospect never contacted them. All the selling skills, all the knowledge, and all the efforts of the vendor’s sales force are never called upon.

***Sixty-two percent had used customer success stories to vet suppliers for their short list.***

Sixty-two percent of those surveyed by WriteIntelligence said they had used customer stories to vet suppliers for their short list. Could missing or ineffective customer stories result in lost sales from prospects you never knew you had?

### **The Backside of Customer Stories**

We’ve seen how customer stories can play a major role in influencing the buying decisions of prospects. But there is yet another good reason to develop customer stories. There is evidence suggesting that a customer’s participation in the customer story development process can have positive and long-lasting benefits for the vendor.

In 2002, Harvard Business Review published the results of an experiment by two university professors [*How Surveys Influence Customers; Paul M. Dholakia and Vicki G. Morwitz*]. One group of 945 randomly selected customers of a financial institution were surveyed, while a control group of 1064 customers with the same firm were not. One year later the experiment found that:

“The customers surveyed were more than three times as likely to have opened new accounts, were less than half as likely to have defected, and were more profitable than the customers who hadn’t been surveyed.”

What does this imply? The study’s authors concluded that:

“The surveys appeal to customers’ desire to be coddled, reinforcing positive feelings they may already have about the surveying organization, and making them more likely to buy their products.”

***Engaging customers in the customer story process strengthens the supplier/customer bond.***

So what does this mean to you? Engaging existing customers in the customer story process satisfies their “desire to be coddled” and strengthens the supplier/customer bond. Average customers can become loyal boosters of your company and its products, enthusiastic customer references that continue to generate sales through their own purchases and through their recommendations to prospects they interact with.

### **Action Items**

- *Get started!* Develop your corporate brochures, data sheets, product brochures, white papers, and other collateral – but don’t postpone customer stories until some convenient time in the future. The future of your company depends on effective customer stories today.
- *Optimize for prospects!* If you already have a complement of customer stories, take the time to review them. Are they crafted with your prospects’ needs in mind? Ask yourself, what information are prospects looking for? What questions are they looking to get answered? What would they ask a sales rep?
- *Cover your markets!* Ideally, you should have at least one customer story for each market segment you compete in and each product or solution set you offer. Don’t become overwhelmed by the task if that represents dozens of customer stories. Prioritize. Begin with your most important market or product.

### **About WriteIntelligence**

WriteIntelligence helps companies transform ordinary customer stories into powerful selling tools by leveraging prospect input, best practices, and decades of professional writing experience.

WriteIntelligence can optimize your customer stories for prospects, streamline your customer story development process, maximize your customer story return on investment, and turn your customer stories into a competitive advantage.

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