



Mastering Technical Sales

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John Care, Managing Director

Customer Success Stories

Tell Them A Story!

As a former IT Executive, I'll tell you a sales secret. One of the best ways to get your message across is to tell me a customer story. Speaking about other customers, their successes and your experiences make you appear confident, knowledgeable, and authentic. Most sales organizations have official references – complete with a glossy brochure accompanied by a PowerPoint slide with a logo – and all are blessed by legal. **And they are totally ineffective!**

They are ineffective because they are sanitized. They are ineffective because they are impersonal and ineffective because they are not your own words. As your customer, I want you to bring me some value and tell me something new I cannot read on your website. A corporate reference slide designed by someone in HQ does not do that. A personal customer story does.

So, what about using all those unofficial customer stories? The ones that are lying around, uncollected and mostly unused, in your head and those of your colleagues? Why not collect and share them to boost your sales performance by removing some risk from your customer's buying process?

How To Get Started

Ask your more experienced and tenured colleagues to share their customer stories. Don't just limit yourself to sales and sales engineers; reach out to people in your services or installation teams and ask about their customer experiences, too. These people are a walking encyclopedia of customer stories, which is undoubtedly one of the reasons they have been so successful for so long. At your next regional meeting, ask everyone to write down a story as their homework.

Unless you are new to your company, you probably have a few stories you can use from your customer base if only you took the time to think about them. Perhaps next time you visit a customer you can ask them to give you some quantifiable benefits or ROI they have received from your solution. *If you don't ask you don't get.*

Even as a new hire, you can say, *"A colleague of mine told me about one of their customers who .."*. Just put it in your own words.

What Kind of Stories Do I Need?

I classify them as 'conversational stories' in that you should be able to establish the relevant details in 45-60 seconds. That equates to a maximum of around 160 words. Go any longer, and you'll lose the flow and the customer's attention. Imagine you are sharing the story with the customer over coffee. In his New Solution Selling book, Michael Bosworth lays out a framework for a customer story that may help you – which we've adapted for the world of the Sales Engineer.

Step	Content
Situation	Customer name, industry, and job title
Critical issue	The pain of the person or company
Reasons	The business reasons for the company's issue, biased toward your eventual solution
Vision	In the words of your customer, the capabilities he said he needed to solve the problem; <i>"he told me he needed a way to.."</i>
We provided	If properly described in the vision, say, "We gave him those capabilities." NO PRODUCT NAMES!!
Result	Some specific measurements

"The Operations Director of a large fleet rental company couldn't accurately track the mileage and maintenance records of the cars in the fleet and provide that data to his clients as they had no central recording and maintenance system. This was causing massive maintenance costs and lost business as their competitors could supply the data and pointed out this competitive difference. He engaged with us because of a recommendation from one of his management consulting partners. The director said he needed a way to provide online access and reports to his fleet customers. We provided him with a web-based online system which cut his maintenance costs by \$11m and allowed his sales team to retain 100% of their corporate customers."

Every Story Has A Happy Ending

These stories take less than a minute. They can cut **days** out of your sales cycle as you establish “credible” and “low-risk” as two adjectives the prospect now links to you and your company. A quick customer story can often be a great response to a “*can you do..*” question in a demo, especially when asked by a mid-level manager. Instead of showing the “how,” you talk about how some other customer did the “how” and speak to benefits instead of features.

By switching personas from a former IT executive to a former presales leader, I can tell you this approach works. Many of my customers now have collections of these unofficial customer reference stories. It works for them too. One of my former SEs jokingly called my collection “Tales From The Book Of John.” Imagine my surprise when, three months later, the CFO of our company called me to ask if he could “borrow” some of my stories. I told him yes – as long as they never ended up in a PowerPoint deck!

CALL TO ACTION: Write down your informal references, ask your colleagues to do the same – and share them for success.

“Of course, it's the same old story. Truth usually is the same old story.”

Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister, UK.

Talking Points is an occasional column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics, visit www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.