

success stories: the top 5 mistakes

Most success stories omit information that is critical to sales. Even great technology firms – including, very likely, your competitors – make this mistake. And that can mean a competitive advantage for you.

by Bill Lee

Below are the results from a study Lee Communications performed of success stories at 25 top technology and technology-related firms. As you'll see, the overwhelming majority of stories – even from great firms – omit information that is critical to buyers. And that suggests an opportunity to gain a competitive advantage with your own stories.

By the way, I hesitate to use the phrase “Top 5 Mistakes” since that may imply carelessness. I doubt that's the case given the excellence of these firms. More likely, the omissions are due to various influences such as writers lacking business savvy, unresponsive customers, conflicting organizational pressures, and so forth. That said, for those customer reference managers who can navigate such issues – and help is available for doing so – the opportunity to gain a real advantage awaits.

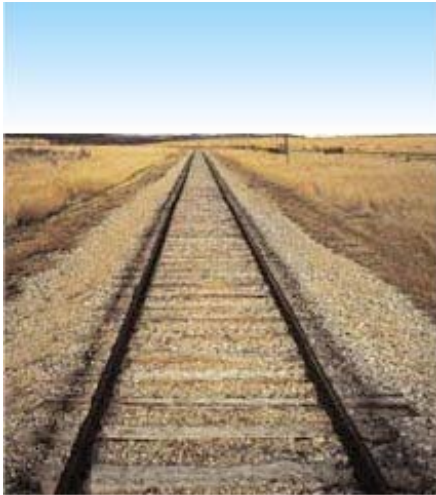
An opportunity to beat the competition

In particular, if your stories are superior there's an excellent chance that they can drive sales close-rates higher than your competitors' whenever sales people rely on success stories to prepare for meetings with prospects. That will likely be the case, for example, when the sales person is new, or your technology or services are new, or the buyer is in an unfamiliar industry or “vertical” – in other words, “frequently,” for most technology firms. See my article, [Anticipating ROI for Marketing Collateral](#).

Main Takeaway: If your success stories can overcome the following pitfalls, there's an excellent chance they can drive better sales close rates in certain, fairly common situations.

What sales needs from marketing

What information do sales people need that success stories are failing to provide? First, sales people need an idea of what the buyer's needs will be,



THE RESEARCH

An analysis of success stories from 25 top U.S. technology or technology-related firms. Firms had either a top 100 brand or sell well respected, up-and-coming technology solutions.

The study analyzed stories for whether they presented certain information that is known to be critical to sales such as customer needs, quantified results, competitor differentiation and so forth. Results are presented below.



some of which the buyer himself may not be aware of. In addition, sales people must be able to explore the business *implications* of those needs with the buyer, to avoid having her say, "I have dozens of problems to deal with. Why should I bother to fix this one?" And, sales people need to know how your solutions can *meet those needs* and the *business benefits* that would result, so the buyer can sell them to his CFO. This is not just common sense. When sales people are prepared to explore these issues with buyers, their close rates go up dramatically – from 30% to 70% (See [Anticipating ROI for Marketing Collateral.](#))

THE FINDINGS:

The study revealed fairly widespread shortcomings – even in success stories produced by top companies. This suggests that firms who do create superior stories can gain a significant marketing and sales advantage.

20%

Success stories that did not describe specific customer needs.

48%

Success stories that did not describe any *business implications* of the need or needs.

64%

Success stories that did not provide any quantified results.

THE TOP 5 MISTAKES

Following are the top five mistakes your competitors are probably making in their stories – and how to avoid them in yours. (Note: rankings are by order of importance to the sales process, not by statistical frequency of mistake.)

Mistake #1. Failing to state the customer's needs with specificity, or show their business implications.

Many stories just quote the customer as saying something like, "we needed to automate our remote customer call center offices." But to adequately prep a sales person, they must tell why he had that need, why he *felt* it strongly. The writer should probe until he understands the *underlying business implications*. "We needed to automate our remote call center offices because of the explosion of data they are generating combined with severe limits on my budget for IT support staff." Or, instead of, "we needed to guarantee data backup at our customer service offices," it's more powerful if the customer says, "we needed guaranteed data backup to protect valuable prospect lists and client files – some of this information would be irreplaceable if we ever lost it – which placed a huge responsibility on my people." Such information will help your sales people probe for similar needs and point out similar implications to prospects who think they have more important issues to deal with.

Mistake #2. Failing to quantify your customer's results.

A common explanation for this is that customers are unwilling to provide quantified results but I would urge you to re-examine this. My opinion, based in part on my own experience, is that very few customer references have a hard-and-fast rule against disclosing such information. After all, by participating in a success story in the first place, they're agreeing to "go public" with how they used your solution and the advantages it conferred. Why stop short at showing that the solution makes economic sense?

When you're not getting some solid, quantified benefits from the customer the more likely reasons are: (1) the person you're interviewing doesn't know such information; (2) *no one* in the company has such information; or, (3) the writer isn't skilled enough or (politely) persistent enough to get this information from the interviewee. There are ways to overcome each of these barriers – for some hints on doing so, based mostly on my own experience writing success stories, see my article, [Tips on Getting Customers to Disclose ROI](#) (posted at www.lee-communications.com).

32%

Success stories that did not mention any results (quantified or not) with a business impact.

40%

Number of stories in which benefits or results claimed were not persuasive, because they gave no explanation of why their solution would lead to the results claimed.

Mistake #3. Failure to describe *business* benefits of any kind (quantified or not).

Every technology marketing manager knows that customers are demanding *business* benefits in today's tough buying environment, yet I still find that a surprising number of stories do not provide this information at all, or if they do, it is not persuasive. A consulting firm's story will tout its expertise in various technologies and industries, without telling how it helped a particular customer penetrate a new market. A software maker will describe all the ways its offering can slice and dice data, but leave the reader unsure of what exactly its customer achieved with the new information, such as better sales figures or reduced operating costs. Mike Bosworth, Advisory Board member of the American Marketing Association's Customer Message Management (CMM) Forum, thinks this is because product marketing managers focus more on what products do than on how customer's use them. His suggestion: talk to your professional services people to find this out. To which I would add, take this information and be sure it finds its way into the list of questions your success story writers use when interviewing customers. And make sure your writers establish a cause and effect link between the solution provided and the benefits claimed.

78%

Success stories that provide no competitor differentiation, or other explanation of why the customer thought their solution stood out in the marketplace.

Mistake #4. Failing to differentiate your offerings from the competition.

Statistically, this was the most common mistake in the success stories I reviewed. The story would simply describe its company's solution without mentioning why it stood out. The reaction from a prospect reading it would be, "OK, there are probably five other firms who can provide the same things you do. What makes yours different? What makes it *better*?" The story – and any sales person who uses it to prep for a tough buyer – had better provide answers. Amazingly, the overwhelming majority of stories out there do not.

60%

Success stories that do not provide, on the first page, a summary showing all essential elements of the story (customer & industry, need & implication, solution, benefits & results).

Mistake #5. Not providing a concise, easy-to-find summary of the story.

Your story has what, maybe eight to 17 seconds to grab the attention of a busy sales person or prospect? Whether you call it an Executive Summary, Overview or whatever, you should summarize the entire story in a brief paragraph on the first page. A prospect should be able to see – at a glance – all the critical pieces of information listed in the box below. I recommend putting the summary in a one paragraph, conversational style, so that sales people can use it as a script when talking to a new prospect. Yet many of the stories I've reviewed have no summary – forcing sales people and prospects to hunt for the information they are interested in (not likely!). Others have a summary that leaves out critical information, such as what the customer was trying to accomplish. Some will make the information so cryptic that it's difficult for anyone not experienced with the product – i.e., most prospects – to understand (that is often the case with bullet-form summaries).

Customer reference stories: 7 tips for grabbing a buyer's attention

- 1. State the customer's need in compelling terms.** What did the customer need to accomplish? What were the business implications of doing so – and of *not* doing so?
- 2. Emphasize the barriers.** Make it clear that meeting the goal wasn't easy – that's why they needed you! This might be stated as, "We got to the point where we had to find a way to _____" or "What made it difficult was _____."
- 3. Describe your solution in terms of value.** Don't focus on product features or service capabilities. While it's okay to mention those, emphasize the ways in which your solution overcame the customer's barriers and achieved the necessary results.
- 4. List quantified results, especially those that impact ROI.** Don't accept at face value the explanation that customers won't disclose such information – more often than you think, they will.
- 5. Differentiate your firm from the competition.** Show how you stood out in the customer's mind. You can do this without mentioning competitors by name, if desired.
- 6. Provide a brief, comprehensive summary.** Let your prospects and sales people see all critical information in the story *at a glance*. Don't make them hunt for it!
- 7. Quote the customer – a lot.**