

5

MISTAKES
THAT
CAN **KILL**
YOUR CASE
STUDIES

COMPELLING CONTENT CREATION

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Why Read this Guide?

Case studies are powerful.

In a world of heavy competition and me too features and benefits, they remain some of the most persuasive weapons in your new business arsenal.

By demonstrating your ability to tackle the challenges affecting your prospects and providing tangible, measurable results they can judge their own success by, case studies position you as the perfect solution to their problems.

Unfortunately, despite the effort that goes into their creation, many don't do the job they were designed for.

The reason for this is simple – **they focus on the wrong thing.**

During this short guide we will look at 5 reasons why this happens and offer some simple tips on how to transform them into persuasive tools that you can use to find, attract and win more business.

Get the Clients You Deserve

Life isn't fair!

If it was fair, your success would be directly proportional to your ability to do your job. The better you were, the more business you'd attract.

You wouldn't need to market or sell yourself. People would just flock to you. Just like in that Kevin Costner movie.

Unfortunately life doesn't work that way. People don't just come.

No matter how good you are, you've got to convince prospective customers that you can do what needs to be done and you can do it better than anybody else.

It's Not Easy

In today's brutally competitive market, finding and attracting quality prospects to your business is tough.

With so many companies vying for the same customers, you have to answer that one all important question...**why you?**

Remember as hard as winning new business is, you've got to spare a thought for your prospects. They've got it really hard.

With so many options open to them, they've got to find a way to sort the wheat from the chaff.

The Burden of Proof is with You

When looking for a supplier, your prospects want to avoid the cowboys at all cost. But it's not just the cowboys. They also want to clear out the mediocre and the subpar.

None of the above is good for businesses.

Your prospects want the best their budget can afford or better.

They want someone with experience of their industry, who understands their business and who can empathise and sympathise with what they are going through.

They want someone who can get results but **most of all they want someone who can prove it.**

What is a Case Study really?

It is undisputable evidence of your ability to not only get results but more importantly to achieve your client's goals.

Your prospects can go onto a dozen websites and read the same promises of high quality, commitments to excellence and market leading products and services.

When everything looks and sounds the same, case studies help you to stand out from the crowd. They say '**you can do what I need to be done and I can be confident that you can do it for me.**'

In fact, when properly produced, case studies offer your prospects all of the information they need to choose you over and above the mind-boggling number of options available to them.

That is, as long as it has the right information in them. Many don't.

Here's why.

The 5 Mistakes Uncovered

So what are these mistakes and why are they such a problem. To understand that we must first understand a case study's structure.

Essentially a case study is **your client's story** told in 4 parts:

1. **Objective** - an overview of your client and what they want to achieve
2. **Challenge** - the problems your client was facing that made it difficult for them to achieve their objective
3. **Solution** - a brief overview of what you did that helped them overcome their specific challenges.
4. **Results** - the tangible/measurable benefits your partnership helped achieved for your clients both professionally and personally

1. Making it All About You

This is the mother of all mistakes.

You would be forgiven for thinking that your case studies should be all about you. After all it was your project and therefore it makes sense that you should take centre stage.

This is a mistake because when you make your case studies all about you, you take the emphasis away from the people that matter the most...the reader.

Rather than focus on you, a good case study puts your client at its heart, providing the reader with a relatable frame of reference from which to measure their own experience and success.

By comparing their own situation with that of your client, the reader can use the case study to determine how relevant you are as a supplier and most importantly get an indication of the results they can expect to enjoy.

The more the reader can see themselves reflected in the case study, the more persuaded they will be by it.

When you write your case studies from your perspective, it subtly changes its emphasis in ways that greatly reduces its power to persuade as we shall see in the next parts of this guide.

2. Overlooking Your Client's Challenges

In life we are motivated by two powerful forces:

1. The pull of the things we want
2. The need to escape the things that are causing us discomfort

Of the two the second is by far the most powerful.

Gyms are a good example of a business that benefits from this principal. While everyone likes the idea of getting fitter, when push comes to shove, the majority of us pay our money but never go.

The goal is just not powerful enough to motivate action.

On the other hand, consider what happens when you get sick. Nothing's going to get in the way of your getting to the medicine cabinet.

Pain is an awesome motivator.

Although your prospects will tend to tell you more about what they want to achieve, chances are they've come to you because they need to overcome some sort of challenge they're incapable of fixing by themselves.

You need to find out what these challenges are because they are pure gold in case studies.

When a prospect can identify with the problems suffered by your clients it makes their own problems all the more vivid, while at the same time offering the hope that you can help overcome it.

The challenge section should therefore recount the specific troubles that motivated your client to seek you out.

This is important because when a prospect reads of someone that has similar challenges to the ones they themselves dealing with, they become bonded to the case study's outcome.

They want to see how it turns out as it gives them a future view of how their current situation could change for the better.

It's not dissimilar to watching a film and identifying with the hero. When you recognise yourself in both the protagonist and their situation, you can't help but be immersed in the action as it unfolds.

You watch in the hope of finding a solution to your own problems and to get an idea of the rewards that lie at the end of the tunnel.

Too many case studies do the complete opposite. Instead of presenting the challenges that the client was experiencing, they focus instead on their objective.

The following is an example of a challenge written from the perspective of the case study creator:

“Frank is the owner of a medium sized design business. He had built a strong reputation in automotive design and now wanted help infiltrating new industry sectors.”

On the face of it this isn't a bad line. However, on closer inspection it is clearly the client's objective not their challenge and therefore lacks the emotional intensity needed to be persuasive.

This is an example of the same challenge written from a client's perspective:

“Frank is the owner of a medium sized design business. The company had an excellent roster of clients but the recession meant the loss of a number of their largest accounts - accounts that the owner was struggling to replace.

If new clients were not won in the next 6-months difficult decisions would have to be made and could ultimately lead to the closure of a business, 10 years in the making.”

Anyone experiencing the same problems would immediately identify with Frank and would be highly motivated to read to the end of the document to see how the story ends.

3. Focusing on Your Solution

It's only natural to want to show your prospects what you're capable of and the solution section feels like the perfect place to do so.

After all it's the bit you know most about because it's the bit that you did. The hope is that when your prospects witness the brilliance of what you can do, they will be falling over themselves to work with you.

It's not surprising then that the solution section ends up being the longest bit of any case study. Which is a shame because, as tempting as it is to showcase the fantastic products and services you've developed, in reality, this is not the stuff that's going to wow your prospects.

Your prospects want to know that you understand their specific problems, that you've helped similar people to them overcome these same issues and that you've achieved their desired result.

The solution section is an excellent way to bridge the journey from challenge to result but don't be drawn into the detail.

Save the nitty gritty of how you did it for another time. It will only bog your document down.

To produce a punchy solution section, just answer these three questions as concisely as you can:

- Why did your client choose you as their solution provider?
- How did your chosen solution fit your client's specific problems?
- How did each intervention lead to each important outcome?

4. Omitting the Real Results You Achieved

In many ways the results section is the single most important part of a case study. Your prospects are looking for evidence that you can deliver and this is the place they'll find it.

While features and benefits provide a general idea of what a service like yours can accomplish, the results you've achieved for someone else will offer a true benchmark from which your prospects can measure their own potential success.

However, despite its importance, the results section is often the most neglected bit.

Because in many cases, the case study has been written from your point of view, the tendency is to only include the outcomes that you can see or to write them in your own language.

For example it's not unusual for a PR company to highlight their results in terms of the number of media pieces they got for you, the column inches gained or the number of people that had the chance (i.e. circulation) to see an article.

This is all very well but without highlighting the impact of the coverage generated, the results are just a bunch of numbers. And while they can be persuasive, with a bit more digging, they can be extremely influential.

Talking purely in terms of the results your service has achieved is a bit like telling a non-sports fan a soccer score without any context.

For example...

In December 2013, the city of Manchester was in shock. Football fans were reeling from the news that their beloved team, Manchester United had suffered defeat at the hands of rivals Everton. The score was 1-0.

On its own the 1-0 result doesn't appear so bad. All teams have bad days and at least it wasn't 10-0.

However, as soon as you uncover its impact, it becomes far more meaningful to anyone reading it.

Consider the following information:

- The defeat took place at Old Trafford, Manchester United's home ground. The one place they should have had the advantage
- It was the first time Everton had managed to beat Manchester United at home in a very long time
- Everton's former manager, David Moyes, had been unable to beat Manchester United at home during his 11 year tenure

- David Moyes was now the manager of Manchester United
- Since David Moyes joined the 2013 Premier League champs at the beginning of the season, Manchester United have had their worst run of form in years
- The likelihood of them defending their Premiere League title this year is remote
- The likelihood of them playing in the Champions League next season is in question
- While not winning the title is disappointing for fans the real problem is not qualifying for the Champions League. If this were to happen, it would cost the Club £millions

Suddenly the 1-0 defeat comes into sharp focus. We can understand the repercussions for the team and the manager.

When thinking about your results sections it's just as important to consider the impact of the results you achieve for your client's business. This is how you uncover the real benefits and value you offer.

It's also important to remember that you don't only sell to companies, you sell to people.

And those people want to know how a relationship with you is going to affect them personally as well as well as professionally.

I recently interviewed one of my client's customers for the purposes of producing a case study. My client had been drafted in to help make their customer's sales event more compelling.

Because franchisees had found previous events dull and uninspiring, sales had been consistently dropping and it was starting to have a big impact on the bottom line.

My client helped redesign the format and content of the event. The feedback was universally positive. Everyone involved enjoyed the event from the presenters to the franchise owners.

Increasing enjoyment levels is a nice result but it was nothing compared to the information he told me when I dug a bit deeper.

The presenters were now more confident and less afraid to present. The franchisees felt more valued and inspired. Best of all because the franchise holders felt more engaged and entertained, sales increased by 20%.

There was also a clear personal benefit for my interviewee. He had earned the respect of his superiors. He had now achieved an unprecedented level of autonomy and was free to make some important decisions he'd wanted to make for some time.

Do you think another Learning and Development Director reading these results would be excited and influenced by them? Of course they would.

So next time you disclose your results, you want to go deeper than the surface numbers.

You want to describe the positive outcomes that your results helped achieve and the impact those outcomes have had on both the company and the individuals involved.

5. Forgoing Testimonial Evidence

It's a sad fact that we live in a world where trust is a rare commodity.

It's no wonder really. We are bombarded on a daily basis with lies, con and spin.

Our recent history is littered with the debris of major scandals involving the people we trusted the most:

- Banks - the Financial Crisis
- Politicians - Expenses
- Supermarkets - Horsemeat
- The Police - Hillsborough
- The Media - Phone Taping

Not one area of society has been left unscathed. It's hard to know who you can trust these days.

Can we really blame people when they don't take what we say at face value?

The Internet is definitely helping. There is an entire industry devoted to impartial opinion on businesses, products and people.

When investigating your company, what are you prospects really looking for?

Like Mulder in the X-Files, they are in search of the truth. They want to get beyond the marketing fluff and hear from the people who matter most – people like them who have actually experienced the service or product.

It is the time of the testimonial, a term that by its very definition means a statement of truth or fact.

Testimonials are powerful for 3 reasons:

1. They reinforce what you have said
2. They provide verifiable proof that what you are saying is true
3. They talk in terms that you prospect will understand and appreciate

By following the advice in this guide, your case studies should already appear more authentic and have greater influence on your target market than ones that don't.

However, if you want to take your case studies from good to great then you must include some strong testimonial evidence from your client.

Be careful. Not all testimonials are equal. Try to avoid wishy washy. A wishy washy testimonial lacks substance. It says how nice you are to work with without saying why.

In essence it lacks impact because the words could be applied to a hundred different companies in a hundred different industries.

Great testimonials are distinctive to your product and service. They highlight the reasons why you were such a good choice of supplier and provide an idea of the impact you've had on your customers business and life.

In essence they are mini case studies written in your customer's words and are the final piece your prospect needs to choose you as their supplier.

The Real Secret Behind Compelling Case Studies

Realistically there is only way to get the information you need to make your case studies the kind of documents that compel quality prospects to work with you.

You have to speak to your clients. It's the only way to get their perspective on the problems they were facing, how you helped solve them and the impact of the results you helped achieved.

Of course this can be problematic. Not everyone feels comfortable having this kind of conversation with their clients.

The thing is, if you don't talk to your clients before you sit down to write your case studies, you'll only ever get the story from your perspective and as we've seen, this will never have the impact with your prospects that your client's story will.

A Favour...

We hope you have enjoyed this eBook.

Our goal is to provide you with something of value that you can actually use to get results.

We'd love to know how we've done.

If you would like to leave us a testimonial or offer some advice on how we could improve our guide further, please visit [here](#) and leave us a comment.

All the best,

The guys at 9mm Public Relations