

CUSTOMER REFERENCE PROGRAM TIP SHEET



A customer reference program can be a tremendous asset to any organization. People are far more interested in reading about your customers' experiences than straight marketing materials. They're more human and accessible. They're more credible, too. Just look at how Yelp and Amazon reviews help drive purchasing decisions, the "social proof" of positive customer stories can give prospects that extra incentive to choose your company.

Even just one customer reference can help you to develop and secure a variety of PR and marketing opportunities, including case studies, press releases, speaking opportunities, and more.

With a dedicated customer reference program, you can keep the momentum going throughout the year.

Force4 Technology Communications has created this set of guidelines based on years of experience establishing and running successful customer reference programs for our clients. Read on for tips on how to work with customers to advance your company's goals and theirs.

Practical Steps to Win Customer References

Position references early in the sales cycle. Include wording in the sales contract that introduces the topic of customer references early on in the relationship.

Segment your client list into three categories, based on their level of willingness to participate.

Secure a list of customers and review top targets. The goal is to move each client toward level 3.

Priority can be assigned based on client size, industry, name recognition, or other criteria.

LEVEL 1



LEVEL 2



LEVEL 3

Customers willing to have their names publicly associated with you or have their logos displayed on your website.

Customers willing to participate in media interviews, a press release, awards, speaking opportunities or panels—on a case-by-case basis.

Customers willing to participate in case studies and/or webinars (a deliverable that can be considered on a case-by-case basis).

Find a client-side champion. Is there an individual on the customer's team who is familiar with your offering and has a positive experience? Even better if this person regularly speaks at events or is otherwise a thought leader in the field.

Explain the personal and business benefits of building a reputation as a thought leader.

- By participating in your program, your customer will get positive opportunities to demonstrate their forward thinking and industry leadership.
- By providing the facts and the challenging or exciting aspects of a project, your customer will build their personal brand, generating interest with the media.
- This exposure can help broaden their professional network, build their reputation and esteem among peers, and ultimately advance their career.
- It's always good to assure customers that all information is confidential and that all released information will be approved by them first.

Bring the client stakeholder an opportunity. It can be much more difficult to get a firm "yes" to an open-ended request for participation. Instead, bring your customer a specific opportunity like a press release or an award submission with defined criteria or a reporter looking for an expert source on a narrow topic.

In addition to identifying a specific opportunity, you also need to give the client stakeholder a specific reason to engage. Emphasize the benefit they will receive by participating. We recommend explaining to the customer that your marketing/PR team is in a position to provide them with press coverage and visibility that will promote their company. Let them know this will include pursuing the media outlets they are most interested in receiving coverage with.

There are a number of opportunities, including participating in:

- a full press release announcing successful implementation
- a quote for a press release
- a few select media briefings
- best-practice award submissions
- an in-depth customer case study that will live on your website
- joint speaking opportunities

Practical Steps to Win Customer References

Provide a cost comparison. Your customer's company pays for media exposure. Sponsored editorial in Fast Company, Tech Crunch or Inc. can cost \$20,000 or more. PPC or online display advertising costs money, too. And editorial coverage is more credible than straight advertising. Estimate the dollar value of the media exposure you're delivering to your customer reference program participants, and let them know.

Make sure you're talking in terms that matter to them—not you. Focus on publications and media channels that will matter most to their business.

Segment your client list into three categories, based on their level of willingness to participate. Customer references and case studies are one of the most effective ways to spread the word about the value of your products and services. Real-world stories. First-hand experience. Maximum credibility. Your customers benefit too by gaining added visibility and recognition as thought leaders in their industries. Introducing your customer reference program early on in the relationship and following the guidelines above will help you build a strong program.

Force4 Technology

Communications

has a long track record of success in designing and running customer reference programs, resulting in great coverage for clients and assets that their sales teams can use to drive prospects through the pipeline.

