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## TESTIMONIALS VALUABLE AS MARKETING TOOL, SAY LOCAL EXPERTS (Published May 2005 in the Jefferson City Business Times) - 5/1/2005

April 22, 2005

About 950 words

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### TESTIMONIALS VALUABLE AS MARKETING TOOL, SAY LOCAL EXPERTS

COLUMBIA, Mo. – When it comes to building credibility in your marketing materials and advertising, nothing is better than a testimonial, say experts at local agencies that handle marketing, advertising and communications.

“There is nothing better than having a third party say something good about you,” said Steve Veile, founder and CEO of Communique Inc., a Jefferson City-based marketing firm with regional and national clients. “You can say great things about yourself, but...what else are you going to say. But when a third party says it for you, even if it’s in a paid ad, it just adds a tremendous amount of credibility to what is being said.”

How well the testimonials work depends on how the agency implements the campaign, Veile said. The testimonial needs to use the actual words of the person who gave it. If the testimonial is obviously generic, clearly written by an advertising copywriter, or spoken by a professional announcer, the testimonial won’t be believable. It may even make the listener or reader suspicious, which is contrary to the intended effect.

It is also important to select customers who feel strongly about your product or service, according to Mitzi St. John of Hanna Stanley St. John, an advertising, marketing and public relations firm based in Columbia that has several Jefferson City clients.

“When friends and family see someone who has given a testimonial, they will discuss it with that person, so you want to make sure they will be very positive about your business,” St. John said.

The client usually knows its best customers and can lead the agency to them. Comments can be gathered via interview or e-mail, but the best ones often originate in letters from satisfied customers. The customers will usually give permission to use the comments.

“Frequently a business will get testimonials, so they have a good idea of where to start from,” Veile said. “If you’ve got some nice letters that have come in, you can’t have anything better than that. You’ve got written comments; you know that they like you.”

Testimonials can be used to promote almost any product or service. In addition to selling a product or service, St. John said testimonials are a good tool to improve or establish a

company's image.

If the client can afford to pay for some research, the results often point the way to proceed. Veile said his firm recently conducted research for a client that showed that the client's current customers valued the opinions of other people who had similar interests, so Communique suggested the use of testimonials for the client.

Although local agencies have used them in radio and television commercials and in fundraising and recruiting videos, testimonials tend to be most effective in printed pieces, such as newspaper advertisements, brochures and direct mail. Radio testimonials are more difficult, according to Veile, and television can be the least effective medium because it can be difficult to get a good sound bite and to find a person who looks natural and appealing on camera.

"Frequently you get somebody in front of a camera, and they could be the most outgoing person," Veile said. "And then, as soon as the camera starts rolling, they kind of freeze. Now, if you have somebody who is good on camera, television can have tremendous impact, but it's a lot more difficult to get that good testimonial in a TV spot."

Mitzi St. John said her firm has used testimonials in advertising for Jefferson Bank to highlight mortgages, construction loans and business banking relationships. "Every time we use them, those featured in the ads always marvel at how many people comment on having seen them in the paper," she said. "Testimonials work great to foster word-of-mouth buzz about the business."

Hanna Stanley St. John has used testimonials with banks, hospitals, colleges, manufacturers, economic development offices and collection agencies. The firm also used testimonials in a successful advertising campaign to promote Socket's business DSL service, getting quotes from people at such companies as JP Promotions, Wilson's Total Fitness Center and the Women's Clinic of Jefferson City.

Stephanie Ricketts, marketing representative for Socket, said the campaign a few years ago had successfully built the image of Socket's high-speed business DSL service. "Testimonial ads work well for general branding images, especially when you use familiar faces or names in that community," Ricketts said. "Marketing a lot of times gets a bad rap for 'trying to sell something you don't need,' and I think testimonials are a good filter for that type of message since it is going through someone who has had personal experience with the company and can truly say what their experience was like and describe it."

Communique has used testimonials in banks advertising and recently suggested their use to an association client that wanted to build its membership, Veile said. Testimonials are a staple of political campaigns, filling newspapers with comments about local, state and national candidates.

"In a political campaign, it's kind of a double-edged sword because it's a little more volatile area," Veile said. "You might feature so-and-so in a testimonial, and there might be a lot of people who like so-and-so and there might be a lot of people who don't. It might actually backfire on you, so you have to be a little bit careful about whom you choose."

Choosing the wrong person to give a testimonial can mean disaster for businesses as well. "The people you choose need to be well thought of in their community or industry, or it could backfire on you," St. John said. "Ill feelings toward a person can rub off on your business and cause guilt by association."

When done correctly, testimonials can be a gold mine in generating word-of-mouth marketing. "When you get somebody else talking about how great you are, it's definitely more effective than just tooting your own horn," Veile said.

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