



# Straight From The Heart

Done right, testimonials can be an effective advertising tool

"As a guy, I know what it's like to ride a bicycle and have a certain part of your anatomy go numb, one that the good Lord never intended for pins and needles. So we have a laser fitting machine in our bike shop that prevents that whole mess."

Now *that's* how to start a radio commercial that men — the target audience — will listen to. It wasn't scripted. It came straight from the heart of the client during a taped Q&A session, which is my favorite way to do testimonials.

When done well, testimonial radio commercials can be very effective. When done poorly, the client would be better served by running 60 seconds of fingernails scratching on a blackboard.

A client with a good business will have little difficulty finding customers willing to come on the radio and say nice things about their experience. The two main stumbling blocks are the customer's belief that (a) I won't know what to say, so I'll sound stupid and (b) I'm a nervous wreck when put in front of a microphone.

How many times have you quickly changed stations at the start of a horrendous testimonial in which a shaky-voiced customer or client reads a script? These commercials try to encapsulate positive experiences, but often in language that no person on earth has ever uttered in real-time. Here is the essence of creating effective testimonial spots:

- **Never use a script**
- **Create a comfort zone for the testimony-giver**

In today's digital production environment, testimonial advertising has never been easier. It doesn't even have to be done in the studio. Whether using a DAT recorder, laptop, or other portable recording device, having a non-studio ambience is just fine for this purpose.

Begin by pre-interviewing the candidates to get their story. Make some notes relating to the essence of their experience. Then, create questions to bring those points out. They should all be how and why questions; asking who, what, when, and where questions will elicit monosyllabic answers unsuitable for commercials.

Explain to the candidate that there are no right or wrong responses, and that the entire process will be in the form of a casual conversation. Let them know you might ask a question in a different way, or even coach them on the kind of response you're seeking, based on the aforementioned pre-interview. Also explain that the answers, not the questions, will be in the final commercial, so they should frame their response by including part of the question. Example: If you ask, "Why did you choose Acme Jewelers?" encourage them to answer, "The reason we chose Acme is ..."

Smile a lot when asking your questions. Their responses will echo your emotion. If you ask a question in a certain way and aren't happy with the response, call a time out, explain to your testimony-giver what you're hoping to get in the way of an answer, then go for it again. Sometimes this takes two or three iterations, but it's worth the effort.

Next, edit the raw "tape" and begin to make the magic happen, using an announcer to ask the "set-up" questions. I always like beginning a testimonial with the owner

or customer saying something interesting, perhaps without even mentioning the client's name yet, to set up an announcer saying something like, "Aaron Weldon, on why Weldon Bikes is the best place to go for your cycling needs."

One cardinal rule I have is to make sure the testimony-provider doesn't get burdened with mundane copy points like addresses, phone numbers, and web pages. These are better left to a professional tag announcer who will make that information much more palatable to the listener's ears.

And no matter what the dictionary tells you about the origin of the word "testimonial" (it may come as a shock), you'll wind up with a commercial that sounds like it came straight from the heart. ☺



Steven J. Steinberg is creative services director for Nassau Broadcasting Partners in Portland, ME. He can be reached at 207-797-0780 or [ssteinberg@nassaubroadcasting.com](mailto:ssteinberg@nassaubroadcasting.com).