



Getting Seen and Heard

Producing and using customer case histories to increase your company's visibility. BY DON KRESKI

Most readers will look at the images on a magazine page, on a handout, or in a website before they look at anything else. Because photos are the first thing readers will see, the first step to creating a compelling case history is investing in good professional photography of your client sites.

Why are case histories so useful, and so widely used, in technical industries like ours? They are useful because they give print and online readers a chance to learn about their peers and how they solve real problems in the field. In other words: Industry readers enjoy them and learn from them.

Case histories can be particularly valuable to an AV integrator for several reasons. First, they offer instant credibility; anyone can say their work is great, but a good and detailed case study proves the point. They can tell your story in ways that advertising and promotional pieces simply can't. Many trade magazines routinely publish case histories; submitting them to editors or posting them to virtual press conferences can be a great source of publication.

PRODUCING CASE HISTORIES

Not every case history gets equal attention from potential readers. You may have a great story to tell, but if your story doesn't have these four essential elements, it's not going to be read:

- **Good photography.** Most readers will look at the images on a magazine page, on a handout, or in a website before they look at anything else. Do you have clean, interesting, eye-catching photos to illustrate your story? Do they illustrate the crucial points you're trying to make? If not, there are certainly other stories and other websites your prospects can look at. Because photos are the first thing readers will see, I always tell my clients that the first step they need to take is investing in good professional photography of their client sites.



Catchy headlines and section heads, along with a good lead and lively writing, will make your case histories stand out as being worthy of potential readers' limited time. It's also important to get enough mileage out of your case history that it will catch potential buyers while they are in buying mode.

- Catchy headlines. Once your readers have decided the photos look interesting, they'll glance at the headlines, subheads, and section heads. The best potential clients rarely have a lot of time to read, but they will skim a lot of material looking for solutions to their particular problems. Give them a clear, concise headline and quick guides to your article's key points in the form of section heads, and you will draw people in.

- A good lead. Professional writers know that the first few sentences will either draw people into an article or turn them off. You need to find the most interesting part of your story and put it right at the beginning. Even if someone doesn't finish the whole article (and many won't), if you can get the gist across in the first few sentences, your case history will work for you.
- Lively writing. The better a story flows, the more of it a prospect is likely to read, and the more likely he or she is to contact you. You may have a talent for writing or photography, but if you don't, outsource the work to someone who does.

USING CASE HISTORIES

Once you have a good story, how can you best put it to use?

Placing the story in a magazine can be valuable, but I tell my clients that's not the end of the process. In fact, if you're looking for sales results, you'll probably be disappointed if you don't do anything more once the story has been published. Few people are looking for vendors when they're reading magazines or magazine sites. They're looking for ideas. So they may read your story and be impressed by it, but they're not very likely to call you then and there.

You need to catch them when they are in buying mode. That is, when they have found you via Google, when your salesperson or dealer has made a successful cold call, when they're checking you out via your website, or when you hand them a proposal or a packet at a seminar or tradeshow.

At these crucial times, your case histories will make a huge difference in how potential customers perceive you. Are you trustworthy? Will your product do what you say it will do? Is your work as good as that of your competitors? With a good case history, you're not just making a claim, you are providing proof.

Publication in a national magazine can be very helpful because it's another layer of evidence for the value of your work. It's not just you telling this story, but an industry expert. Still, publication alone is not enough. You have to put the story where buyers will trip over it while they are making the decision to buy. Hand it to them. Email it. Feature it on your home page. Link to it from your product pages. Tell them where to find it when you are talking on the phone. Then, it will have tremendous power.

RULES OF THUMB

I'm sometimes asked, "How long should a case history be?"

If you place the story on your own website or in a two-page handout, 500 words is usually enough. Your prospect will see your photos, the names of your clients, and a brief description of each job. If you are submitting the story to a magazine, however, the editor is likely going to want 800 to 1,200 words. If it's a really interesting story or describes a groundbreaking technology, you may need to write more.

For your own publications, there is always a tradeoff between eye appeal and interesting detail. If you present your longer stories as one dull block of text, people will tend to turn away, even if the writing itself is lively.

On the other hand, if you structure the article so that it's easy to skim (with bold section heads, callouts, and key words in bold type or bullet points), and you leave sufficient room for photos, the extra detail is good. Busy people tend to drill down through an article—viewing the photos, headlines, and section heads first—but when they find something that hits home, they will read it all.

For a longer story, you may need to produce a four-page handout, rather than two pages. And you may need an extra-long web page or a multipage story, and perhaps a slide show to make sure the layout is appealing and the photos emphasized.

Still, when budget is an issue, I usually tell my clients to trim text rather than photos. A short story with good photography will work better than a long story with nothing to catch the eye. **SVC**

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