Delivering Credibility in Testimonials
By Deborah M. Collier

Most experts will tell you that good testimonials can increase your sales by as much as forty percent. However, consumers are more and more aware of the proliferation of non-genuine testimonials, reviews and ratings on the Internet. This impacts how even the most credible of testimonials are perceived, resulting in consumers being more and more suspicious and wary of buying. How can organisations convince potential buyers that their products and services will deliver and exceed their expectations, as claimed by their so-called customers?

Deborah Collier, President at The Certificate in Online Business, delivers some useful insights on how industries could tackle this challenge.

Ethical and responsible businesses implementing an online trust building strategy, owe it to their customers to support them in making comfortable purchasing decisions. Lets explore how businesses can help their customers accurately assess the credibility of testimonials, and potentially authenticate them.

Word-of-Mouth

Social media and review sites such as Tripadvisor, allow recommendations about products and services to reach a wide audience rapidly. Enabling customers to leave traceable feedback is absolutely critical, whether that be directly on their own web site or elsewhere.

False Reviews and Ratings

It's very easy for a business to write and post it's own reviews and ratings – in both off-the-shelf and bespoke e-commerce systems. This practice is of course highly unethical, but not unheard of. Businesses can even hire PR specialists and team members to write positive reviews online. Similarly, unscrupulous businesses may instigate false negative reviews against competitors.

You may have watched documentaries about the impact false negative ratings have had on restaurants and hotels, no doubt posted by competitors. In the example on the following page, an authentic hotel customer, discovered an unfair review about a hotel, which he dismissed in his own review. Can we really rely on customers to actively participate in supporting our businesses and fighting for what's right, without prompting? How can we stop bogus reviews?

Recently I ran a test on Amazon by leaving a review of one of my own self-study course box sets, which as the publisher, I had of course not bought. To my surprise, the review was allowed. It's frightening how easy it is on some sites to leave a review for a product or service without having even bought it.

Below - A genuine customer writes a positive review and dismisses the potentially bogus or no longer relevant negative review:

Tripadviser goes some way in identifying reviewers by enabling photos, and allowing others to see what other reviews they have written. Potential customers can then make their own assessment about the credibility of any reviews by looking at the pattern of the other reviews that individual has made. Secondly, Tripadvisor features and reviews posted by our Facebook friends, and as we all know, we tend to trust a friend's recommendation or feedback over that of a stranger.

Identifying your Customers

Identify you customers on your web site. " John from Leeds says…" is not enough, but what can you do if you offer a sensitive service that requires confidentiality, for example medical treatment? Clearly

identifiable press and independent expert reviews are an excellent way of convincing your customers that you products and services are credible and will deliver.

Below - Testimonials about The COB Certified E-Business Manager Program from delegates at the South African Post Office. These can be traced on Linkedin

South African Post Office

The South African Post Office commissioned an in-house course, for delivery to their new e-business leadership team.

Here's some of the feedback received:-

"I would certainly recommend the COB Certified E-Business Manager program. I think it establishes a wide base of competency and understanding across a number of key issues relevant to E-Business and hands E-Business managers the keys to successfully deploy, and manage a successful online business.

I found the course insightful and very relevant. Presentations were engaging and thought provoking, and the engaging style of content delivery promoted understanding. Above all, I experienced the content as current and in line with times through the use of pertinent real world examples, which is critical in this business sphere.

The course promotes an understanding of the critical elements of E-Business Strategy and planning, which speaks to my role in the organisation. Further to this, it underlines the importance of E-Risk management and factors to mitigate, which is valuable and applicable to many facets of our business."

Albert Olivier, Acting Senior Manager E-Business Operations

"The experience I had of the COB Certified E-Business Manager Program was remarkable, and very fulfilling. Being introduced to the world of E-Business was worth the investment. The e-business strategy and planning elements were particularly interesting, as it required a shift in mind-set from the traditional strategy management planning. I recommend this course, as it not only taps into the commerce element, but also on how efficiency can be achieved through automation".

Portia Matsena, Acting General Manager Commercial, South African Post Office

While photos and logos with a testimonial or review work well, video testimonials work better for business-to-business transaction testimonials.   It's possible your clients' peers may recognize the reviewer or be able to authenticate that review with them. On a business-to-consumer web site however, there is much more of a challenge. After all, a business could have enlisted their friends or even actors to deliver testimonials.

Linkedin and Facebook profiles attached to testimonials go some steps nearer to demonstrating that a testimonial is from a genuine person (Linkedin for business-to-business and workplace product and service transactions, Facebook for consumer product and service transactions). Retailers and service providers could feed these testimonials and reviews into their web site, directly onto product or service pages.

While this is great for supporting credibility and sales, it is still not ideal. There are two flaws:

- Social media profiles can be faked

- Social media profiles open up risk of competitors approaching your customers

So what's the answer? A credible non-social media online identity is required, but how can that be achieved? If governments insisted that each individual had it's own government registered profile online, what would that profile include? How could they ensure the profile holder's privacy is protected? That's quite a big industry discussion, a solution I've pondered with several ideas. Providing a risk-free platform for authenticating reviews, ratings and testimonials is a responsibility the industry and consumer protection agencies need to address. It will be interesting to see how things progress in this area over the coming years.

Deborah M. Collier

President & Chief Marketing Officer – The Certificate in Online Business
Deborah is the founder of the Certificate in Online Business™ (COB) series of globally-recognised industry qualifications, which were established in 2008. She developed the reputation of the programs among well-known brands gaining testimonials from Directors and managers at government organisations and leading companies such as Mars, Schneider Electric, House of Fraser and Procter & Gamble. Deborah leads the strategic direction of the training programs and company. In addition, she oversees marketing, partnerships and licensing.

Follow Deborah on Twitter: **twitter.com/deborahmcollier** Learn from Deborah and her team: **COBCertified.com**

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