



! CHALLENGES

- Building trust in Colt throughout the sales cycle
- Changing traditional perceptions about Colt
- Demonstrating the value of customer references

⚙️ SOLUTION

- Continual engagement with, and education of, internal stakeholders and customers
- Working with agencies such as HN to deliver on-message customer references through a variety of channels and formats

✓ RESULTS

- A well-managed repository of more powerful and strategic references
- Clear successes from a growing use of references

References that sell

...how to build a programme from the ground up

Shortly after winning a new customer, IT services company Colt followed best practice and asked the 'why us?' question. Two reasons, the customer said: "the clear understanding you demonstrated of our business requirements; and the clear evidence, so compellingly delivered, of other customers praising your work with them. Together these provided great reassurance that we could trust Colt to deliver."

Only a year-and-a-half earlier, the outcome may have been quite different. Colt wouldn't have been able to use a variety of spot-on customer examples and quotations consistently throughout the sales cycle, nor end their presentation pitch with a video testimonial that spoke directly to the prospect's issues. Choosing to put their trust in Colt would have been a far bigger leap of faith for the prospect to make.

"Few things deliver peace of mind better than the endorsement of an existing customer," says Gemma Fielding who, as Colt Customer Marketing Programmes Manager, is responsible for developing Colt's customer reference programme.

Are we getting the message across?

When Gemma joined Colt and started analysing the company's reference activities and deliverables, there was very little in the way of a robust reference programme. Colt was producing occasional case studies, but not paying enough attention to whether these were delivering the right messages, in the right way and for the right audiences.

This was a particular issue for Colt because the company's challenge isn't just to be noticed, but to be noticed for the right things. For years Colt has been helping customers to solve business problems through the design and delivery of innovative managed networking, IT and communication services. It was this story they needed to tell to overcome any lingering perception of the company as a traditional 'telco'.

From the outset, one of Gemma's stated objectives for the programme was to improve Colt's ability to communicate the strategic value it delivers to customers, rather than product features. To do so, she needed not only to develop a pipeline of suitable reference candidates that could support Colt's positioning, but also to communicate their stories powerfully and engagingly.

ABOUT COLT

As Europe's information delivery platform, Colt uses its wholly-owned network and data centres across Europe to deliver integrated and responsive networking, IT and communication services to customers. Colt solutions enable enterprises to use IT in smarter ways to achieve business transformation, get to market faster, reduce risk and control costs.

colt
smarter / faster / further



“HN understands our customer reference objectives and, as an independent party, can ask our customers things that would be harder for us to ask. They put our customers at ease and capture great insight and stories.”

Gemma Fielding, Customer Marketing Programmes Manager, Colt

Gemma also wanted to broaden Colt’s reference activities to address the whole sales cycle: to ensure that Colt was in prospects’ minds when they decided who to invite to tender; to have good customer examples to hand when preparing proposals or talking to prospects; and to be able to ask customers to speak at events or to answer the questions of analysts, journalists or prospects directly.

Developing the pipeline: it can’t just be a box-ticking exercise

There’s no doubt that having a good quantity of reference assets provides valuable support for the sales process. A good choice — not just of case studies and testimonials in a variety of formats but also permissions to use customer logos and individuals who are willing to act as a reference — means that any one asset won’t get overused and you won’t impose on the good will of your biggest advocates. Also if, like Colt, you serve multiple geographies and industries with a diverse portfolio of services, only a large variety of reference assets can cover the breadth and depth of your expertise.

“Of course we want lots of references, but quantity is not the only measure,” says Gemma.

“We have to prioritise and invest in the right ones; the ones that support our positioning.”

You might think that all you need to do is incentivise account teams or make it a formal objective for them to put customers forward as references. You’d be wrong.

“If account teams don’t understand what we’re trying to do with customer advocacy,” Gemma explains, “then such objectives just become a box-ticking exercise for them and we’re unlikely to get the calibre of nominations we need.”

One of Gemma’s earliest decisions was to spend face-to-face time with the account teams, talking to them about what makes a good customer reference and about how and when to approach customers and communicate what’s in it for them if they take part. To help, information was created to equip account teams to have the right level of conversation with their customers and encourage them to get involved.

Since the account teams own the customer relationship, it’s vital to maintain their support for the programme. Sales engagement can’t be thought of as a one-off task. Both Gemma and her in-country marketing colleagues continually engage with sales directors and account teams to communicate the value of the reference programme — both for Colt and for the customers who participate.

Telling the right stories

Getting the right type and volume of nominations into the pipeline is only half the job. The other half is capturing and presenting customer stories in ways that support Colt’s objectives and directly align with the selling process.

“This is where our agencies contributions are so valuable,” says Gemma. “We can trust HN to tell powerful and engaging stories that communicate our strategic messages and position us in the right way.”

“HN not only understands what we’re doing and what we need to communicate, they know how to get our customers to tell the stories that are important to us by asking the right questions, digging for insight and pulling the right messages from the answers they get.”

With writers and editors based in several European countries, HN can conduct interviews in key native languages and draft case studies in those languages or English, depending on who will be reviewing the piece. Customers get a good, professional experience, with the convenience of being able to express themselves in their own language.

“It’s not a translation,” says Gemma, “it’s genuine localisation, which gives us a better quality story that’s on message, consistently, in each European language.”



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Building momentum

As Colt's repository of good reference materials has grown, showcasing the company as a responsive, innovative solver of business problems, the reference programme is beginning to have an impact. Colt uses the successes to build further momentum through a variety of internal communications, as Gemma explains:

“We'll interview an account manager whose customer has been the subject of a case study, and use this to show how easy the process is for them and their customer. Then we'll interview a salesperson who used the story, showing the value to them and to Colt. We're also looking at the role of references in our win-loss analyses of important bids, so we can communicate to stakeholders where references have helped us win and where lack of references has contributed to a loss.”

Building a successful reference programme hasn't been easy and hasn't happened overnight, but Colt has achieved a lot within 18 months. It's now much more a matter of 'business as usual' for customer references to be an integral part of employees' conversations and for their value to be recognised. This in turn makes it easier to fill the reference pipeline; success breeds success.

Widening reach

Gemma continues to develop and improve the programme, working with stakeholders across the business — from senior management to regional marketing teams; from portfolio managers to bid teams; from HR to sales and sales training teams. A big focus is aligning the programme with the multiple ways in which prospects consume information: via blogs, social networking sites, platforms such as YouTube, SoundCloud and SlideShare, web apps and native apps.

“We know that decision-makers and influencers are doing their own research, interacting with colleagues and peers using social media, and doing so long before they'll talk to us as a potential partner or invite us to respond to a tender,” says Gemma. “We need to explore all these avenues and maximise our use of customer advocacy across them all. It's a challenging and exciting time to be building a customer reference programme.”

HN Marketing Ltd

Your message is our business.

We're an expert copywriting and marketing agency specialising in the creation of persuasive sales and marketing content for B2B technology companies. We'll help you build long-term relationships with customers and open new doors to close more business more quickly.

Visit our website or contact us to find out more about how we can help you.

info@hn-marketing.co.uk +44 1628 622187 www.hn-marketing.co.uk