

Riding on Customer Coattails

Canadian B2B Technology Companies and Enhanced Reputation Through Customer Advocacy

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Abstract

This case study explores how fast-growing Canadian technology companies in the business-to-business (B2B) sector leverage their customers for reputation building. Literature on the under-studied topic of customer referencing practices as well as reputation research provide a framework for the companies' practices and objectives. A content analysis of key texts from 25 Canadian technology startups and 30 member companies of the Customer Reference Professionals Association (CRPA) provide a bases for comparison. Interviews with three technology startups and two established companies offer further insight into the role that customer advocacy plays in their reputation-building strategies. The findings shed light on the increasingly important role of customer advocates in these companies' reputation-building toolkits. The study concludes that despite inherent challenges, Canadian companies recognise that harnessing the customers as a strategic communication vehicle for building reputation offer significant returns by demonstrating competence, establishing credibility, and reducing risk in the eyes of prospective customers.

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	5
2	Research Problem	6
3	Research Questions	6
4	Literature Review	7
4.1	<i>Customer References</i>	7
4.2	<i>Customer Reference Marketing</i>	8
4.3	<i>Signaling, Reputation Borrowing, and Reputation Building</i>	10
4.4	<i>Reputation</i>	11
4.5	<i>Nature of High-Tech B2B Sector</i>	14
4.6	<i>Using Digital Channels to Signal Reputation</i>	17
5	Methodology	18
5.1	<i>Research Design</i>	18
5.2	<i>Content Analysis</i>	19
5.3	<i>Focused Interviews</i>	21
6	Results	26
6.1	<i>Content Analysis</i>	26
6.2	<i>Focused Interviews</i>	33
6.2.1	<i>Organization A</i>	34
6.2.2	<i>Organization B</i>	36
6.2.3	<i>Organization C</i>	38
6.2.4	<i>Organization D</i>	40
6.2.5	<i>Organization E</i>	43
7	Discussion	45
8	Limitations	50
9	Conclusions and Future Research	51
10	References	53
11	Appendices	60
11.1	<i>Appendix A: Salminen & Moller's Normative Theory of Referencing</i>	60
11.2	<i>Appendix B: Content Analysis of Customer Reference Professionals Association (CRPA) (Summary of Findings)</i>	61
11.3	<i>Appendix C: Content Analysis of Startup Companies (Summary of Findings)</i>	70

<i>11.4</i>	<i>Appendix D: Interview Guide for Startup Companies</i>	<i>76</i>
<i>11.5</i>	<i>Appendix E: Interview Guide for Established Companies.....</i>	<i>78</i>

1 Introduction

Customer reference marketing has long been considered “the ugly stepchild” of business-to-business marketing (B2B) practices (Persofsky, 2014, p. 1). However, peer-to-peer recommendations are becoming increasingly important in the buying process (Heuer, 2013) and are exerting substantial influence over purchasing decisions. It is estimated that approximately 82% of purchasers in the B2B space rely on recommendations from people in their network (Williams, 2015). According to the Customer Reference Professionals Association (CRPA), customer references help to legitimize companies’ claims about their products and services to various stakeholders (2014). They also help to build brand credibility (Herbig & Milewicz, 1995). As a result, more B2B companies, particularly in the high-technology (high-tech) sector, are shifting their marketing priorities to create customer reference programs that reflect the changing dynamics of customer relationships (Heuer, 2013), and cultivate customer advocates who can share their experiences publicly with a myriad of stakeholders.

The high-tech sector is rife with startups. As young companies trying to establish themselves in the marketplace, they lack the reputation capital that some of the behemoths they compete against enjoy. Prospective customers are understandably hesitant about staking the integrity of their business on technology solutions that are relatively new, or that are offered by a new company in a market full of proven players. Therefore it is critical that high-tech startups leverage the power of strategic peer-to-peer reference programs for the purposes of building, sustaining, and enhancing reputation. This research seeks to uncover how Canadian B2B companies in the high-tech sector are doing just that.

2 Research Problem

Reference marketing can help fast-growing technology companies—particularly in the B2B space—to develop and enhance their reputations (Gomez-Arias & Montermoso, 2007; Ruokolainen, 2008; Salminen & Moller, 2006). Despite this, reference marketing remains a niche area of study (Ruokolainen, 2008; Helm & Salminen, 2010). This is particularly true in a Canadian context. This area has received minimal attention in mainstream academic circles even though customer advocates play a “critical role in many purchasing situations in B2B markets” (Hada, Grewal, & Lilien, 2014, p. 48).

When combined with the growing body of reputation literature, customer advocacy initiatives that help to signal the company that companies keep play a critical role in an organization’s growth strategy (Salminen & Moller, 2006). Therefore, the objective of this capstone research is to better understand how Canadian companies are engaging in customer advocacy activities.

3 Research Questions

This research is built on theoretical propositions as they relate to the normative theory of referencing (Salminen & Moller, 2006) and the StellarRep framework (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). The former asserts that customer advocacy practices enable organizations to demonstrate their competence to prospective customers; establish credibility and reputation; and reduce perceived risks in the eyes of prospective customers (Salminen & Moller, 2006). The latter outlines five characteristics that highly reputable companies display, offering a framework for reputation building (Fombrun & Riel, 2004). Specifically, this research asks:

RQ1: How do established technology companies, particularly in the B2B space, use customer references to enhance their reputations?

RQ2: How do fast-growing Canadian technology companies, particularly in the B2B space, use customer references to help shape their reputations?

To answer the first question, a content analysis of the 30 active members of the CRPA was conducted. To answer the second question five interviews were conducted based on two related interview guides: one developed for Canadian startup companies, and the other for established Canadian companies (see Methodology, below).

4 Literature Review

4.1 Customer References

A “reference triad” (Helm & Salminen, 2010, p. 739) consists of the prospective customer, the reference customer, and the supplier. In academic circles, a customer reference can be defined as “a customer relationship and the related value-creation activities that a firm leverages externally or internally in its marketing efforts” (Jalkala & Salminen, 2009, p. 3). A customer reference relationship is “a relationship with a specific customer that is used to attract new customers” (Helm & Salminen, 2010, p. 737). In a true reference relationship between a customer and a supplier, it is the customer that assesses the relationship and communicates his or her experience to prospective customers orally or in writing (Salminen & Moller, 2004). Perhaps the most applicable comparison is the labour market, where a job candidate’s previous employer provides a formal recommendation to a prospective employer (Ruokolainen & Mäkelä, 2007).

Before fully exploring the characteristics and role of customer references in helping to shape reputation, it is important to differentiate the term from others often used interchangeably. A customer reference is not synonymous with word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing or a referral, particularly in a B2B context. The buying process in B2B is often more complex than in

business-to-consumer (B2C) markets (Kumar, Petersen, and Leone, 2013). Literature on WOM marketing is generally focused on how WOM influences consumers' choices (Berger & Iyengar, 2013), but does not address business-level peer-to-peer reference activities (Salminen & Moller, 2004; Salminen & Moller, 2008). WOM marketing also tends to be more informal, and is not initiated by the supplier (Salminen & Moller, 2008). Jalkala and Salminen (2010) back this notion, but also suggest that customer reference efforts and WOM can be intertwined in a B2B setting, as the former can trigger the latter. And while a referral is closely related to the concept of a reference, in a sales context it is used as a means of securing an introduction to a prospective customer (Salminen & Moller, 2004).

Another important distinction to be made is that between customer advocacy—in terms of a company that is customer-centric (Urban, 2004)—and a customer acting as an advocate for a supplier organization. While the former does incorporate closely related behaviours such as information sharing, support for marketing research, and the willingness of an organization to do business again with a supplier (Lacey & Morgan, 2009), it is in the latter context that the term customer advocacy is used in this paper. That said, the focus of this research is on how customer advocacy can help to shape reputation; naturally, companies must first secure reference customers before they can cultivate their customer champions.

4.2 Customer Reference Marketing

Salminen and Moller (2006) first developed this under-researched area of study. They conducted an extensive review of the literature on customer reference marketing (also referred to as “customer marketing”, “customer advocacy marketing”, and “customer testimonial marketing”), to develop a theory of referencing (see Appendix A: Normative Theory of Referencing). In developing their model, Salminen and Moller argued that research in this area

has been fragmented, noting that even the terms used to find existing literature on the topic are wide and varied. For example, business marketing literature focusing on risk, credibility, and relationship marketing, also touches on the concept of customer references. As a result, Salminen and Moller found it challenging to perform an exhaustive review of the scholarly work that is related to this topic¹. Nevertheless, Salminen and Moller were able to come up with a definition of a customer reference as: “an indirect proof, based on some practical or concrete evidence, like product, service or systems delivery, of a supplier’s capability of delivery” (2006, p. 5).

According to their normative theory of referencing, the three main goals of a customer reference practice are: the pursuit of new customers; upselling to existing customers; and gaining a foothold in new markets (Salminen & Moller, 2006). To achieve these, organizations leverage customers in activities such as reference visits hosted by existing customers for prospects; contributing industry articles; joint press releases; reference lists to help the sales team close business; promotional material such as case studies and videos; seminars; and digital communications. In doing so, Salminen & Moller’s framework posits that organizations can demonstrate their competence to prospective customers; establish credibility and reputation; and reduce perceived risks in the eyes of prospective customers (2006). The practice of customer reference marketing is operationalized via a customer reference program, which the CRPA defines as “a centrally managed function responsible for coordination and fulfilling requests for customer references to help sales close business and persuade analysts, press, and investors that corporate claims are legitimate” (2014, p. 1).

¹ The same can be said of the researcher’s experience for this paper.

4.3 *Signaling, Reputation Borrowing, and Reputation Building*

From a branding perspective, customer reference programs “increase their (companies’) visibility and reach by creating memorable associations between a product and a group of customers it targets” (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004, p. 8). A brand is an association that is made by consumers or other groups with a company’s offerings, or with the company itself (Smith, Smith & Wang, 2010). When viewed through this lens, reputation can impact a company’s ability to attract potential customers, which in turn contributes to company revenues (Fombrun & Riel, 2004). A good example of this is when less-established companies seeking to enhance their credibility place customer logos on their web sites. These logos signal an organization’s status to prospective customers (Barron & Rolfe, 2012), and help to legitimize the business to other stakeholders. As a prospective customer on a vendor’s web site, the presence of customer logos solidifies the existing customer’s experiencing, enhancing the strength of the signal (Barron & Rolfe, 2012).

For startups, the companies they align with serve as an important signal to the market. To elevate themselves even further, startups can leverage their affiliations to “borrow” reputation as they proceed to build their own (Petkova, 2012). In addition to customers, a company’s partners, investors, and other strategic alliances can act as a stand-in for an as-yet unestablished reputation (Cravens, Oliver & Ramamoorti, 2003). Reputation “borrowers” know that external stakeholders hold the reputation “lenders” in high esteem (Petkova, 2012). This results in reputation transfer (Helm & Salminen, 2010) and, when examined through a prospective customer’s lens, the perception of increased competence (Kilian & Greuling, 2013).

Reputation-building strategies provide startup companies with opportunities to garner the attention of key stakeholders, establish credibility, and “provide [an] indication of underlying

quality, potential, and future prospects” (Petkova, 2012, p. 386). One of the measures for determining a young company’s reputation and market legitimacy is the quantity and quality of its customers. The role of communications is particularly important in reputation-building as young companies seek to establish a foothold in the market (Petkova, 2012). By sharing their vision and strategy externally, startups can offset doubt on the part of their stakeholders.

4.4 *Reputation*

According to Fombrun & Riel (2004), reputation “involves the assessments that multiple stakeholders make about the company’s ability to fulfill their expectations” (p. 4). While conducting the research that led to the development of the Reputation Quotient (RQ)—an instrument developed jointly with Harris Interactive to measure companies’ reputation capital—Fombrun & Riel identified five characteristics of high-RQ companies: visibility, transparency, distinctiveness, consistency, and authenticity (2004). These five key elements, they argue, are key to building and maintaining reputation:

- Visibility relates to the level of familiarity that stakeholders have. For example, the level of visibility in the media is strongly correlated with high-RQ companies.
- Distinctiveness refers to whether or not companies “own an empty niche” (p. 90), and the ability to align communication and actions around a central theme.
- Authenticity “creates emotional appeal” (p.91), without which reputations cannot be built. Aligning stakeholder communications and company actions to core values is critical to building and maintaining authenticity.
- Transparency helps to build trust. The more that companies communicate about themselves, the more credibility they earn, even in times of crisis. “Transparency helps build, maintain, and defend reputation” (p. 94).
- Consistency in actions and communication across functions, to all stakeholders, is necessary in order to avoid diluting or contradicting a company’s “culture, core values, and strategic direction” (p. 95).

Companies want to do business with other companies that have strong reputations, so a positive reputation can result in strong financial returns (Cravens & Oliver, 2006). Because reputations are intangible assets, they are difficult for competitors to emulate so they can be

leveraged significantly to create value (Roberts and Dowling, 2002). Roberts and Dowling also looked at the relationship between a company's positive reputation at a given point in time, and how it correlates to the company's financial performance over a longer period. What they found is that companies with good reputations are able to sustain "superior financial performance over time" (2002, p. 1089).

Likewise, reputations are built over time on the basis of trust and consistency (Gray & Balmer, 1998). The longer-term aspect of reputation building is what sets it apart from a company's image, which is an external representation of a company that can be built fairly quickly and with relative ease (Walker, 2010). While Smith, Smith and Wang (2010) position corporate reputation as a type of brand association, Fombrun and Riel (2004) refer to branding as "a subset of reputation management" (p.4). A brand's appeal is measured by its customers, while reputation is comprised of stakeholders' collective assessments about whether or not a company can meet their individual needs (Fombrun & Riel, 2004). Nevertheless, when viewed through the branding lens, a high-reputation organization is seen to be more credible to prospective customers and will therefore attract more customers, which in turn helps to generate more revenue (Fombrun & Riel, 2004). That said, it is also possible to have a strong brand with a negative reputation (Fombrun & Riel, 2004), although at some point, a brand requires a positive reputation to propel it to success and profitability (Herbig & Milewicz, 1995).

Despite their subtle differences, reputation, image, and brand are intertwined. Signalling provides a framework for companies to build, maintain, and defend their reputations based on the images they project, which helps stakeholders form particular impressions (Walker, 2010). Market signaling, argue Herbig and Milewicz, "is a marketing activity that...alerts another firm to its intentions, commitments, or motives" (1995, p. 5). Reputation is established when

information flows between stakeholders to create some form of transaction—that is, an organization must fulfill marketing signals in order to establish its reputation (Herbig & Milewicz, 1995).

Reputation is also a “relative and dynamic concept” (Conference Board of Canada, 2007, p. 11) because it depends on which stakeholders are defining it. What is important to one set of stakeholders—financial returns among investors, for example—may not be as important to employees, who may be more concerned about their wages, working conditions, and benefits (Conference Board of Canada, 2007). Therefore, different stakeholders will judge reputation based on different criteria (Bromley, 2002; MacMillan, Money, Downing & Hillenbrand, 2005), and their particular relationships to a firm (MacMillan et al., 2005). MacMillan et al. go on to argue that “reputation is captured in stakeholder perceptions of the drivers and nature of the relationships” (2005, p. 220). Because of this, there are three questions that must be asked when defining reputation: 1) reputation for what?; 2) reputation according to whom?; and, 3) reputation for what purpose? (i.e. what is the measurement being used for?) (Lewellyn, 2002). Therefore it is likely that an organization has several reputations based on the perceptions of a particular group of stakeholders, and on any particular issue (Walker, 2010). Walker defines reputation as being “a relatively stable, issue-specific aggregate perceptual representation of a company’s past actions and future prospects compared against some standard” (2010, p. 370).

Fostering a good reputation can influence stakeholders’ level of support for a company (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004). In the case of customer stakeholders, customers that identify strongly with a supplier organization are more likely to become champions for that company. If customers perceive an organization to have a negative reputation, they will likely reconsider their support of the business (Gray & Balmer, 1998).

References can reduce perceived risk and increase the credibility and reputation of the supplier (Ruokolainen, 2007; Salminen & Moller, 2004). The role of reputation and image in forming positive brand associations “are examples of informational cues that reduce uncertainty” (Kilian & Greuling, 2013, p. 67), but a customer’s uncertainty about a supplier can also be mitigated using references as the effect of image transfer (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010). For example, a customer reference’s corporate reputation positively correlates to the customer’s credibility and ability to provide an expert and trusted opinion about a supplier (Hada, Grewal & Lilien, 2013). Jalkala and Salminen (2010) back up this claim, indicating that references from prestigious customers create a positive image transfer to the supplier. From a customer reference relationship perspective, reputation is based on customers’ perceptions of how well they think a firm can meet their needs (Helm & Salminen, 2010).

4.5 Nature of High-Tech B2B Sector

Established B2B companies, particularly in the technology sector, have evolved their customer reference programs to be at the core of their customer advocacy strategies. Large, multinational technology companies have expanded their customer advocacy programs beyond the list of previously mentioned reference activities listed above to include co-marketing, customer communities, advisory boards and forums, MVP-type programs, and social media initiatives. The mutual value to sponsoring organizations and participating customers ranges from lead generation for the sales team, to co-branding for customers, and enhanced market awareness for all parties involved (CRPA, 2014).

The use of customer references in B2B high-tech marketing is particularly important because of: the complexity of offerings (creating barriers to adoption); the volatile nature of the industry; the high cost associated with switching vendors; and, the narrow window before

product obsolescence. All of these factors expose buyers to higher risk (Helm & Salminen, 2010; Ruokolainen & Mäkelä, 2007; Gomez-Arias & Montermoso, 2007; Salminen & Moller, 2006). As a result, securing an initial customer reference, particularly for startups or established companies entering new or international markets, is critical for high-tech companies (Conference Board of Canada, 2007; Gomez-Arias & Montermoso, 2007; Ruokolainen, 2008; Salminen & Moller, 2006).

The role of an initial customer reference is not only to generate revenue. It also: provides the supplier with valuable feedback about product development; offers insights on other aspects of the business (such as customer service and product positioning for sales); participation in promotional opportunities; and, gives both the supplier and customer a competitive edge (Gomez-Arias & Montermoso, 2007). In a case study examining Hewlett Packard's role as a first reference customer for AMD's Opteron server technology, researchers concluded that "in high tech, the first customer is not only a financial resource but a marketing accomplishment to be trumpeted for reference selling and credibility" (Gomez-Arias and Montermoso, 2007, p. 989). In another case study, Ruokolainen (2008) also found that a company's first reference customer—in this case, a startup software company—plays a pivotal role in supporting the company's growth.

First references serve as a powerful promotional channel for sceptical prospects (Gomez-Arias & Montermoso, 2007), and also enhance the suppliers' knowledge of, and confidence in, its own technology (Salminen & Moller, 2006). In addition, companies that agree to act as first customer references signal that they are committed to having a long-term partnership with the company (Ruokolainen, 2008) and therefore, to the startup's success. However, it is necessary

for a customer to be committed to its supplier and have a level of trust before agreeing to act as a marketing advocate (Lacey & Morgan, 2009).

During the buying process, most companies request references from prospective vendors rather than try to seek them out themselves, making it even more important for high-tech companies to cultivate customer reference relationships (Helm & Salminen, 2010). Firms that leverage references during the sales process can “significantly influence an organizational buyer’s decision to make a purchase” (Kumar, Petersen, Leone, 2013, p. 69). Clearly, the strength of a supplier’s references influences purchasing decision of a prospective customer (Kumar et al., 2013). In a multiple case study of high-tech companies, Jalkala and Salminen (2010) concluded that “external use of customer references contributes to building reputation, market credibility and a firm’s customer equity” (p. 8).

Salminen and Moller (2004) built a case study around the assumption that “the smaller the company compared to its competitors, the more it needs references” (p. 139). They found that smaller and newer companies benefit more from the status-transfer effect of having reputable customers than do larger firms with well-established reputations (Helm & Salminen, 2010). A company’s network plays a role in how attractive it is perceived to be by other potential exchange partners, including prospective customers (Helm & Salminen, 2010).

In one of the very few Canadian studies found on this topic, Reuber and Fischer (2005) examined how younger firms leverage their existing customers to signal their reputation to prospective customers. They found that reputation development via customers is dependent on the complexity of the startup’s offerings: the higher the level of complexity and customization, the more valuable the association with a high-status customer and therefore the more important

the reputational signal. Conversely, while well-known and large reference customers provide value to suppliers, prospective customers prefer to speak with peer-like reference customers—that is, companies of the same size, in the same industry (Ruokolainen, 2008; Kumar, et al., 2013). Nevertheless, a well-established customer relationship can act as a building block for reputation, which can be used to open the door to new customer relationships (Helm & Salminen, 2010) and increase a company's financial value (Conference Board of Canada, 2007).

4.6 Using Digital Channels to Signal Reputation

The literature reviewed to date is largely presented from the seller's perspective—in other words, how vendors can leverage customer references to shape their reputations. Conversely, early on in the buying process, buyers' personal relationships and information culled from the media play a critical role in the reputation assessment of a prospective supplier (Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen, 2014). The role of the media is particularly important as companies seek to disrupt traditional customer reference program models, and thus attempt to include more digital marketing in an effort to reach customers earlier in the buying cycle (O'Neill, 2014). In a content analysis conducted by Kumar et al., (2013), references provided through “richer media formats”—such as videos, podcasts, case studies, and white papers—and communicated via the supplier's web site, significantly influenced purchasing decisions (p. 70).

The Aarikka et al. content analysis in turn built upon Salminen & Moller's 2008 study, where they examined the customer reference content and functions of industrial suppliers' web sites. They found that the value of web-based reference utilization was “especially attractive for companies who do not have an established reputation in certain market or technology areas” (p. 828), and that it allows companies to “increase their perceived credibility and reputation in a

cost-effective and large-scale manner” (p. 828). These findings are of particular interest to both startups and established companies seeking to expand their global footprint, but that lack the ability to invest in human resources in international markets (Kilian & Greuling, 2013). In the current context, given the high-risk, high-complexity nature that defines the high-tech industry, it is almost certain that buyers will use the Internet to research potential suppliers (Samaniego, Arranz, and Cablesudo, 2006). The mere level of visibility and information shared by a supplier to the market via its web site correlates positively with prospects’ perceptions of that supplier’s reputation (Kumar et al., 2013).

Another web site content analysis of German mechanical engineering companies, built on Jalkala and Salminen’s research to “analyze the intended effect on potential customers” (Kilian & Greuling, 2013, p. 66), found that references have a positive impact on “perceived supplier’s competencies” (Kilian & Greuling, 2013, p. 65). In this case, machinery was customized to individual customers, involving a high level of complexity. The companies studied communicated their competencies via references on their web site. The researchers coupled their content analysis with executive interviews, and concluded that “perceived credibility, reputation, and technological expertise” (Kilian & Greuling, 2013, p.70) was a key goal of their company’s use of references.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research Design

In keeping with the research methodologies of the marketing, reputation, and business-related scholarship reviewed to date, a multiple-case research design was selected for this research. More specifically, the “how” nature of the research questions lent themselves well to an explanatory case study because customer advocacy marketing practices evolve over the

lifecycle of a company, and are not “mere frequencies or incidence” (Yin, 2009, p. 9). Since this area of scholarship has been largely untapped in Canada, the use of this format enabled the researcher to gather a rich data set that can be built on for future research (Yin, 2009).

A case study approach is particularly useful for examining present-day issues within their specific contexts, and that are beyond the control of the researcher (Yin, 2009). In this study, participating companies provide individual context for their customer advocacy practices, whether it’s related to the nature of the individual business; the characteristics of their specific customer set; or the resources to initiate and execute a strategic customer advocacy program. The researcher was not affiliated with any of the companies studied and thus could not manipulate the behaviours associated with the outcomes. Finally, the case study format enabled the researcher to consider and incorporate a wider range of evidence, including content from web site analyses and interviews, into one paper.

Case study critics fail to account for the expansive nature of material that is available to researchers that is not applicable to other methodologies (Yin, 2009). Using the guidelines set out by Yin (2009), to increase the study’s construct validity, multiple data sources were collected and a chain of evidence was established. Internal validity was bolstered using pattern matching and explanation-building techniques. External validity was supported using replication logic.

5.2 *Content Analysis*

A content analysis is useful to establish “converging lines of inquiry” (Yin, 2009, p. 115) and to help corroborate the data collected in the interviews. When reviewed and interpreted collectively, the information gathered enhances the accuracy and credibility of the research findings.

The first research question is: How do established technology companies, particularly in the B2B space, use customer references to enhance their reputations? To answer this a content analysis of the 30 active members of the CRPA (the majority of which are American), was conducted (See Appendix B: Content Analysis: of Customer Reference Professionals Association (CRPA) (Summary of Findings)). The purpose was to determine the extent to which these companies—which serve as benchmarks for other B2B technology companies—featured the five pillars of reputation building in their content, as outlined by Fombrun and van Riel (2004). These pillars are visibility, distinctiveness, authenticity, transparency, and consistency. The unit of analysis measured was any mention of customers in publicly available content. Content coding was conducted based to determine the quantitative and qualitative dimensions with regard to the following characteristics:

- Visibility: Is there some form of customer references on the web site?
- Distinctiveness: Does content feature elements of the Triple A model of storytelling: ability, activity, and accomplishment?
- Authenticity: Are stories aligned to the company's core mission, vision, and/or values?
- Transparency: Was information publicly available on the following?
 - Products and Services
 - Financial Performance
 - Vision and Leadership
 - Social Responsibility
 - Workplace Environment
- Consistency: Are the messages across customer reference assets consistent? Do they align with the core vision and mission?

The same analysis was then conducted on the web sites of the startup companies featured on the Branham Group's annual ranking of the Top 25 Canadian Up-And-Coming ICT Companies (Branham Group, 2014). This was done for comparison purposes, and to identify any gaps in their approach to reputation building using customer content (see Appendix C: Content Analysis of Startup Companies (Summary of Findings)).

Content was analyzed over a three week period in December 2014. The content analysis focused on customer-centric content, such as customer success stories, videos, press releases announcing new customers, and customer testimonials. Due to the extensive volume of content on CRPA members' web sites, analysis was limited to three pieces of content per company. If customer videos were available they were included as one of those three pieces. In total, 84 texts from CRPA companies were analyzed². Conversely, customer-centric content was limited on the startups' web sites. As a result, the analysis was limited to between one and three pieces of content. In some cases, no content was evaluated because it did not exist. In total, 31 pieces of startup content were analyzed. Between the two groups, 115 content pieces were analyzed.

5.3 *Focused Interviews*

The second question asks: How do fast-growing Canadian technology companies, particularly in the B2B space, use customer references to help shape their reputations? Focused interviewing was used to develop the data for analysis. Two interview guides were developed: one for Canadian startup companies, and the other for established Canadian companies (see Appendix D and Appendix E). The interview guides were designed to help the researcher gain insight into the companies' inner workings from multiple angles: their culture, values, vision, and leadership; and how these characteristics influence their approach to customer relationships. A set of questions then probed the participants' understanding of customer advocacy and its role in reputation building. Finally, questions relating to individual companies' strategies and tactics helped to determine how they were leveraging the power of their customers' voices to help them

² Two CRPA companies required the researcher to fill in a form to access content. As a result, their content was not analyzed because it was not easily accessible to the researcher, or to other stakeholders.

build or sustain their reputations; and their intentions for capturing customer experiences as their companies continue to evolve.

There were minor variances in the questionnaires for startups and established companies. Participants from established companies were asked how they measured the success of their customer advocacy programs. They were also asked whether or not their customer advocacy efforts were tied into the company's overall financial performance, and whether or not their companies (to their knowledge) measured reputation. The purpose of these questions was to understand the degree to which the established companies were mapping their customer advocacy efforts to the company's overall reputation strategy.

Interview participants were recruited from the listings provided through the Branham Group's annual ranking of the Top 25 Canadian Up-And-Coming ICT Companies. The companies featured on the list were selected due to their innovative and creative practices. Revenues did not factor into their rankings. Email addresses and phone numbers for the appropriate contacts at each company were found on either the companies' web sites or on LinkedIn. In some cases, the researcher tapped into her professional network to facilitate introductions to prospective participants.³ Once the contact information was found, the researcher sent an email to determine participants' level of interest with an attached Letter of Information containing additional details about the study. For those companies that did not respond within a week, a follow up phone call was made, and a final email was sent.

Three participants representing three organizations from the Branham Group's Top 25 Canadian Up-And-Coming ICT Companies list were interviewed. Given the small sample group,

³ A strict ethical protocol, as reviewed and approved by the McMaster University Ethics Board, was followed to make sure no respondents felt obliged to talk due to a pre-existing personal or professional relationship with the researcher.

even a brief description of the participating companies would make it relatively easy to identify them. As such, descriptors of the participating companies' industries will not be included in this paper to protect their privacy and anonymity.⁴ However, all of the participating companies are classified as B2B technology companies. They are referred to in the findings as Organizations A, B, and C respectively.

Although the researcher's initial aim was to interview up to three different participants from each startup company (a representative from marketing, public relations, and an executive team member), resource constraints on the part of the participants did not make this possible. One potential participant said: "I and my team have been very busy and I don't we (sic) have that much time to support your project. I can get on the phone and spend 30 minutes if that works?" (personal communication, January 14, 2015)⁵. As a result, focused interviews, which are defined by the length of the interview (i.e. an hour) versus in-depth interviews, which take place over an extended period of time, were selected due to the time constraints of the participants and the lack of access on the researcher's part to "informants" (Yin, 2009, p. 107) within participating companies.

Primary research was collected via telephone interviews from the CEOs of two companies and the Director of Marketing from another. A fourth startup could not commit to an interview, but instead offered to provide written, consolidated responses from the public relations, marketing, and executive team members. However, the marketing contact left the

⁴ A list of the interview participants and the companies they represent was made available to the researcher's supervisor.

⁵ The potential participant has not been identified to ensure privacy and anonymity. However, the researcher can provide proof of communication to her supervisor if necessary. As it turns out, the researcher was not able to schedule an interview with this person due to his busy schedule.

company and was not able to collect and finalize responses prior to her departure, so data from that company is not reflected in the results.

In addition, representatives from two companies on the Branham Group's annual ranking of the Top 250 Canadian ICT were interviewed. Organization D provides IT solutions and services to thousands of corporations and public institutions across North America. The company is publicly traded, has received accolades for its workplace culture and employee engagement, and boasts brand-name multinational companies as both partners and customers. Organization E serves the needs of thousands of companies across a variety of vertical industries with its cloud-based technology solutions. Also publicly traded, the company has been recognized for its financial growth, talent management and development, and community initiatives.

The same protocol was followed when contacting these companies. The researcher contacted 25 companies based on her professional network with the goal of securing three participants. When this approach only yielded one participant, the researcher extended her outreach to an additional 10 companies and was able to secure an additional participant. By this time, there were less than two weeks before the date specified in the Letter of Information for participants to re-evaluate their participation in the study. In order to schedule the interviews and provide ample time for participants to reconsider their options if necessary, the researcher ceased outreach to additional companies.

The participants from this sample oversee the customer advocacy efforts for their respective organizations. Their titles are Manager of Services Marketing, and Public Relations Manager respectively. Companies from this list were targeted for interviews because they are farther along in their lifecycle than their counterparts on the Top 25 list. Thus, it was expected

that they could provide insight from a Canadian perspective that might be useful for younger, less-established companies. It is also important to note that Branham ranks its Top 250 based solely on company revenues. While financial performance is one dimension of the StellarRep model, it alone does not guarantee success in this area. As one potential participant from a publicly traded Top 250 company noted:

Would love to help, but.... not sure that we can help since we have a lot of issues getting customers to do press releases and case studies. Let alone references that we can use externally. Most of our customers either don't do vendor releases or don't want their competitors to know what equipment they have in their networks. If you figure out a solution for getting customers to do references/case studies please let us know! (personal communication, December 2, 2014)⁶.

Interview guides were created to help the researcher pursue her intended “line of inquiry” (Yin, 2009, p. 106). The majority of questions were open-ended in an effort to keep interviews conversational. Questions that asked “why” were avoided to mitigate the risk of defensiveness on the part of the interviewee.

The questions included in the interview guides were comprised of both Level 2 and Level 3 inquiries (Yin, 2009). Level 2 questions focused on the experiences of a single case—in other words, a participant from an individual company—as part of the overall multiple-case study approach. Level 3 questions enabled the researcher to apply the learning gathered across the multiple cases to help identify patterns in the results.

⁶ The potential participant has not been identified to ensure privacy and anonymity. However, the researcher can provide proof of communication to her supervisor if necessary.

6 Results

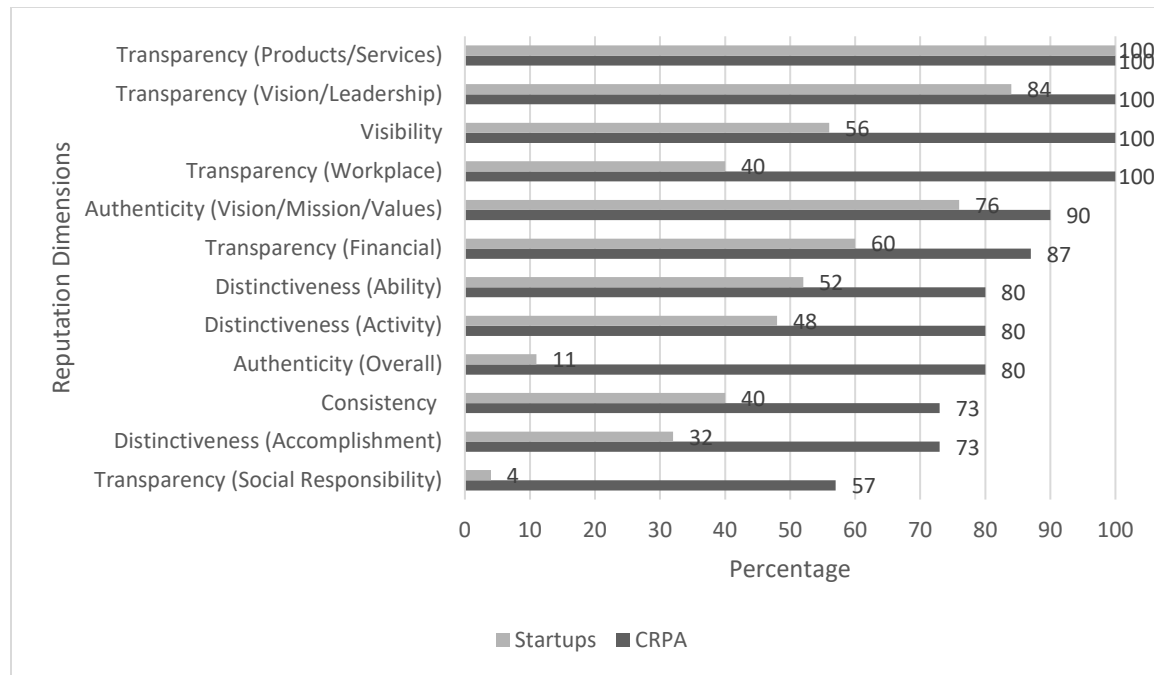
This case study series relied on theoretical propositions as they relate to the normative theory of referencing, and the StellarRep framework. The former asserts that customer advocacy practices enable organizations to demonstrate their competence to prospective customers; establish credibility and reputation; and reduce perceived risks in the eyes of prospective customers (Salminen & Moller, 2006). The latter outlines five characteristics that highly reputable companies display—visibility, distinctiveness, authenticity, transparency, and consistency—offering a framework for reputation building (Fombrun & Riel, 2004). Below is a review of the results of the content analysis and focused interviews as they pertain to the normative theory of referencing and the StellarRep framework.

6.1 Content Analysis

RQ1: How do established technology companies, particularly in the B2B space, use customer references to enhance their reputations?

In analysing company documents, Table 1 illustrates the extent to which both the CRPA companies and the Canadian startup companies are leveraging the reputation-building dimensions of the StellarRep framework. Overall and as expected, the CRPA members scored higher on all dimensions. However, both groups provided a high level of transparency about products and services, followed by their mission/vision/values. Conversely, both groups struggled with the overall communication of their corporate social responsibility initiatives. As the chart demonstrate, these three key characteristics were high (between 50%-100% for established and startup companies).

Table 1:
Startups v. CRPA Companies, Percentage Demonstrating Reputation-Building Dimensions (%)



Just over half of the 25 startup companies, 56% (n=14), met the visibility requirement with customer-centric content on their web sites. These assets ranged from simply displaying customer logos to customer success stories and videos. In some cases, only customer logos were featured. While this meets the visibility requirement, the logos do not tell a story; rather, they serve as signals to prospective customers of the vendor's credibility. By comparison, all of the CRPA organizations featured customer-centric content on either their main page, a separate customer or community page, or both.

On the distinctiveness scale, 52% (n=13) of the startup companies met the first A—ability—of the storytelling model compared to 80% (n=24) of the CRPA companies. The customer content needed to clearly communicate the startup company's core competencies. For example, a customer of startup company mnubo offered the following:

mnubo's data management and real-time analytics for Internet of Things helps OEMs maximize the value from their data – delivering a more personalized experience to its users (mnubo web site, 2015).

The second A, activities, of each startup company were also communicated but to a lesser degree than their abilities, while the CRPA results show consistency in both the ability and activity categories. For example, in a press release announcing three new customers, startup Fabric Engine featured a customer quote that clearly articulated what the vendor's solution would accomplish:

Fabric Engine allows us to code in one environment and port to others without making changes – this frees up the R&D team to work on other tools. We also have a lot of artists who are not programmers so the visual programming feature of Fabric Engine has been a real draw (Fabric Engine, August 11, 2014)

According to the results, communicating the third A, accomplishments, via measurable results is the most challenging aspect of the storytelling model for both startups and established companies. Only 32% (n=8) of startups were able to achieve this via statements such as “revenue per visitor increased 35.86%” (Granify, 2015), and “Linkett generated an average of \$12,215 additional retail revenue per week” (Linkett Consumer Engagement, 2015). While statements such as “without the help of Obero, we would have had a very challenging year” (Obero Solutions, 2015) are a step in the right direction, their vague nature prevented them from being counted as true customer accomplishments. Similarly, 73% (n=22) of the CRPA organizations could report measurable results. For example: “The space efficiency features in Colt's colocation facilities allowed us to reduce the number of racks by 40% and save over €15,000 on annual data centre costs” (Colt, 2015). Although the CRPA companies had greater success in this area than the startups, the declining numbers for both groups in this category underscore the difficulty that

B2B technology companies face in engaging customers at a level where real business results can be collected, reported, and shared.

Authenticity was measured in one of two ways: whether or not the company communicated its vision, mission, or values (or a combination thereof), and if so, if the customer-centric content featured on the site aligned with these. In some cases, a startup might state its values (i.e. “innovation, integrity, learning and risk taking, and creating shareholder value” (Smart Employee Benefits, 2015), but only feature customer logos on its web site. In these instances, authenticity could not be measured because it was impossible to map the company’s vision, mission, or values to customer content. Of the 25 startups, 76% (n=19) listed some sort of guiding principle. However, only 11% (n=44) had customer-centric content that supported and aligned with the company’s mission, vision, or values. In comparison, 90% (n=27) of the CRPA companies featured a vision, mission, or values statement on their web sites. Of those, 80% (n=24) of companies’ content aligned.

Table 2 highlights an example from each group, demonstrating how each company’s mission is communicated and reinforced via its customer-centric content.

Table 2:
Customer-Centric Content and Authenticity: Key Examples from a CRPA Organization and a Startup

Company	Temenos (E.g. of a CRPA Company)	Slyce (E.g. of a Startup Company)
Mission/Vision/Values	“To rid the banking industry of its legacy software.”	“Why did we create Slyce? The 'Holy Grail' for Retailers is to be there at a shopper's moment of inspiration — simply put, Slyce makes that possible.”
Customer Statement	“We have state-of-the-art IT systems that are infinitely scalable. Temenos probably spends more updating their system every year than any bank could ever afford to spend. If you build a system, it is obsolete the day you start, whereas ours will constantly be updated.”	“From the moment of your inspiration—from seeing something that you like on someone walking down the street with a great bag, or in a magazine or wherever—you can take a picture of it on our (Neiman Marcus) app and get immediate gratification.”
Message Platform	Up-to-date, modern	Inspiration

Temenos, 2015
eMarketer, 2014

As Table 2 illustrates in both cases of a typical CPRA and a startup company, the messages in the customer quotes can be mapped directly to each company’s mission. This helps to reinforce the credibility of the supplier to prospective customers, because a third party is validating the authenticity of each supplier’s claim.

In determining the level of transparency, five dimensions were evaluated: products and services; financial performance; vision and leadership; social responsibility; and workplace environment. All 25 startups and 30 CRPA organizations clearly communicated their products and/or services on their web sites. With respect to financial performance, 12% (n=3) of the startups and 83% (n=25) of the CRPA companies are publicly traded and subject to disclosure

regulations. The remaining companies from both groups that communicated information that is financial in nature on their web sites are under no obligation to disclose revenue details.

Nevertheless, some listed investors and announced funding that was sometimes picked up in the media—an indicator of the reputation-borrowing effect. For example, startup Introhive announced a significant investment from Salesforce.com, resulting in the following headline in Business Insider: “Salesforce.com invests in Introhive, a startup filled with former Radian6 and Blackberry employees” (Bort, 2013). Another startup, Atomic Reach, disclosed that it had raised a total of \$4 million when it announced a round of funding in February 2014, as well as the company’s plans for the money:

[...] this latest investment will be used to further accelerate the development of its proprietary audience engagement platform, boost marketing efforts and increase engagement with its target market, which includes publishers, brands and bloggers (TechVibes, February 3, 2014).

Safenet, a company that belongs to the CRPA, states on its site that it was “founded in 1983 with revenues in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and under private ownership” (Safenet, 2015).

While this sort of publicly conveyed information does not meet the level of disclosure that public companies are tasked with, it may lay the groundwork for building credibility and trust, which represent “the underbelly of corporate reputation” (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004, p. 94).

As mentioned when discussing authenticity, 76% (n=19) of the startups and 90% (n=27) communicated their mission, vision or values on their web sites. On the leadership scale, 84% (n=21) of the startups featured, at minimum, the names of their executive leadership teams; while all of the CRPA organizations did the same. Most also featured biographies to highlight the breadth and depth of their leadership team’s experience. One startup company, Finmaven, lists

what appears to be its entire team on its web site site—from its CEO to its engineers, account executive and business analyst.

Corporate citizenship is one area of the transparency dimension that the startups studied seem to have not embraced—at least not publicly. Only one company, mnubo, listed a social responsibility initiative. Employees took part in raising funds for prostate cancer by partaking in the Movember campaign. The company had a fundraising page on the Movember site, and tracked its progress via its Twitter and Facebook pages with relevant calls to action: “Happy mo'vember! mnubo has been busy raising awareness for men's health. If you would like to join the mnubo team and donate, follow the link below!” (mnubo, 2014). This is also an area that the CRPA companies struggled with: only 57% (n=17) called out their corporate social responsibility initiatives on their web sites. These ranged from posting pictures from a charity run (IQ Navigator, 2015) and a CSR section on the web site (Vocera, 2015) to CSR reports (Cisco, 2014).

The last of the transparency characteristics, workplace environment, was measured by the amount of information companies provided about their respective working environments. All but one of the startup companies had a web page dedicated to careers, a link to job openings, or an email address for job-related inquiries. All of the CRPA companies met this requirement. However, only 40% (n=10) of startup companies went beyond this to include descriptions of their workplace environment and company culture.

The last reputation building block to be measured was consistency. Specifically, were the messages across all customer reference assets consistent in that they aligned with the company's core vision, mission, or values? Only 40% (n=10) of startups and 73% (n=22) of the benchmark

companies met this criteria, underscoring the challenges that all companies— regardless of where they are in their lifecycle—have connecting all of the reputation building blocks together to support a core vision of the company that then manifests itself via customer-centric content.

6.2 *Focused Interviews*

RQ2: How do fast-growing Canadian technology companies, particularly in the B2B space, use customer references to help shape their reputations?

Interview participants from each of the five companies clearly and succinctly communicated their mission, vision, and/or values. When asked how they thought their customers perceived them, two of the three startups (companies A and C respectively) used the term “innovative”. The three remaining organizations, a startup (Company B) and two established company (Company E), reinforced that their customer relationships go beyond simply fulfilling a need— they are viewed as more than just vendors in their customers’ eyes. Table 3 lists their responses, which offer a snapshot into the vision that in turn shapes their culture and influences each company’s unique approach to customer relationships. This is followed by summaries of each individual interview, which provides insights into the dynamics of building reputation via customer advocacy communications.

Table 3:
Snapshot of Participating Organizations: Guiding Principles, and How They Think Their Customers Perceive Them

Company	Mission/Vision/Values	Perceived Reputation
A	Tell the story of every person, object, and place	Innovative, bold, disruptive
B	Help customers uncap the value of their data	Excellent product and service; partner that helps enhance analytics
C	Uncover relationships via analytics to simplify the sales process	Up-and-comer; innovative
D	Build deep relationships with customers, partners, and employees	Constantly evolving to help deliver value to customers' businesses
E	Provide a world-class customer experience	Excellent customer service and support; partner, not just a vendor

6.2.1 Organization A

The CEO of Organization A is the outward face of his company. Despite co-founding the company with two others, he states: “the general vision of where this can go, the core technology, and the evangelization of the business has all fallen upon myself.” So far, Organization A has between 15 and 20 customers actively using its technology, with many more in the pilot stage. Of these customers, about half are publicly reference-able. “We have a very long sales cycle because it’s a very new technology,” says the CEO. “It might take three to six months before there’s a really good comfort there, before they make a purchase or proceed with a pilot.” In some cases, it can take more than a year because of the nature of the industry in which they operate—which is relatively new.

Organization A has received referrals from other entrepreneurs, and even potential customers that ended up not purchasing their solutions. This network of fellow entrepreneurs “is good for the whole ecosystem,” he says.

It’s just a general love of entrepreneurship and a respect thing. They know they’re putting us in contact with other people that will create more business down the road so when they do need us, we’ll actually still exist because we’ll have done more business. They’re willing to stick their necks out a bit and make a recommendation or mention our technology to someone else because they think, in the big picture, it benefits everyone in the ecosystem.

Organization A has the logos of customers on its web page, but is focusing on expanding its customer-centric content to include success stories that feature its brand name customers. To date, the process of securing reference customers for PR purposes has been relatively informal.

We’re generally on a first-name basis with our internal champions. That means we can say, ‘Hey Bob, I’ve got this journalist on the line who’s doing this story. This is very good PR for you as well, would you be interested?’ Then it’s up to them to get permission from within their organization, and that can take more time.

For the most part, customers that have participated in reference activities on behalf of Organization A realize the value of the opportunities they are presented with. Some of the larger, corporate customers actually have mandates to work with startups in an effort to solidify their own reputations as progressive and innovative companies. In these cases, “it’s a pretty easy sell,” says the CEO. “The marketing guys are super excited because they know we’re doing them a service by communicating the message they want to emphasize.” On the other hand, some customers want to remain in “stealth mode” about the vendor technologies that they use in order to keep an edge on their competitors.

Overall, this CEO recognizes the value of reference customers in reputation building. In order to support Organization A’s current reputation as being “very innovative, very bold, and very disruptive” in its industry—one which many people distrust because of the level of personal

data that can be collected and shared—trust must exist. Ideally, he would love his customers to communicate the fact that his employees are inherently good people who will work hard to solve customers' problems, while remaining transparent and innovative.

If we can present ourselves as the company that says, 'hey, this is inevitable but we're going to do the best we can with it'...and if people can truly believe that by what customers say about us, that's actually our biggest value next to the technology we've created.

The CEO recognizes that having a brand-name customer associated with Organization A is key to building credibility among prospective customers, as well as employees, investors, and the community at large. The validation that comes with this is indicative of the reputation-borrowing effect:

It gives a lot of reassurance that we're not talking complete crap, we're not just vapourware. It's amazing how much we're trained and conditioned as humans and consumers to want to go with winners. People don't want to see that we're working with all these other startups—which is the part I'm most proud of. They're like, 'oh great, some big company validated the fact that what you do makes sense.'

This is somewhat of a revelation for the CEO, who admits that he didn't realize the extent to which he'd have to rely on reputation borrowing from his customers.

We didn't think we'd have to rely on customer reputation that much...but it's essential because mutually our reputations are on the line, and it's very important that we're aligned on that. Our survival will depend on the fact that we make customers truly happy for them to talk about us.

6.2.2 Organization B

The CEO of Organization B runs the company by making decisions based on a set of principles that defines the purpose of the organization, rather than a corporate-like mission or vision statement. "We've got our *raison d'être* figured out," he says. The company is self-funded, with no external shareholders. As a result, he can select both employees and customers that meld well with the culture of innovation and trust with no outside interference. "Our business doesn't

have the sex and sizzle that some organizations have, but we'll choose quality over quantity any day," he says.

Organization B's customer roster consists of approximately 30 companies, including some of the most recognized consumer brands in Canada. Between 10 and 12 of those customers participate in customer advocacy initiatives. Customers are considered early adopters of Organization B's innovative solutions. As a result of the relative "newness" of its offerings, Organization B has built its business—and credibility—largely by referrals. "We're selling a highly innovative technology to a target market that trusts other people's opinions and referrals within their networks," he says.

Clients are educating themselves about this brand new space. They want to see other organizations that are doing this and learn a little bit about their success, or their trials and tribulations. They want to know that they're not guinea pigs. They want to know that there are trail blazers ahead of them.

Organization B has been relatively successful in getting customers to participate in both peer-to-peer and external customer advocacy initiatives. The company's site features customer success stories, videos, and logos. "There's nothing quite like a credible, innovative organization saying great things about us and sharing their story," says the CEO. For Organization B, the most successful strategy for securing reference customers has been through relationship building. "I have genuine conversations with every client about this when the timing is right," he says. In cases where customers decline to participate in public-facing reference activities, it is usually because of corporate policies that prevent them from doing so—particularly in the public sector. However, even these customers turn out to be great advocates at a peer level. "The gentleman who is our key client (at a major Canadian city municipality) is constantly introducing us to prospects, as well as speaking to prospects on our behalf," says the CEO.

There are three main reasons that Organization B's customers are willing to participate in customer advocacy activities. The first is to build up the customer's personal brand. "We have business-savvy, action-oriented leaders, and if they can get their names out there in the marketplace, that raises their stock," says the CEO. The branding angle extends to the organizational level as well.

There's an element of 'we think this is innovative, this is leading edge, and we want to be seen as an innovative, leading-edge organization.' So there's a potential marketing play for them as an organization.

Finally, the CEO cites the desire for customers to mobilize their newfound knowledge among their peers.

From a recruitment perspective, reference customers demonstrate the viability of the company. "To get someone to come and join a little shop like ours, we need to be known and we have to have some quality organizations that we're working with," says the CEO. In addition, "as we move from being in a very niche market to more of a mass market, we need great organizations to speak about what we do," he says.

6.2.3 Organization C

Organization C is represented by its Director of Marketing, who oversees all marketing and PR initiatives, including customer advocacy activities. He describes the work environment as fun and agile, enabling the company to quickly react to evolving market conditions. The company has approximately 24 customers. To date, Organization C has leveraged customer references as part of the sales cycle, on a peer level. "We've set up calls between the prospect and the customer that allows the prospect to get a real idea of what they can expect and what the use case is," he says. The sales team is not involved in those calls.

As a new company in a relatively new industry, Organization C's customers are considered early adopters. As a result, Organization C works closely with its customers on product development. "We're working closely with them to understand what's good and what's bad," says the Director of Marketing. "There's a lot of customer feedback that ends up going right into our product roadmap and dictates the direction of the product as well." Organization C also piggybacks off the reputation of one of its globally renowned investors, participating in its annual event that draws significant visibility and prospects. "They showcased us as part of their keynote one day," he says. "It really shows our customers how innovative and forward-thinking we are."

Organization C is just starting to engage customers in publicly reference-able activities. The customer reference program is "definitely in its infancy stage...because we deal with Fortune 500 and 1,000 companies and the design cycle takes so long," says the Director of Marketing. Two of its customers are scheduled to speak at events this year, offering a case study-like presentation that outlines how they solved their problem using Organization C's technology. "Those are worth a million dollars," he says, speaking from his experience at a previous company. In addition, Organization C is starting to capture early data from its customers, with the intent to follow up months later to capture results that can be used for a success story.

The day after they begin their journey with us we like to capture what made us attractive, and what the problem was that they were hoping to solve. And then we follow up seven or nine months down the road, after they've used us for an extended period of time so that we can start getting some results. So, 'what are the problems we helped you solve? What are some of the wins that came from us?'

The company is also collecting basic customer testimonials that can be used for internal sales collateral. This enables the sales team to offer some "third-party validation" in addition to

running product demonstrations for prospective customers. This validation extends to other stakeholders as well, such as employees and investors.

In this day and age, no one just goes out and buys something. There is a lot of research that goes into it before a salesperson has even heard about the prospect. Having those customer testimonials and all of those various pieces getting Google indexed helps to feed information about how we're different from our competitors. So when they actually talk to us they already have a good idea (about the company) and it's coming from a third party.

The Director of Marketing feels that having customers communicate a company's core messages is "one of the most important things a startup can do," especially when the marketing budget is limited.

You have to spend your dollars wisely, and this gives you the opportunity to get that third-party validation that you can't get anywhere else, that reaches new customers that you wouldn't have been able to reach before.

6.2.4 Organization D

In contrast to the startups, Organization D has been in business for more than two decades and boasts more than 20,000 customers. The company's reputation is built on the pillars of innovation, partnership, and trust. Over the past few years, Organization D has evolved to offer more services, which means that "customers are looking to us to actually help them implement and manage those areas," says the Manager of Services Marketing. "What that's done is created the need to have advocates on our behalf. Our customers are looking for more credibility throughout the sales cycle as opposed to just taking our word for it." Prospects seek narratives from actual customers around what was actually delivered in order to assess the scale and scope of Organization D's experience, and how it relates to their specific needs.

Leveraging customer voices for external advocacy initiatives is where Organization D sometimes faces roadblocks.

It's one area we've certainly been challenged with. A lot of customers certainly feel comfortable talking one-to-one with a prospect, but we hit some PR roadblocks in terms of interacting with their own corporate marketing or PR organizations.

To overcome this, Organization D has created a toolkit that helps the sales and marketing teams communicate the value proposition for customers, which includes promotions via social media and other channels. These are manifested in a series of email templates to support outreach from those people—usually the sales team—who are identifying customer advocates. They include the key points that need to be reinforced so that no additional training is necessary.

Nevertheless, Organization D has found that only about five percent of its customer advocates—which are identified based on their Net Promoter Scores (NPS)—are able to go on the record publicly. Rather than discount the remaining 95%, Organization D sends out anonymous surveys to collect data that can be curated and shared to support the company's value propositions. Data can be organized according to the solution, vertical industry, or even specific scenarios. Organization D is also a proponent of short, anonymous case studies. All of these “allow us to get more scale out of the advocates we have,” says the Manager of Services Marketing.

The time investment is another barrier for customers—from initial content collection (via interviews or meetings), to asset reviews, revisions, and approvals that can take hours of time and months to complete. However, Organization D provides a clear timeline of the process so that customers know what to expect and when, and understand what is expected of them in return. The biggest motivator for customers to participate is the personal branding aspect.

For them to be showcased across all of our channels...raises both the corporation's brand as well as the individual's. Most notably it's the CIO or other IT leader that's trying to create more brand presence for their organization with technology solutions that truly change their business. That's the biggest factor for the customer, who loves the airplay.

As a company that's recently introduced managed services on top of its traditional technology offerings, Organization D also faces credibility issues from its employees. Customer references "help move the needle on people's belief in something, and also their confidence to go out and sell," he says. It also helps with the recruitment and retention of technical talent in a fiercely competitive market.

Recently, Organization D integrated its content marketing and customer relationship management (CRM) solution to gather more insight on what content is actually being consumed, and how it has contributed to a sale.

Having specific targets around the number of leads generated, or in many cases the content usage within the sales cycle, is what's going to be important to us in 2015. A lot of organizations create a lot of content, but don't necessarily have the hooks back into the opportunity management.

The company also hosts events for customers to build networks among themselves. There is no formal agenda for these gatherings, but it brings together both customers and prospects who have an opportunity to discuss what's going on in their respective businesses. "Building deeper relationships with our customers, and between our customers" is the goal, he says, while also providing Organization D with insight on industry trends that can be used for content marketing purposes, such as white papers. Right now, Organization D's customers are looking to the company to help them distinguish between the hype and reality of the technology changes occurring in the marketplace. "That's one area where we're seeing our customers really hone in when they're talking to prospects or other customers," says the Manager of Services Marketing.

It all boils down to trust. The projects we're getting into now are the ones that require a lot more trust. Having advocates allows us to build more trust for the organization, especially as we look at broader, more complex solutions that have more risk associated with them.

6.2.5 Organization E

Organization E is another established Canadian high-tech company, in operations for nearly two decades. The company is represented by the PR Manager, whose responsibilities include traditional and digital marketing communications, as well as customer advocacy initiatives. The latter includes working closely with her colleagues in sales to identify customer champions who would be willing to publicly communicate their experiences with the company, most commonly via success stories, press releases, speaking engagements, or interviews with industry analysts and the media. She reinforces how every decision in the company is weighed against its mission, which is to deliver a world-class customer experience. This value is engrained in everything she and her colleagues do. As a result, customers are proud of their partnerships with the company.

This is the first company I've worked for where it's been this easy to have customers say 'yes' to things. When I first started, I thought 'I'm going to ask, but I know they're going to say no.' It's really astounding to me and I think it ties back to...delivering that world-class customer experience. They're happy with their interactions with us, so that when we do ask them to do something, they want to.

Organization E has approximately 2,000 customers, but was not able to disclose how many of those are publicly reference-able. The company relies on a greater pool of customers for peer-to-peer reference activities to help close deals. Like Organization D, Organization E uses NPS to help identify customers who would be willing to participate in external references activities. This data is captured and regularly updated in the CRM system. The PR Manager will regularly do research to find out which customers have been onboard for at least a year, so that they can show tangible results since implementing Organization E's solution. Before the PR Manager reaches out to the customer with a specific reference opportunity, she speaks with the account manager first for the most recent status update.

In addition, the sales team will flag potential references based on the relationships they've fostered with the customer.

I would say that the sales team are really, really good at identifying and securing references. It's almost like a natural next step in their relationship. And then they'll flag the customer for us and say 'hey, you might want to consider this customer down the road for customer marketing activities once they've implemented and have a bit of a story to share.'

Other times, it is the customers themselves who self-identify for customer advocacy initiatives.

"They'll say 'I love you guys so much so anytime you need me to talk to someone you just let me know, and I will,'" she says.

Organization E has developed a template of communications that identify the value propositions for proposed reference activities. "Sure, there's something in it for us or we wouldn't be doing this," says the PR Manager, but it also gives customers the opportunity to showcase how they're using Organization E's technology to enhance their own business. "There's a brand play for the company, as well as personal brand," says the PR Manager. "It's a way for them to elevate their individual thought leadership exposure with their peers or within their industry." The downside for customers as well as Organization E itself is the required time investment, even for a single opportunity.

I might need to find a customer that's been with us for this amount of time, has this many of our solutions, has this many licenses, and is in this particular region. So we're looking for that perfect mix of customer demographic. That research can take a lot of time, particularly if we don't quite have what we need within our reference list already. Now we have to go outside of our go-to reference customers.

Rather than setting hard metrics—such as completing 10 case studies a year, for example—the PR Manager is not measured by the quantity of reference customers she secures or assets she produces. "We stopped doing that kind of measurement because it was unfair to the employees that these goals were set on them, because at a certain point it becomes out of their

control,” she says. A customer may not have the bandwidth to review and approve a case study right away—it could take months or even a year to get approved after it’s written. “Because of these delays we don’t necessarily set metrics, but certainly there’s an expectation that they’re happening,” she says.

Organization E regularly measures brand awareness through a survey administered via a social networking and resource site that caters specifically to its target market. Customer advocacy initiatives play an important role in helping to drive visibility, brand awareness—and by extension, reputation—for the company.

It really has to start on a foundation of trust. If you have a brand promise, but you don’t deliver on it you’re going to have a hard time getting customers to say ‘yes’ to doing these sorts of things. There really has to be an alignment between...what your vision and mission are and how you actually execute on them. So you definitely need to build that trust through your ability to execute on brand promise.

7 Discussion

The case studies examined through focused interviewing allow for a 2015 snapshot of the customer advocacy practices employed by five Canadian B2B technology companies, three of which are startups, while the remaining two are considered to be established players in their respective markets. Despite the fact that they each serve different audiences across a variety of industries, recurring themes emerged within each sub-sample. When augmented with the findings of the content analysis, several cross-case conclusions can be drawn using the normative theory of referencing and the StellarRep framework.

The findings suggest that the relative newness of an industry, an offering, a company—or even a different offering from an established company—increases the level of perceived risk on the part of prospective customers. This lengthens the sales cycle, giving the prospects more time to evaluate a vendor, and the vendor more time to evaluate the vendor’s capabilities. This is

particularly true when vendors try to sell to larger, more established companies that may have more rigorous vetting criteria. Establishing a solid relationship built on trust is always vital, but in the high-risk technology industry, when both vendors and customers have a lot at stake, trust is key. This is also critically important for companies that must entrust their sensitive data to a vendor's platform; a growing issue in an era of big data.

These findings align with the conclusions of previous researchers who have studied this topic in other high-risk markets, in other countries. The findings underscores the seemingly universal importance of customer advocates who can speak on behalf of a company's capabilities in order to build reputation capital. In short, customers want to know that others have successfully deployed a vendor's solution before making the investment themselves.

For younger companies, i.e. startups, referrals from peers within their professional networks is an important first step in new business development. The research underscores how startup communities exist as an ecosystem of entrepreneurs whose success depends, to a large degree, on the success of the larger network. Referrals are an important first step in the relationship-building process with prospective customers, and is indicative of the trust levels of a vendor's partners.

While an entrepreneurial spirit and a passion for technology may fuel a startup's early days, the companies studied recognize the crucial role that reference-able, brand-name customers can play in their growth strategies. There is no doubt that vendors benefit from the reputation-borrowing effect that comes with this, but at the same time, they are keenly aware that their customers' reputations are constantly "on the line" as well. As a result, they position external referencing as an opportunity for customers to enhance their personal brands, as well as their

organizational brands. This was echoed by the established companies, which are in the position to “lend reputation” to their customers as well.

Public customer referencing practices also help build credibility in the eyes of other stakeholders, particularly employees. In the technology industry, competition for talent can be fierce; having reference-able customers can reduce the risks associated with joining a startup company, and help extol the virtues of working for a more established company. By extension, attracting employees from the local community lays the groundwork for corporate citizenship. All of these dimensions are important for building, maintaining and enhancing reputation.

For visibility purposes, search engine optimization techniques are equally valuable for startups and established companies. For startups, having customer-centric content searchable and accessible online may be key to even getting on a shortlist of preferred suppliers. It is also considered to be a more cost effective—albeit time-consuming—way of getting noticed compared to other marketing activities when there is a limited budget with which to work. For established companies, a deep well of customer-centric content can simplify the vendor selection process because customers’ potential questions might already be addressed in existing online material. Therefore, the use of digital channels is crucial for signaling reputation via customer-centric content.

In general, it appears that both startup and established companies face varying degrees of difficulty securing customer advocates who can be publicly referenced. Recurring themes include: 1) customers not wanting to divulge too much information to competitors; 2) corporate policies that prohibit vendor endorsements (the latter is particularly in the case of work with the public sector and other highly bureaucratic organizations despite a strong relationship with the

vendor's internal champion); and 3) the time commitment involved. Even vendors that are able to get customers to participate in case studies or videos are challenged with telling a story that clearly articulates the tangible accomplishments of customers as a direct result of the vendor's solutions. This roadblock often prevents them from fully communicating their distinctiveness in the market.

Despite these challenges, all of the companies interviewed are, at a minimum, leveraging existing customers in peer-to-peer activities behind the scenes, and helping them to secure business. Although external referencing would help with reputation-building, connecting prospective customers with existing customers is nevertheless a valuable way to demonstrate competence, reduce perceived risks, and establish credibility and reputation for both startups and established companies alike. The only apparent downside of relying on peer references is that some companies may discount themselves from the process before it has even begun because they lack sufficient reputation capital.

The two established companies interviewed have a more formalized way of identifying and recruiting potential references than the startups. The use of NPS (Net Promoter Score) is a simple but effective way of flagging potential customer advocates. Both companies rely on a series of templates that communicate the value proposition of external reference opportunities to customers. This is a practice that startup companies can benefit from, making it easier to ensure that the mutual reputational benefits of participating are clear to their customers. Anonymous content should not be discounted either; both startup and established vendors can still create content for public consumption without having to identify customers directly.

Clearly, the benchmark companies' customer-centric content outperformed the Canadian startups on every reputation dimension communicated. However, the purpose for comparing these two vastly different sample groups was to identify which specific characteristics were lagging to provide a framework for best practices. Aligning customer-centric content with company messaging that maps to each reputation pillar can help companies fill the existing voids.

Canadian startups appear to understand the value of transparency as it relates to their products and services, and are moving closer to the 100% standard set by the CRPA companies in communicating their vision and leadership. However, both groups significantly lacked transparency in their social responsibility initiatives. This may be indicative of a lack of resources to pursue social responsibility initiatives; a lack of understanding regarding how social responsibility factors into reputation-building; or perhaps they are indeed partaking in social responsibility initiatives and simply not communicating their efforts. Startups are also closing the financial transparency gap by leveraging mentions of their investment partners. While this level of disclosure is minimal compared to publicly traded disclosure requirements, it does suggest that startups understand the importance of financial transparency to their external stakeholders.

The fact that more than half of the startup companies evaluated have some form of customer-centric content on their web sites suggests that they recognize the importance of external reference customers for enhancing credibility and building reputation. The challenge lies in evolving referencing practices from an ad hoc activity to an integrated strategy that can help organizations achieve their business objectives. The seeds for this must be sown early on in a startup's lifecycle, given the challenges involved with securing external reference customers.

Understanding the role that customer advocacy initiatives play in reputation-building is critical for strategic communicators in Canada. The CRPA members provide a benchmark for best practices that Canadian companies can certainly learn from. However, the fact that most of the organizations analysed are American suggests that Canadian high-tech companies are not as active on this front as they could be. There is an opportunity for both the academic community and practitioners to expand their knowledge and experience in this area.

8 Limitations

This research relied on the case study approach as set out by Yin (2009). Multiple data sources were able to bolster the study's construct validity, including primary (interviews) and secondary research (content analysis of 'found texts') that helped to establish a chain of evidence. To enhance internal validity, commonalities across cases were noted in order to build out a more robust explanation of the findings. External validity was supported using replication logic, which enabled cross-case conclusions to be drawn.

Despite these efforts, there are a number of limitations to this study which must be acknowledged. The companies interviewed do not serve the same market; are geographically dispersed; are in different stages of their lifecycle; and, were represented by various levels of personnel within the organization, from manager to CEO to co-founder. These variable factors mean that the conclusions drawn do not necessarily reflect the full range experiences of other organizations that share one or more of these variables. Generalizations about how Canadian technology companies in the B2B space are leveraging customer references to help build reputation cannot be made given the small sample size. In order to accomplish this, a larger sample size is required as well as more quantitative data (the content analysis helps to provide some level of generalizability, but it too is statistically unreliable given the small sample size).

Finally, given the niche area of study, the findings of this case study may not necessarily be applicable to startups in other industries.

In addition, while the researcher made every effort to remain objective, it should be noted that she works with technology companies on customer advocacy initiatives, including three of the companies featured and analysed on the CRPA list. This familiarity may have influenced her line of questioning and the final interpretation of the data gathered.

Having said all of this, the study does provide some important and new observations about reputation management, highlighting some emerging themes in the area. These can be stated as hypotheses worthy of future, more generalizable research analysis, including an industry-wide quantitative survey of the larger population of technology startup companies in Canada.

9 Conclusions and Future Research

This research addressed two research questions: how established technology companies, particularly in the B2B space, use customer references to enhance their reputations; and how fast-growing Canadian technology companies, particularly in the B2B space, use customer references to help shape their reputations. As the technology sector continues to evolve, customer advocates will play an increasingly important role in companies' reputation-building toolkits. Young companies hoping to grow their businesses must attract the attention of a myriad of stakeholders, including customers. But harnessing the customers themselves as a strategic communication vehicle for building reputation can offer significant returns by demonstrating competence, establishing credibility, and reducing risk in the eyes of prospective customers.

Customer advocacy initiatives take time to develop over the course of a company's lifecycle, but it is important for startups to sow the seeds early on in their customer relationships.

Despite these efforts, there may be instances when customers are not able to publicly extol the virtues of their suppliers. Rather than abandoning efforts in these cases, startups would be wise to collect data that can be used to create anonymous content pieces, or to bolster existing content marketing efforts. When coupled with peer-to-peer reference activities, startups may be able to effectively harness the value of customer references on both ends of the spectrum.

This formative research is one of the only Canadian studies that examines the topic from a strategic communications perspective. There are several potential avenues for future study. In keeping with the case study method, it would be interesting to conduct a similar, but more in-depth study of a single organization that has a significant customer presence on its web site. In addition, a survey of an organization's customers could provide some deeper insight on the motivations behind acting as a customer advocate for a technology vendor (or not); a specific area of interest is the impact on the participating customer's organizational and personal reputation. On a longer-term basis, tracking the evolution of a startup—or several startups concurrently—in tandem with their customer advocacy initiatives could also provide more tangible lessons for up-and-coming startups.

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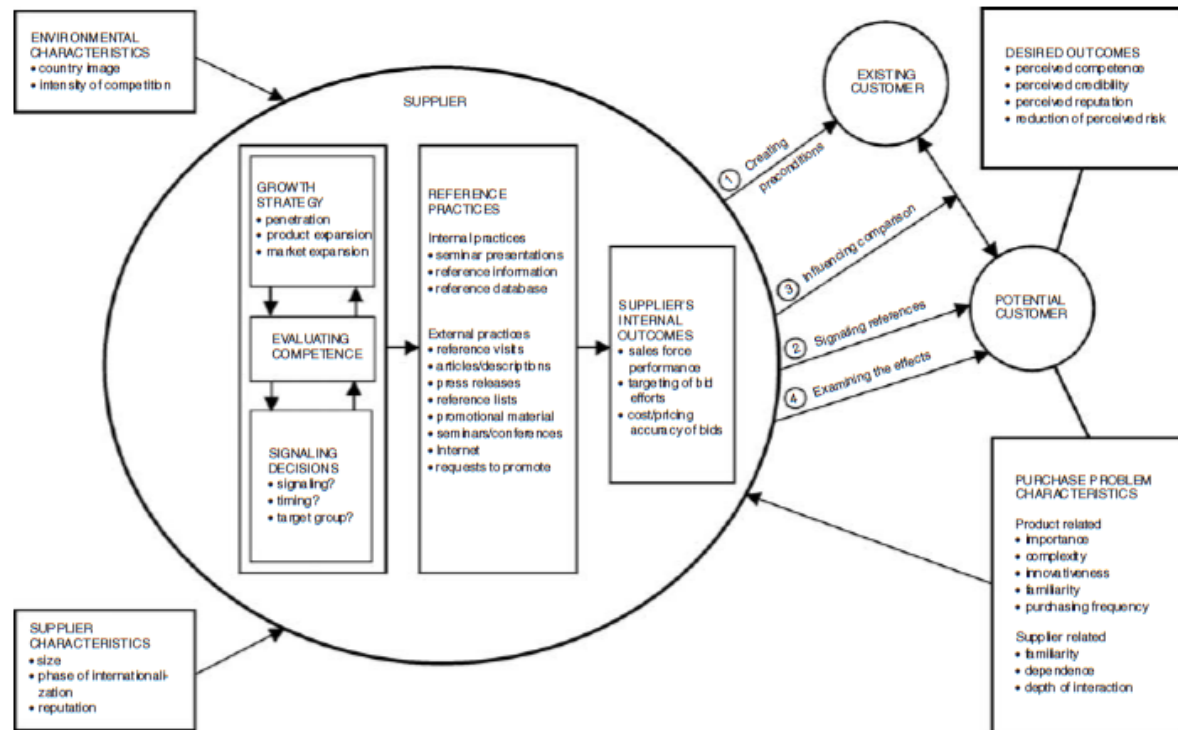
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11 Appendices

11.1 Appendix A: Salminen & Moller's Normative Theory of Referencing



(Salminen & Moller, 2006)

*11.2 Appendix B: Content Analysis of Customer Reference Professionals Association (CRPA)
(Summary of Findings)*

Company/Ranking	Visibility (Are there customer references on the website?)	Distinctiveness (Does story feature elements of Triple A model: Ability, Activity, Accomplishment?)	Authenticity (Are stories aligned to core mission, vision, and/or values? Include where possible.	Transparency (Products & Services, Financial Performance, Vision/Leadership, Social Responsibility, Workplace Environment); contact info	Consistency (Are the messages across all customer reference assets consistent? Do they align with core vision/mission?)
Callidus Software www.calliduscloud.com	<p>Yes – page full of brand-name logos, A-Z. States that it has more than 2,500 customers worldwide, across industries. Regular press releases announcing customers. Case studies buried in “Resources” page; include anonymous case studies and</p> <p>Recently established a Customer Community: “A Forum to Collaborate, Share, and Access Knowledge on CallidusCloud Services and Products”</p>	<p>Ability: Yes (although just at boilerplate level) Activity: Yes (i.e. how customers will use the suite) Accomplishment: Yes (in case studies, where possible)</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>CallidusCloud’s mission is to revolutionize business processes and align key parts of the business to revenue through software that delivers increased productivity, greater customer engagement and top-line results.</p>	<p>PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes; exec bios online SR: No WE: Yes, i.e. “Interested in joining our world-class team?”</p>	<p>Yes: press releases sometimes just announce the customer name, and move straight to boilerplate. For those with customer quotes, align with mission. i.e.: “As a fast-growing company, it is essential that our sales organization is geared for success. We need to be able to manage commissions and incentives seamlessly. Not only does CallidusCloud have the functionality and experience to improve our commission’s process, but its broad Lead to Money suite is ideal for a company on our growth trajectory. A fast-growing company in a competitive market needs to onboard sales teams quickly, maximize their effectiveness and move leads quickly through to conversion. With its ability to drive efficiency throughout the entire process, we expect CallidusCloud to be essential to our future growth and success”</p>

					Quote from Lenovo release: "The Lead to Money Suite gives us best-in-class solutions to enhance our key sales processes without the time and cost of stitching together multiple point solutions, from multiple vendors. Having one suite will provide us with critical, data-driven insights that will further optimize performance on a global scale."
Salesforce www.salesforce.com	Yes: on home page, 2 stories are featured: BRP (links to video) and Ottawa Senators (case study); entire Customer page with logos that link to success stories and videos	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes (i.e. 25% productivity increase for Ottawa Senators reps	Yes Initial vision when founded 15 years ago: "to reinvent CRM in the cloud." Supporting point: "Industries and companies of all sizes can connect to their customers in a whole new way using the latest innovations in mobile, social, and cloud technology to connect with their customers like never before." "Our mission is to help our customers go faster" – CEO @Dreamforce 2014 (video)	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes, exec bios SR: "...put aside 1% of our equity, 1% of our employee's time, and 1% of our product, and formed the Salesforce Foundation...creating a new philanthropic model for all to follow." WE: Yes: Forbes, Glassdoor, Fortune recognitions; includes a list of 5 reasons to join team, including "philanthropic culture with 6 paid days off to volunteer"	Yes: BRP video closed with "Connect to your customers in a whole new way."
Amdocs	End-customer journey video on home page (anecdotal); Customer page lists customers, and then links to CRP assets (quotes, press releases, success stories); Customer experience collection (video) Aio Wireless, Amtel, AT&T, Telefonica, Reliance,	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes (in video "Success by Numbers" offers stats such as "billing time down 20%", attributed to a Tier 2 European service provider"	Yes Simplify experience; harness data; stay ahead; be efficient	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Cannot find bios, etc. SR: Yes (CSR Report available on web site) WE: Yes (growth opportunities for every stage of career); values statement	Yes. Very impressive, since service providers are typically not easy to do reference activities with. Overarching msg: Harnessing data to simplify processes to enable better customer experience

	Cricket Wireless, Rogers, Ono, TMO, Vodafone				Success stories are in video format
Temenos	Slider: Claims that its customers experience 32% higher return on assets; Customer page: success stories, videos	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes (i.e. ABN AMRO case study cites “97% straight through processing rate.”	Yes To rid the banking industry of its legacy software.	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec and board bios) SR: Yes (CSR page on web site) WE: Yes	Yes (i.e. Metro Bank’s reduction in IT hardware, software spend)
Axway	Yes – customer page with logos and success stories	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes (i.e. ROI within 2 years in the Vattenfall story)	Yes Giving customers the power to govern any flow of data within and across the edge of the enterprise, unlocking the tremendous value this can bring to business interactions	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec and board bios) SR: No WE: Yes (“I am Axway”)	Yes. Customer quotes reflect the message that the ability to leverage data is critical to their businesses. High degree of risk if something goes wrong.
IQ Navigator	Yes – case study section on Resources page, but need to fill in form to download it. Dated Aug 2013. Cites “over 5.2 million users” on web page, but no specific customers listed. Have an IQN Community for customers and partners to network (actual event).	Ability: N/A Activity: N/A Accomplishment: N/A	N/A	PS: Yes FP: Nothing recent (2008 release announcing 52% increase in revenue) VL: Yes (exec and board bios) SR: Yes (pics at Run for the Cure; team building a house for rescue mission) WE: Yes	N/A
GSI Commerce (now eBay Enterprise)	Yes: Press release announcing banner year: “...the company secured 1,015 new client wins and 1,711 renewals and extensions with premier brands and retailers in 2014.” Customers listed include: Ace Hardware (quoted), British Airways, Shoe Carnival (quoted), Finlux, and others.	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes (i.e. Ace experienced 20% increase in ecommerce sales”	Yes To be “at the center of a global ecosystem of digital commerce partners and developers. So we can empower your business to engage with and sell more to today’s hyper-connected consumer.”	PS: Yes FP: An eBay Inc company, so publicly traded. Lists 2013 revenue. VL: Exec bios listed SR: Via parent company’s Social Innovation program (charitable giving, green commerce, etc) WE: Yes	Yes
Dassault Systems	Yes – customer page features short blurb on customer problem/solution/results with a video	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes 3DEXPERIENCE powers the next-generation capabilities that drive today’s Experience Economy	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec team bios) SR: Yes (environmental reports) WE: Yes	Yes

Fico	Yes – logos of big-name brands like BMW, eBay, Walmart, Sprint, etc. Press release with plug from Obama; guest blogs; and customer case studies (including anonymous ones)	Ability: N/A Activity: N/A Accomplishment: N/A	Yes Helps businesses in 80+ countries make better decisions that drive higher levels of growth, profitability and customer satisfaction	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (execs listed with pics, but no bios) SR: Could not find WE: Yes (even includes testimonial from an employee); info on culture	N/A: To access case studies, you must fill in contact info in order to obtain the content.
Hybris	Customer page with logos. Cites serving “We now serve over 500 customers, including some of the most-recognized companies in the world: global B2B brands as well as consumer brands”; some case studies on Resources page	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes See this story Tommy Bahama press release	Yes hybris helps businesses on every continent sell more goods, services and digital content through every touch point, channel and device.	PS: Yes FP: No (it’s an SAP company so SAP reports on its companies’ performance) VL: Yes (exec bios) SR: No WE: Yes	Yes
GHX	Case studies featured on Industry Resources page; Videos	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes Mission: Global Healthcare Exchange (GHX) enables better patient care and billions in savings for the healthcare community by maximizing automation, efficiency and accuracy of business processes.	PS: Yes FP: No (private company) VL: Yes (exec bios) SR: No WE: Yes	Yes (via videos). To access case studies, you must fill in contact info in order to obtain the content.
RWD (acquired by GP Strategies)	Customer success stories tab on Resources page, but not actual customer stories; they are industry-specific stories with no customer mentions. Press releases announcing customer wins (named and anonymous)	Ability: N/A Activity: N/A Accomplishment: N/A	Yes GP Strategies’ mission is to solve business challenges by providing the expertise and solutions needed to attain ultimate performance results.	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Thought leader bios and contact info ; leadership images and titles (but no bios) SR: No WE: Yes (includes logo of award, “Top Places to work 2013”)	N/A. Announcements seem to be driven by disclosure requirements as a public company.
Colt	Yes – list of customer case studies on Customer page; general video with no customer names, but anecdotal	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes i.e. “The space efficiency features in Colt’s colocation facilities allowed us to reduce the number of racks by 40% and save over €15,000 on annual data centre costs.”	Yes ...to be the information delivery platform for European businesses	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec and board bios) SR: Yes WE: Yes	Yes

Manhattan Associates	Yes. Customer page features four distinct areas, including pages and pages of case studies from companies like Adidas and Guess. Portraits in Leadership videos . Customer community via Supply Chain Leaders program. Benefits touted include enhancing “internal and external visibility of your vision and success, heighten reputations in the financial community, generate new business, and recruit top employees.”	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes (i.e. David’s Bridal video 65% - 98% on-time delivery metric)	Yes We help our customers successfully manage accelerating and fluctuating market demands, as well as master the increasing complexity and volatility of their local and global supply chains.	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec bios) SR: Yes. Also, points gained in Supply Chain Leaders program can be redeemed for charitable donation of customer’s choice. WE: Yes. Includes employee profiles.	Yes – strong metrics to support claims.
Progress Software	Customer page features logos that link to success stores (sometimes including video). Also has user community.	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes We help them (customers) turn their ideas into business reality through the rapid development, deployment, and management of data driven applications.	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec and board bios) SR: Yes WE: Yes. Culture and values communicated via flipbook	Yes
Safenet	Reference: “For over 25 years, Fortune 500 global corporations and government agencies have turned to SafeNet to secure and protect their most valuable data assets and intellectual property”. Cite more than 25,000 customers in 100+ countries, including Citigroup, Banamex, Bank of America, Gap, Netflix, Starbucks, Kaiser Permanente, Cisco, Dell, and Hewlett-Packard. Also, logos at bottom of home page.	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Weak...most case studies do not have Results section.	N/A	PS: Yes FP: Yes: “Founded in 1983 with revenues in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and under private ownership” VL: Cannot find exec listing or bios SR: No WE: Yes	N/A
CDS Global	Yes, but you must fill in a form to access the full case study.	Ability: N/A Activity: N/A Accomplishment: N/A	N/A Powering elite operations worldwide; helping customers to	PS: Yes FP: Yes (via parent company, Hearst) VL: Yes SR: Yes (i.e. United Way donation)	N/A

			connect with their customers; and streamlining and simplifying operations	WE: Yes (Why Work for Us? Page)	
AllScripts	Yes – customers announced via press releases (latest two include customer quotes). Also, Healthcare IT News announced best hospital IT departments, and AllScripts took results and identified which are their customers . Features case studies, but need to use search function to find; some links not working	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: N/A	N/A At Allscripts, our shared CLEAR values underpin everything that we do for our clients and our company as a whole. These values promote an inclusive, supportive and collaborative culture that allows us to be leaders in the healthcare industry. Our CLEAR values set us apart from the competition and drive the behaviors and actions that deliver results. When we incorporate these values into our work it creates a foundation for innovation and world-class outcomes. -Client Experience -Leadership -Extraordinary People -Aspire -Results	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (bios on web site) SR: N/A WE: Yes	N/A
Kronos	Yes – customer spotlight page with customer stories organized by solution categories.	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes (i.e. Department sees \$50,000 in overtime savings)	Yes We help organizations across a variety of industries manage their most valuable, and expensive, strategic asset — their workforce. How? By giving them the tools they need to help them control	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (bios on web site) SR: Yes (Corporate Giving page) WE: Yes	Yes

			labor costs, minimize compliance risk, and improve workforce productivity.		
Vocera	Yes – customer quote prominently displayed on home page. Customer page features logos that link to success videos/stories.	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes Vocera provides integrated, intelligent communication to instantly connect people in mobile, mission-critical environments	PS: Yes FP: Yes (Publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec and board bios) SR: Yes (employee volunteerism, giving, and policy around conflict minerals) WE: Yes	Yes
NetApp	Yes – extensive Customer Showcase page featuring customers like NFL, RP Data, Symantec, etc. Stories, videos, press releases. Includes anonymous stories where necessary	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes To help our customers achieve the outcomes that matter most to them.	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (bios on web site) SR: Yes (including greenhouse gas footprint), and global corporate citizenship work WE: Yes, #3 on the Great Place to Work Institute's list of the "World's Best Multinational Workplaces 2014"	Yes
Cornerstone	Yes – customer quotes on Relationships page from Visa, Symantec, etc. Quote from Symantec : “ <i>Your reputation is once again confirmed and we very much appreciate your willingness and ability on this project!!!</i> ”	Ability: N/A Activity: N/A Accomplishment: N/A	Yes In our 6 years, we continually strive to deliver emerging IT solutions and extend superior service offerings in our focus solutions. Our customers and business partner’s success is paramount. In the pursuit of this goal, we embrace our faith, family and integrity in our employee and business relationships.	PS: Yes FP: N/A VL: Yes (exec bios on web site) SR: N/A WE: Invitation to connect on LinkedIn for recent career opps	N/A – Site is not updated
Syngy	Yes – both named (i.e. McKesson) and anonymous. Logos of companies on Clients page, categorized by industry. Includes brief snapshots i.e. BlueCross	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes To help our clients transform the way that they manage sales and sales operations—by	PS: Yes FP: N/A VL: Names and photos of exec team on web site; no bios SR: N/A WE: Yes	Yes

	BlueShield. Contents page also features these stories.		providing them with agility, innovation, and continuous improvement.		
Cisco	Yes. Also, Cisco Champions Program and Cisco Designated VIP program take advocacy to a new level. Case studies page has thousands of assets.	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes Helps companies seize the opportunities of tomorrow by proving that amazing things can happen when you connect the previously unconnected.	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec AND senior leadership team bios) SR: Yes; features its own website: http://csr.cisco.com/ WE: Yes; awards for top place to work	Yes
Rosetta Stone	Yes - case studies on UN, US Ski and Snowboard Association, Academy for International Education, etc. Video reviews from individual users.	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes Our company's mission is founded on expanding communication and understanding on a global scale.	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec bios) SR: Yes, including supply chain expectations WE: Yes	Yes
Silkroad Technology	Yes – Customer Success page with logos that link to customer case study videos and stories	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes We're passionate about creating a vision of success for talent management and human resource professionals and their organizations.	PS: Yes FP: No (private) VL: Yes (exec bios on web site) SR: No WE: Yes	Yes
Alteryx	Yes – includes Customer Community and Customer page with logos that link to customer success videos, slides, and webinars	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	N/A	PS: Yes FP: VL: Yes (exec and board bios on web site) SR: WE: Yes, includes testimonials from current employees	N/A
FieldGlass	Yes – case studies from Cisco, Teradata right through to anonymous ones (i.e. an oil and gas company, etc.). However, must submit an online request to access full content. Online customer community called FieldGlass User Social Exchange.	Ability: N/A Activity: N/A Accomplishment: N/A	Yes Our success is measured by yours. Your ROI is our top priority. By enabling workforce visibility, we can help you cut costs, increase worker quality, mitigate compliance	PS: Yes FP: Recently acquired by SAP, which is publicly traded VL: Yes (exec bios on web site) SR: Yes (pics of bike testing for a local charity) WE: Yes	N/A

			risks and create a more efficient contingent workforce program.		
VMware	Yes – online program overview and self-nomination , customer videos and success stories. Customer stats, logos, and quotes on Why Choose VMware page	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes VMware's vision is to empower people and organizations by radically simplifying IT through virtualization software.	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec bios on web site) SR: Yes (VMware Foundation) – “We are all citizen philanthropists” WE: Yes	Yes
Commvault	Yes – Voice of the Customer page with videos and case studies.	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes The company's vision and strategic mission is to be the leading provider of singular information management solutions, ensuring high-performance data protection and simplified management of complex storage networks. ...	PS: Yes FP: Yes (publicly traded) VL: Yes (exec team bios) SR: No WE: Yes	Yes

11.3 Appendix C: Content Analysis of Startup Companies (Summary of Findings)

Company/Ranking	Visibility (Are there customer references on the website?)	Distinctiveness (Does story feature elements of Triple A model: Ability, Activity, Accomplishment?)	Authenticity (Are stories aligned to core mission, vision, and/or values? Include where possible.	Transparency (Products & Services, Financial Performance, Vision/Leadership, Social Responsibility, Workplace Environment)	Consistency (Are the messages across all customer reference assets consistent? Do they align with core vision/mission?)
Affinio www.affin.io	No	N/A	N/A Affinio's goal is to find the tribes within any social audience and provide strategists with the deep psychographic insights they need to immerse themselves in the culture of each niche community.	PS: Yes FP: Lists investors VL: Yes SR: No WE: No	N/A
AnalyzeRE www.analyze.com	No	N/A	N/A Imagine making strategic decisions in real-time against your current portfolio. Imagine seeing several routes to fulfill your plan. That is the power of Analyze Re. Built from years of industry experience, the performance and scalability of our technology is making the war on deep data analysis one you can win.	PS: Yes FP: Investments by BDC communicated via news stories VL: Stated on site SR: No WE: No	N/A
Atomic Reach www.atomicreach.com	No	N/A	N/A	PS: Yes FP: Press release announcing seed financing in 2012 VL: Yes SR: No WE: No	N/A
Cloud Dynamics www.clouddynamics.com	No – but does state that “...solutions are in use worldwide in a	N/A	N/A	PS: Yes FP: Lists investors; Branham site	N/A

	wide variety of industries including finance, education, government, media, retail, manufacturing, healthcare, technology and others.” Also features page of logos of partners (many of which have high visibility).			includes revenues from 2012 and 2013 VL: Exec team bios SR: No WE: No	
Exo U www.exou.com	Yes – press release about deployments in Panama	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: No – only discusses that deployment is complete but not customer results	Yes Our mission is to enable enterprises and educational institutions to securely manage information and empower people to communicate their best ideas.	PS: Yes FP: Yes (includes revenue from Panama deal) VL: Exec team bios SR: No WE: Yes, includes “We value teamwork, openness, honesty, diversity, innovation, passion and new ideas.”	Yes
Fabric Engine www.fabricengine.com	Yes – press release about three new deals featuring quotes from customer execs; 2 customer videos	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	N/A	PS: Yes FP: Yes – press release announcing an investor VL: No (founders names listed in boilerplate only) SR: No WE: No	N/A
Finmaven www.finmaven.com	No	N/A	N/A Our Mission: To help decision makers use the power of social.	PS: Yes FP: Mention that company is funded by strategic investors in job openings. VL: Team is listed SR: No WE: No	N/A
Granify www.granify.com	Yes – testimonial on home page; link to Case Studies page, featuring 1 story with a note that more will come soon	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes – supported by metrics	N/A	PS: Yes FP: Logos of investors backing company VL: Team is listed SR: N/A WE: Yes – “We believe that a culture of happiness, balance, and collaboration in a fun environment leads to a world class company”	N/A – no mission, vision, or values communicated
InfraDog www.infradog.com	Yes – testimonials from customers; logos of customers and partners on home page	Ability: No Activity: No Accomplishment: Vague references i.e. “who would have thought we would manage our servers without a desktop or laptop” but no hard metrics	Yes “Our company’s vision is to lead the charge away from traditional computer based IT management replacing it with IT	PS: Yes (also links to YouTube channel featuring product videos) FP: No VL: No SR: No WE: No	Yes – reinforces value of mobile to manage IT

			management on Mobile.”		
Introhive www.introhive.com	No customers listed, but lists logos of companies its technology is integrated with	N/A	N/A Introhive helps companies turn relationships into revenues.	PS: Yes FP: Press releases discuss funding, including from Salesforce VL: Yes SR: No WE: Yes	N/A
Invici Technologies (now Tactalis) www.tactalis.com	No	N/A	N/A “...help people who are blind or visually impaired to explore, create and share images and digital media that they cannot see.”	PS: Yes FP: No VL: No SR: No WE: No	N/A
Login Radius www.loginradius.com	Yes – logos and testimonials of customers on home page;	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: No (no mention of results)	Yes “...committed to transforming and simplifying the way users connect to the web and mobile apps and we won't stop until the entire web is social”	PS: Yes FP: Logos of investors listed VL: Yes – team members and exec bios listed SR: No WE: Yes - Come join a team where decisions are made quickly and everyone's opinion is heard. Want a career that has high potential for growth and learning in a fun, up-beat start-up atmosphere? LoginRadius could be a great fit for you! LoginRadius is the fastest growing social platform and our team is growing equally as fast! Want to be a part of that?	Yes – clarity and simplicity of solution
Mnubo www.mnubo.com	Yes – logos of select customers on home page; testimonial quote from customer	Ability: Yes Activity: No Accomplishment: Vague – no metrics; very general statement (in testimonial)	Yes We are data enthusiasts and cloud experts passionate about making IoT smarter. Mnubers are on a constant quest to transform 'connected things' into 'smart objects	PS: Yes FP: No VL: Yes; bios for exec team members SR: Yes: Active in Movember campaign, with CTA for donations. WE: Yes: “At mnubo we cultivate a fun-filled startup culture where our team of thinkers, designers and technologists combine their unique blend of smarts, dedication and passion to innovate solutions for the IoT.”	Yes – testimonial message is in line with vision

Obero Solutions www.oberosolutions.com	Yes – client testimonials listed. Of the 5 listed, three were anonymous i.e. Senior IT manager, Large US Auto Parts Manufacturer. Also, select client logos listed on separate “Select Obero Clients” page	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: General, but not metrics i.e. “Without the help of Obero, we would have had a very challenging year.”	Yes The cornerstone of our philosophy is simple – our success as a company is defined by our customers’ success. We are a team of professional consultants passionate about solutions we deliver and committed to every customer’s success. Obero is a trusted consulting shop that will become your long term partner supporting and enabling you in all initiatives in the space of Corporate Performance Management and Business Analytics.	PS: Yes FP: No VL: Names and titles of exec team listed; no bios SR: No WE: Yes: Career page has “Why Work for Obero?”	Yes
People Insight www.peopleinsight.com	Yes – logos on home page; link to video testimonial on YT from National Gallery of Canada; customer success stories under Customer Success tab; customer testimonials on home page too. Good mix of name-brad companies (Softchoice) and smaller local companies.	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Vague; no metrics. In success stories, Outcomes are not quantifiable.	Yes Our goal is to help position our clients so they can inform, influence, make a difference and stand out in their organizations. We don’t expect you to only take our word for it... - and then features two customer testimonials, with pics, below.	PS: Yes FP: No VL: Yes: Exec team bios on site SR: No WE: Yes: “...we love what we do and we’re always looking for people to share the joy.”	Yes
Procima Experts www.procimaexperts.com	No	N/A	N/A “...to optimize the use of data towards meeting and exceeding business objectives.”	PS: Yes FP: No VL: Exec team bios SR: No WE: No	N/A
reelyActive www.reelyactive.com	No, but 3 partner logos listed	N/A	N/A	PS: Yes FP: No	N/A

				VL: Yes SR: No WE: No	
RtTech Software www.rttechsoftware.com	No	N/A	N/A We want to help companies use their data to give them valuable information in real-time to help them increase their production volume and quality, while reducing their costs and ultimately improving their performance.	PS: Yes FP: No VL: CEO and CTO bios listed SR: No WE: No	N/A
Seamless Mobile Health www.seamless.md	Yes: Customer testimonial on home page	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes, results in being more “connected” but no specific metrics	Yes We are on a mission to advance patient care and improve health outcomes by making health data and education more accessible, meaningful and connected.	PS: Yes 11.3.1 FP: Yes (mentions that it’s funded by “some of Canada’s most prominent executives, investors and digital health entrepreneurs...” VL: Yes; exec team and advisor bios on site SR: No WE: Yes, mention that culture is “fun and relaxed” on Careers page	Yes
Slyce www.slyce.it	Yes. Nieman Marcus video is featured prominently on the home page. Under the Investors tab, states that “Slyce is currently working with a growing list of fortune 1000 brands and companies as well as multiple innovative developers.”	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes (mentions 95% accuracy of trial in eMarketer story)	Yes Why did we create Slyce? The 'Holy Grail' for Retailers is to be there at a shopper's moment of inspiration — simply put, Slyce makes that possible	PS: Yes FP: Yes – publicly traded on TSX (but newly listed) VL: Exec team listed with bios SR: No WE: No	Yes
Smart Employee Benefits www.seb-inc.com	Brands & Partners tab included on site. Videos and overviews of partners; no customers listed.	N/A	N/A Corporate values listed as: Innovation, Integrity,	PS: Yes FP: Yes; publicly traded VL: Yes; email and phone # provided for CEO and VP	N/A

			Learning and Risk Taking, and Creating Stakeholder Value	Marketing; exec team bios SR: No WE: No	
SweetIQ www.sweetiq.com	Yes: FedEx, Dominos listed on home page with quantifiable results; logos of customers on home page (including BDC, McDonalds, Microsoft); customer testimonials	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes Since 2010, we've been helping our clients grow their sales by increasing their online findability, giving them the tools to manage their online presence and ultimately converting online searchers to in-store shoppers.	PS: Yes FP: No VL: No SR: No WE: No	Yes
Thalmic Labs www.thalmic.com	Yes: Features 1 video of world famous DJ using Myo product; quote from Steve Wozniak	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	N/A	PS: Yes FP: List of investors VL: Yes, exec team bios SR: No WE: Yes, Career page features "Why Work at Thalmic" Q&A	N/A
Vena Solutions www.venasolutions.com	Yes: Customer logos on home page; customer testimonial on home page; Case studies, video testimonials, and press releases; Clients page with list of logos	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes	Yes At Vena, we believe there's a better way to manage your company's data and processes. We give you the control and security you need but let you and your team stay in native Excel.	PS: Yes FP: No VL: Yes, exec team bios SR: No WE: Yes	Yes
WestonExpressions (now called Linkett Consumer Engagement) www.westonexpressions.co	Yes: Logos on the home page; 3 case studies; customer testimonial	Ability: Yes Activity: Yes Accomplishment: Yes (including metrics)	Yes We are closing the gap between offline and online analytics to mutually enhance the marketers and consumers experience.	PS: Yes FP: Investors listed VL: Yes; exec team bios and email, LinkedIn and Twitter contact info SR: No WE: No – cannot find careers page	

11.4 Appendix D: Interview Guide for Startup Companies

1. Background

- a. Please provide a brief overview of your company.
- b. What is the company's mission and vision statement?
- c. Tell me about your role and responsibility in the company.
- d. How would you describe your corporate culture?

2. Customer Landscape

- a. Approximately how many customers do you have?
- b. What is the nature of your interaction with customers?
- c. If I asked your customers about the company's reputation, what do you think they would say?
- d. To what extent does your company rely on customers to help close business?

3. Defining Customer Advocacy

- a. What does the term "customer references" mean in your company? What types of activities come to mind?
- b. To what degree do you use customers as advocates externally, for marketing and PR purposes?
- c. Do you have a formal customer reference program in place?
 - i. If yes, how is this operationalized (i.e. specialized database, integration with CRM tools, etc.)
 - ii. If not, do you plan to implement one?
- d. Walk me through the process of securing a reference customer for marketing and PR activities.
- e. Describe any hurdles you face in securing customer references. How have you overcome them?
- f. Approximately how many of your customers are publicly reference-able (i.e. would be willing to speak to the press on your behalf, or have their logo displayed on your web site, etc.)?
- g. In your opinion, what is the value of having customers engage with you on external reference activities?
- h. What is the main reason customers agree to be publicly reference-able? What is the value to them, and how is this positioned?
- i. On the flip side, what is the main reason customers do not agree to public reference activities?
- j. What is the impact of customer references on your other key stakeholders? (employees, investors, community at large, etc.)
- k. Ideally, what are the key messages you'd like your customers to communicate about your company?

4. Role of Customer Advocacy in Building Reputation

- a. To what degree do you think customers as advocates can help drive visibility for your company?

- b. To what degree do you think customers as advocates can help communicate your distinctiveness to the market?
- c. To what degree do you think customers as advocates can help communicate your company's vision and leadership?
- d. To what degree do you think customers as advocates can help communicate your trustworthiness as a company?
- e. To what degree are customer reference initiatives and successes shared across business functions (i.e. PR, marketing, sales, and business development)? In your opinion, are there any areas for improvement?

5. Conclusion

- a. Is there anything you'd like to add about the role of customers in helping startup companies build their reputations?

11.5 Appendix E: Interview Guide for Established Companies

1. Background

- a. Please provide a brief overview of your company.
- b. What is the company's mission and vision statement?
- c. Tell me about your role and responsibility in the company.
- d. How would you describe your corporate culture?

2. Customer Landscape

- a. Approximately how many customers do you have?
- b. What is the nature of your interaction with customers?
- c. If I asked your customers about the company's reputation, what do you think they would say?
- d. To what extent does your company rely on customers to help close business?

3. Defining Customer Advocacy

- a. What does the term "customer references" mean in your company? What types of activities come to mind?
- b. To what degree do you use customers as advocates externally, for marketing and PR purposes?
- c. How is your reference program operationalized? (i.e. specialized database, integration with CRM tools, etc.)
- d. Walk me through the process of securing an external reference customer.
- e. Describe any hurdles you face in securing customer references. How have you overcome them?
- f. Approximately how many of your customers are publicly reference-able?
- g. In your opinion, what is the value of having customers engage with you on external reference activities?
- h. What is the main reason customers agree to be publicly reference-able? What is the value to them, and how is this positioned?
- i. On the flip side, what is the main reason customers do not agree to public reference activities?
- j. What is the impact of customer references on your other key stakeholders? (employees, investors, community at large, etc)
- k. Ideally, what are the key messages you'd like your customers to communicate about your company?

4. Role of Customer Advocacy in Building Reputation

- a. How do you measure the outcomes of your customer advocacy efforts?
- b. Are outcomes tied to the company's financial objectives?
- c. Does your company measure reputation specifically in any way?
 - i. If so, how do customer advocacy efforts factor into this?
 - ii. If not, do you know why not?

- d. To what degree are your customer advocates helping drive visibility for your company?
- e. To what degree are your customer advocates helping communicate your distinctiveness to the market?
- f. To what degree are your customer advocates helping communicate your company's vision and leadership?
- g. To what degree are your customer advocates helping communicate your trustworthiness as a company?
- h. To what degree are customer reference initiatives and successes shared across functions? In your opinion, are there any areas for improvement?

5. Conclusion

- a. If you had three tips for companies looking to build a strategic customer advocacy program, what would they be?
- b. Is there anything you'd like to add about the role of customers in helping startup companies build their reputations?