

Thriving in a World of Online Reviews

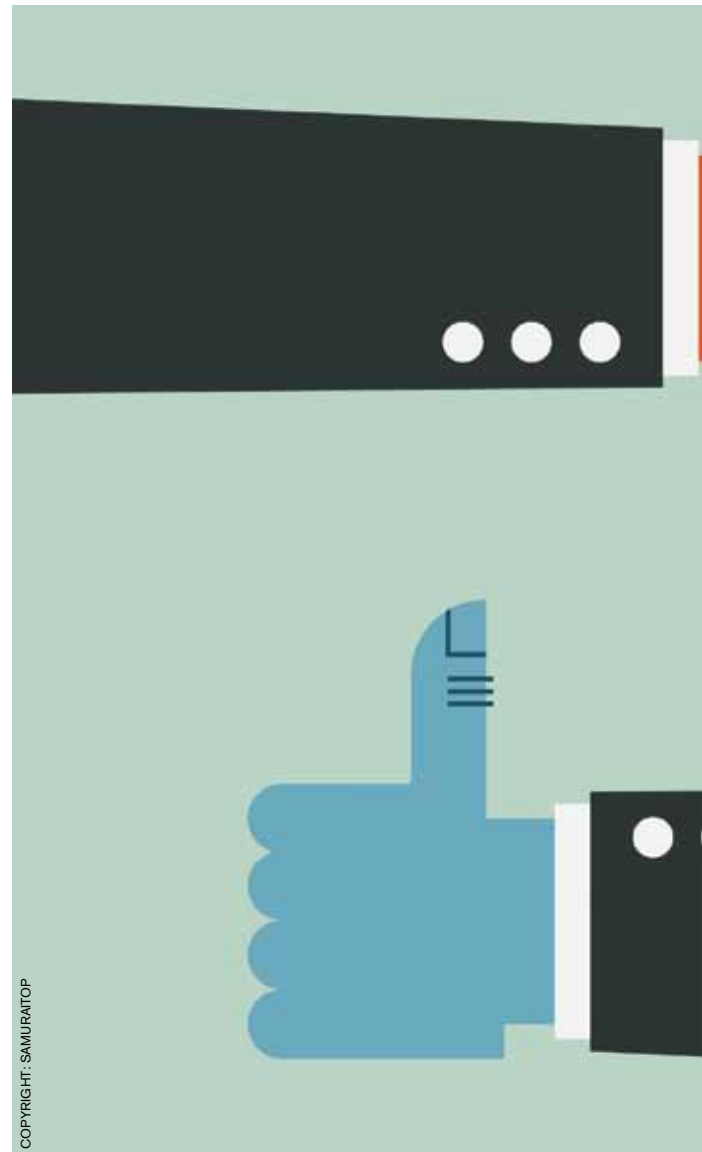
Tips on managing & responding to positive & negative online reviews

By Shannon Good

With the rise of social media, word-of-mouth has spread to the digital world, and business owners cannot ignore its influence. The statistics tell the story:

- Eighty-one percent of shoppers conduct online research before buying.
- Eighty-eight percent of searchers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations.
- Eighty-five percent say they read up to 10 reviews.
- Seventy-two percent say positive reviews help them trust a business more if there are multiple reviews to read and if the reviews seem authentic.

Businesses need to constantly encourage their customers to share their experiences online for two main reasons. First, as the above statistic indicates, online shoppers read up to 10 reviews before forming an opinion, and second, it helps increase the number of positive reviews versus negative reviews. Everyone will receive at least one negative review at some point—the important thing is knowing what to do when it happens and how to use both bad



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and good reviews to help your company grow.

Whether you are a business owner or an employee who takes pride in your work, no one likes to be accused of being dishonest or unfair. Four words define the intensity of most reviews: emotion, expectations, perceptions and communication.

Usually when there is a negative review, one or all of these terms are the foundation of the complaint and your reply. Let's discuss the dos and don'ts when replying to online reviews—bad and good.

What to Do

The following are the top five dos for responding to reviews.

Apologize. This is the hardest one to get past, but an apology can go a long way. It also can calm the emotions. If you do not feel an apology is required or realistic, however, acknowledge the complaint and appreciate the input, letting the reviewer know you are taking action or investigating the situation.

Use the review as an opportunity. Communicate in your reply why the situation happened. Be sure to keep it short and to the point. Many times the root of the problem is that your company's policies, operations, timelines or costs are different from the customer's expectations or perceptions. Communication alleviates many of these misunderstandings. The review also may provide insight into patterns or red flags you were not aware of, for example, a broken system, a concerning employee or faulty equipment.

Respond to all reviewers. Good or bad, be sure to always reply. If it is a reply to a negative review, trust that the other readers will read between the lines and judge the situation based on the response. If you only respond to bad reviews, readers will not see that you appreciate reviewers' time and view the business as being on the defense versus caring about their feedback.

Use proper spelling, grammar and punctuation. Emotion can blind the reviewer and the company to obvious errors, which can hurt the credibility of the review and the reply. As a business owner, be sure to have a neutral party read the reply before posting to proofread for spelling, grammar and punctuation errors as well as clarity of the message you are trying to get across.

Monitor other sites and watch for a reply to your reply. Do not engage efforts to spark an online brawl. If there is a reply to your reply, end the conversation with, "Feel free to contact me during business hours to discuss further." If the reviewer has posted his or her experience on multiple review sites, copying and pasting your original reply is OK, just be sure to monitor and stay consistent.

What Not to Do

The following are the top five don'ts for responding

to reviews.

React. Emotions can be strong, especially if an irate customer posts a negative review. Take a minute or even a day before drafting your reply to remove the raw, defensive emotion. Imagine a face-to-face scenario in your place of business and react as you would if other customers were around. Again, ask someone you trust but who is removed from the situation to proofread the reply before posting.

Duplicate replies. Unless there are multiple reviews by the same person about the same situation, never duplicate a reply. Always personalize and customize the reply so it is seen by other readers as authentic.

Pay for reviews. A thank you goes a long way, even in a negative review—for example, "Thank you for taking the time to make us aware of the situation." Also, ask the staff to encourage feedback from customers during and after the sale. If your company makes it a policy to pay for endorsements, be sure to publish that policy on your website and encourage the endorser to disclose the connection via a disclaimer or hashtag at the end of the endorsement. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has strict endorsement guidelines that can be found on its website.

Ignore reviews. If there is a negative review that has not been replied to in 12 months, let it go. Encouraging more reviews will push down the negative review. Consistently replying to reviews going forward will show readers that reviews have become an important part of your business.

Worry or obsess. This too shall pass. The best way to move past a negative review is to encourage more positive reviews. Make posting reviews easy and convenient, with links in your email signature and in the header and footer of the company website that automatically open your company's profiles on review sites.

Many business owners tend to think reviews are only posted on social media sites. There are a variety of categories to consider where profiles about your company may have been started, including:

- Search engines: Google, Bing, Yahoo, Ask, AOL
- Directories: Google Places, Yahoo Local, Superpages.com, Local.com, YP
- Blogs: Tumblr, Blogger, WordPress.com, TypePad
- Content: Metacafe, Flickr, YouTube, Picasa, SlideShare
- Reviews and recommendations: Better Business Bureau, Angie's List, Yelp, TrustLink, Citysearch, TripAdvisor
- Social media: Facebook, Twitter, Zvents, Tumblr, Ning
- Location-based services: Foursquare, Shopkick
- Deals: Zagat, Groupon, LivingSocial, Yipit

These profiles can be claimed and updated for free. Keep the information on your profiles consistent and relevant, including photos, contact information (phone number, Web address and street address) and products

or services offered.

Also be sure to set up monitoring alerts for when someone posts a review or uses your company name in a blog. There are many free resources, such as Google Alerts, TweetDeck, HootSuite and Free Review Monitoring. If your reputation is important but you do not have time to keep up with all of the review sites, paid services are available. Before purchasing software or hiring a reputation management company, follow these tips:

- Research the reputation of the reputation management company or software—read its reviews. Is it a recognized expert featured in mainstream media platforms? Does it have experience in your industry? Establish expectations for three weeks, three months and one year out. Ensure you hear from the company frequently for feedback and updates.
- Understand what your time is worth and define your goals. Are you looking to improve your online presence? Then your goal is to gain exposure. Are you looking to monitor your online presence? Then your goal is to protect against attacks. Do you want to clean up your social network presence? Then your goal is to restore your reputation.
- Be sure the company or software performs “white hat” tactics, which are Google-acceptable techniques.
- Beware of astroturfing, keyword stuffing, invisible text, link spamming and creating fake or additional websites in an effort to generate more search results.

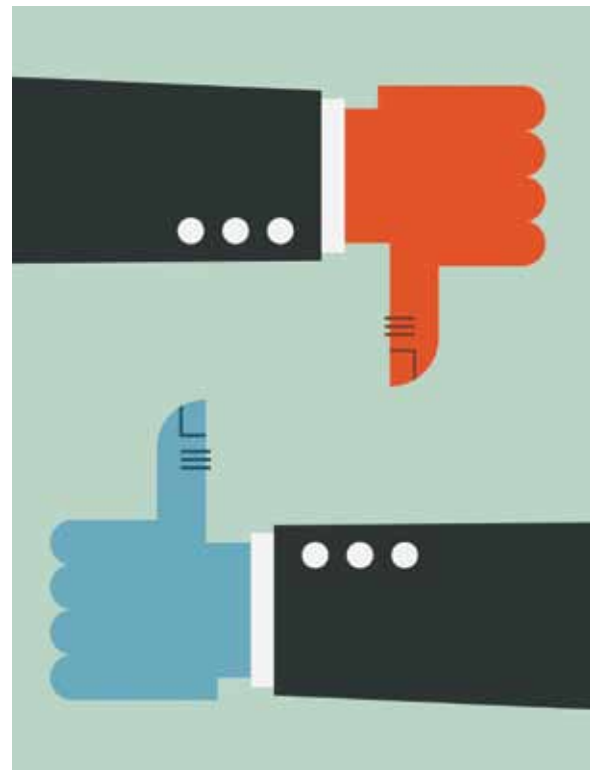
Build Visibility & Encourage Positive Reviews

Online reviews can help your company grow through online visibility and using keywords in other marketing efforts. By claiming and updating your online profiles in the various online directories, you are adding content and saturating the online marketplace with information about your company. Establishing policies with your staff on encouraging online reviews and offering monthly recognition via a certificate will build excitement and competition, which inspires a team effort to help grow the company. Discourage bribing customers for a review; offering discounts or entering to win a drawing can cause reviews to be perceived as dishonest opinions with an ulterior motive, and may result in FTC violations.

Using keywords and phrases from satisfied customers in other marketing efforts can help grow your company as well. As business owners, we tend to use words and lingo that are industry specific and not necessarily the language the target audience would use to describe a product or search online for a service. Keywords can be used in pay-per-click campaigns and in content on your company website to help qualify new prospects. When

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tracking positive reviews, cross-reference the customers with their zip codes and demographic information. When purchasing lists for direct mail campaigns, geographic and demographic information helps you to find similar “happy” customers. Ask customers if they would mind if you use their reviews on your website, in sales materials, on displays, in email blasts and even on business cards. Just be sure to use the customer’s first name and the last initial to protect his or her anonymity.



Reviews do not have to be scary. Most are encouraging and can be used to grow your company—even the bad ones. There are many resources available to business owners to help manage their online reputations and many of them are free, but also time consuming. The most important tip to remember is to consistently check for online reviews and reply quickly. The reviewer wants to feel respected for his or her opinions, good or bad. The business owner wants to have an opportunity to give his or her side but needs to stay professional so other readers can come to their own conclusions and make an educated decision. **WQP**

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