

What to Do When Customers Criticize You Online

Approach it as a customer service issue, and respond appropriately.

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Nobody likes negative remarks or criticism, but such is the world of reviews. With the proliferation of mobile review sites like Yelp, people have an outlet for their feelings about their consumer experiences. The old chestnut still rings true: a customer will tell three people about a good experience and tell 10 about a bad one. Review websites just make it easier to spread the word.

What do you do if the negative review is of your business?

KEEP CALM

A negative review can feel like someone just said your baby was ugly. Do not take it that way. Also, do not attempt to remove the negative review by threatening the review site with legal action. Responding unkindly to the poster will only make the comments more public. In both cases, you will come off looking worse rather than better.



Take a few deep breaths, find your inner grown-up, and approach this as a customer service issue. Here is what Yelp itself has to say about the matter:

- Your reviewers are your paying customers.
- Your reviewers are human beings with (sometimes unpredictable) feelings and sensitivities.
- Your reviewers are vocal and opinionated (otherwise they would not be writing reviews)!

KEEP IT SIMPLE

When you respond, keep it short and to the point. Thank the reviewer for his or her feedback and for visiting your business. Anything more could come off as condescending or sarcastic or as bribery. If you can offer specific actions you have taken to eliminate the issue in the future, do so, but keep it simple.

KEEP LEARNING

Review sites are not going away anytime soon. Rather than take your ball and go home, learn to play the game better, starting with these steps from

Brandon Suyeoka of the Huffington Post.

Claim your name. Claim your business on Yelp and other sites. This enables you to respond directly to a reviewer's low rating in public. It also allows you transparency, a critical ingredient in earning trust.

Flag false reviews. Yelp and other sites do not permit false reviews. Flag them so the site can remove them. Do not try to use this to remove a legitimate review, but you are within your rights to request the removal of reviews that are patently incorrect such as a review based on hearsay rather than personal experience. Another type of false review makes a claim about products or services that your business does not actually sell.

Build a following. Use the wide array of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to build an online presence and attract followers. By building a community, your business gains the backing of people who feel positively about your products. Reviewers are less likely to leave a stink-bomb rating.

KEEP TO THE BOTTOM LINE

If there is a problem, fix it. This is the bottom line. Someone who was a customer of your business found a problem. Whether you knew about it or not, you need to investigate if it is a true problem and then work out a resolution. Take ownership and the high ground and you cannot go wrong.

Learn more about how Yelp and other review pages can help you get the most out of the sites. Many have a variety of business tools to help with marketing and promotion. The more people positively reviewing your business, the higher your average rating will be. In that case, a few clunkers will not seem so bad; it is the law of averages.

You can also partner with Yelp or other review sites when they have events that attract their users. This strategy makes you known to people who use the service and may introduce your business to a whole new clientele.

A negative rating can hurt; nobody disputes that. Your response, however, is what shows whether your practice is worthy of a second chance. ■

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