## How to Remove Defamatory Reviews from Yelp

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Based on third quarter data from 2013, more than one-in-five Yelp reviews earned two or fewer stars on the website's five-star scale. Of the website's 47 million reviews, 13 percent earned one-star reviews, while another eight percent were rated two stars.

This is not to say that the majority of underwhelming reviews may not be warranted. But it is no secret that angry consumers – based on bad experiences, or sometimes for little or no reason at all – can cross the line and post false or defamatory information about a business or individuals associated with it. This behavior can be extremely harmful because Yelp reviews tend to rank highly in search engine results. In fact, Yelp has a domain authority of 94/100, according to Open Site Explorer, meaning Yelp pages tend to be among the first items listed when you search businesses online.

Further, *The Washington Post* previously reported on a 2011 Harvard Business School study that revealed a one-star rating change can lead to a difference in revenue of five to nine percent. The article also linked to a marketing study that found 80% of consumers "have changed their minds about purchasing a recommended product or service based solely on negative information they found online."

By establishing this forum for posting both good and bad reviews about service providers that include doctors, financial institutions, real estate professionals, and management companies, Yelp clearly supports free speech. But the San Francisco-based company cautions its users of the legal consequences of posting false information in a review. Specifically, in its Terms of Service, Yelp warns its users about exposing themselves to liability for posting false or defamatory information, among other violations.

*Removal and Filtering Basics*

A positive about Yelp is that, unlike Ripoff Report, content can be removed and, thus, the impact it may have on businesses can be mitigated. Sometimes removal can be accomplished rather quickly, or at least in fairly routine fashion. Other times, it requires a multi-tiered

litigation process, typically to reveal the source of anonymous posting, and eventually remove the false reviews.

The simplest method of removal is by the author itself. Users can delete their own reviews, simply by clicking the tiny "Remove" button at the bottom of their own posts. We have found that a well-crafted owner response can convince an otherwise disgruntled consumer, or a user posting false information, to voluntarily delete his or her post. Yelp also allows business owners or managers to private message reviewers, in addition to publicly posting a comment.

Second, the Yelp user support team will remove reviews that violate its Terms of Service or Content Guidelines. For instance, we have successfully facilitated the removal of defamatory reviews that specifically name a company employee that does not hold themselves out to be a service provider in the stream of commerce. Yelp recognizes the harm that reviews containing this information can cause and considers such content a violation of its terms of service.

Short of actual removal, Yelp's review-filtering process can help make certain reviews essential non-factors. Yelp utilizes an undisclosed algorithm that allows its automated software to sort and feature the reviews it determines to be the most helpful and most reliable. This process considers many factors, such as perceived quality, reliability and the posters' overall Yelp activity.

Reviews featured less prominently on a business's page, both positive and negative, do not contribute to the overall star rating and often can be difficult for most users to locate. But if Yelp notices a pattern of consistent negative (or positive) reviews that it determines are not posted by "genuine consumers," it may consider removing them altogether.

In some cases, it may be necessary to identify anonymous posters. This strategy is addressed in this post.