

Publications

Protecting Your Business's Reputation on the Internet

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According to a recent survey, more consumers are reading online reviews, they are forming opinions based on those reviews quicker, they are paying close attention to star ratings, and – in general – they are highly trusting of online reviews.

These survey results, discussed below, reaffirm just how vulnerable businesses are today on the internet. Consequently, business must spend some time focusing on how they are being perceived on the internet and work to protect their online reputations beyond simply attempting to put out a quality product or service. All it takes is one or two unhappy customers or disgruntled customers to tarnish a business's online reputation.

Consumers weigh in on online reviews

It is no secret that online reviews are being written in large numbers. Yelp, the clear leader in the online review game, has been home to 83 million reviews in its 10 years of existence (as of June 30, 2015). And anyone who Googles a business or searches it on Bing has seen how prominently Yelp's review pages and star rating scores are being displayed – among others (Google, of course, also displays its Google reviews among the very top search results).

Accordingly, reviews are easy to find, and many people are reading them, whether they actively seek out online reviews or just stumble upon them when running internet searches.

In fact, according to the [BrightLocal Local Consumer Review Survey 2015](#) alluded to above –which polled 2,354 North American consumers, 90 percent Americans and 10 percent Canadians – about 92 percent of the respondents indicated reading online reviews at least occasionally. This figure is up four percent since last year's survey.

The consumers surveyed also indicated that they pay most attention to overall star ratings. And on a related note, just 14 percent of those polled by BrightLocal indicated they would consider conducting business with a company that has a rating of less than three stars (on a

five-star scale).

On the flipside – despite the vast majority of consumers reading online reviews and there generally being positive reactions to highly-rated companies – the survey results also seem to suggest that some consumers are becoming less trusting (or at least somewhat skeptical) of online reviews.

While 80 percent of those surveyed by BrightLocal last month said they trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations – certainly a high number – the survey saw a three percent dip from last year. Similarly, 68 percent indicated positive reviews make them trust local businesses, but that was a drop from 72 percent in 2014.

While many consumers are easily impressionable when it comes to online reviews, there seems to be an increasing amount of skepticism from some – especially with more instances being reported of many fake reviews, including cases of internet defamation.

Fighting back against harmful reviews

Whether false online reviews or simply negative (but legitimate) feedback online, businesses must be prepared to protect and defend their reputations on the internet.

According to a [Deloitte study](#) often-cited on our blog, executives from large companies have identified reputation as the single most important strategic risk. It speaks volumes that large companies are so concerned with their reputations, especially given how crucial positive reputations are to the small- and medium-sized businesses.

In our white paper, “[Protecting Against, Preventing and Planning for Online Reputation Attacks](#),” we discuss the many strategies businesses must consider in anticipation and in the event of reputation attacks – including in the form of online reviews.

In short, a business should ensure that there is positive content about it online and, if online reviews are important to the business, to consider implementing a program to generate more reviews.

Developing positive search results, higher quantity of reviews

First impressions of most businesses are formed on the internet, in particular through the first search engine results pages. Therefore, businesses will want to ensure – to the extent possible – that their top search results are populated by positive or neutral content.

As such, businesses will want to develop content, including building up company websites; creating affiliate websites; managing and regularly posting to blogs; writing guest posts; and creating other so-called “web assets.”

Given that online reviews are so prominent today, including their locations in search results, these cannot be ignored – in particular if the ratings are lower than ideal. Thus, businesses should consider establishing a content-neutral program for [obtaining more reviews](#), without actively and impermissibly soliciting positive reviews.

Should any issues balloon beyond just negative reviews, but actually false and damaging content, businesses will need to weigh their options, including – but certainly not limited to – potential legal action.

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