



Illustration by MIKEL CASAL

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

How to Make Online Reviews Work for You

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“One of the worst evenings out in a while,” began S1nsand, a Trip Advisor reviewer in his one-star rating of The Blade Bone Inn near Reading, England. His scathing review provoked a 1,000-word response from the restaurant owner, who accused the reviewer of trying to get freebies. The whole episode went viral and unleashed a wave of international media attention.

At stake was more than the beef rib and mashed potatoes in question; it was about the power that online reviewers – a group of average consumers and virtual strangers with until now unknown agendas – have to make or break a business.

Reputation, of course, is everything, espe-

cially in an online world. Here, word of mouth spreads like wildfire; with just one click, a rant or rave reaches an audience of thousands or even millions. While it takes more than one review to launch a business to success or trash it to oblivion, the impact of customer reviews cannot be shrugged off as irrelevant.

This article delves into the reviewsphere, and in particular the review site, Yelp, which has over 47 million reviews and counting of almost every type of local business, from restaurants to plumbers, in a growing number of national markets around the world.

Based on our studies of this and other such platforms, we have begun to build up a picture of who online reviewers are and what motivates them to write – which may not always be

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for the pure joy of belonging to and giving back to the community.

Armed with a better understanding of how the reviewsphere works, businesses will be in a much better position not only to engage with these sites, but to reap the benefits of what is undoubtedly a growing global phenomenon that is here to stay.

Everyone's a Critic

In many ways, the reviewsphere is simply a new platform for an old phenomenon. Customers have always had ways to express their satisfaction or disappointment with a service rendered; and successful businesses have always sought new and better ways to capture information about their customers' experiences, and then improve their product or service offerings accordingly, in order to retain and grow their customer base.

The difference today lies in the scale, immediacy and ubiquity of customer feedback. In the past, a suggestion box was for your eyes only, and a known critic with an established voice was relatively easy to single out from the crowd.

Now, review sites and other online outlets give anyone a voice, but with a much broader

reach than that of a local newspaper. This sets the bar much higher than ever before for businesses, especially considering the permanence and persistence of any information held on a review site's database.

No business can afford to ignore the statistics. In a recent Havas PR survey of 10,219 adults in 31 countries, 38 percent of respondents said that a single negative comment can dissuade them from making a purchase online. Another PhoCusWright survey commissioned by Trip Advisor found more than half (53 percent) of respondents said they would not book a hotel that did not have any reviews on its site, and the vast majority (between 57 percent and 84 percent) agreed that seeing management responses to reviews, whether good or bad, influenced their likelihood of booking.

Our own research involving nearly 1,500 Yelp reviewers reveals that feedback systems – the customer's rating of how useful they found the review to be, among other factors – also influence the subsequent production of more online reviews. Potential future customers trust these online reviewers as a source of information and take heed of what they write.

For a business, getting to grips with the reviewsphere need not be as unwieldy as it seems. It starts by understanding the reviewers, and then tuning in to what they are saying about you, so that you convert the review landscape into a goldmine of consumer information, rather than a minefield of mismanaged customer complaints.

Know Your Reviewers

What makes online reviewers tick? Think about it: why would an ordinary consumer bother to sit down and spend time writing fairly lengthy texts, hundreds of words long, on an ongoing basis for review sites such as Yelp, without receiving financial compensation or any other tangible rewards? Indeed, none of these reviewers enjoys privileged access: a consumer who labors for hours to produce hundreds of reviews has the same level of access as any other consumer who only ever posts one review.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article delves into the reviewsphere, and in particular the review site, Yelp. Based on the authors' studies of this and other such platforms, they build up a picture of who online reviewers are and what motivates them to write.

They observe certain status-seeking behavior on the part of some online reviewers – people who desire an audience, a readership, a public. This represents an emergent property of consumer behavior

in an online world, and one that is bound to become more pervasive.

As such, businesses need to find ways to engage with this new breed of not-so-ordinary consumer. Armed with this understanding of how the reviewsphere works, businesses will be in a much better position not only to engage with these sites, but to reap the benefits of what is undoubtedly a growing global phenomenon that is here to stay.

Some say it derives from the free, open, democratic nature of the Internet, whose sharing economy encourages altruistic behavior, whereby the very act of writing and publishing a review for the greater good of the World Wide Web community is reward in itself.

However, our research of Yelp reviewers revealed another dynamic at play: a need for an audience.

The occasional post to a mass audience of anonymous strangers is one thing, but to make a regular practice of publishing reviews

is taking it a step farther: it is to claim the role of author, someone who desires an audience, a readership, a public. Whether we label this “the megaphone effect” or “the need to publish,” we observe certain status-seeking behavior on the part of some online reviewers (see sidebar).

Unlike blogs, where no audience is guaranteed, and posts on Facebook, whose audience is limited to one’s social circle, online reviews promise a mass audience of consumers. This represents an emergent property of consumer behavior in an online world, and one that is bound to become more pervasive.

As such, businesses need to find ways to engage with this new breed of not-so-ordinary consumer. The following tips will help you to relate to these self-appointed taste leaders who hold sway over attentive masses looking for guidance to make informed purchases.

■ The Megaphone Effect

How the Internet is changing the rules of the game.

The Internet has been a catalyst for many new social phenomena. Among them is “the megaphone effect,” whereby anyone with a computer or mobile device is able to broadcast his or her opinions to the world.

This subverts many traditional models. There no longer need to be editorial filters before publishing; you simply publish, then edit. You do not need to obtain official credentials to become a critic; anyone’s opinion is worthy and becomes legitimized by the size of its following. Word of mouth used to be bounded by one-to-one conversations with a closed circle of personal contacts; now you can reach a mass audience of strangers.

Online platforms of expression such as YouTube and review sites represent a new form of publication or broadcasting. Legitimacy comes via the support received on the site where the content is posted. And better than traditional word-of-mouth conversations, these sites leave a persistent archival trace for others to follow.

A Yelp member can post hundreds of restaurant reviews, receive thousands of compliments and acquire a readership of tens of thousands without ever having owned a restaurant, worked for a food publication or been a chef. Our studies of these reviewers reveal them to be omni-communicators who seek to publish their written self-expression in any forum that will take it. This makes them significantly more likely to report maintaining a blog, writing for newsletters, participating in discussion forums or posting videos on YouTube.

At the same time, ordinary consumers are looking for guidance to make decisions and filter ever-increasing choices. As advertisers are not seen as objective, consumers turn to reviewers, whom they regard as more authentic sources, to assist in their decision-making process. In this way, the Internet serves as the perfect matchmaker, giving reviewers the megaphone they desire to speak more loudly to a willing and receptive audience.

DON'T TURN YOUR BACK. You may never know the true motives of the people writing reviews of your business, but the good news is that, by posting them in a public forum, at least they are not talking about you behind your back – so it is best not to turn your back on them. You now have the perfect opportunity to respond.

Even the irate owner of The Blade Bone Inn acknowledged in his reply, “I am a believer that these sites offer a communal platform to share experiences on, that enable us all to eat, drink and sleep better, and that can’t be a bad thing. Alas, we can never please 100 percent of people 100 percent of the time, no matter how hard we try, but we never stop trying.”

You should always stay on top of who is saying what about you online. Take it as immediate feedback, and consider whether it is appropriate to modify or improve your business, product or service offerings accordingly.

ENCOURAGE CUSTOMER REVIEWS. The most popular restaurants in San Francisco, for example, have 1,000 or more Yelp reviews. Review site activity has, in fact, become a barometer of buzz. And buzz begets more buzz: the most reviewed restaurants attract additional reviews from individuals looking to establish their own online credibility as an expert or critic. Use this phenomenon by making sure that reviewers are talking about your business and spreading the word.

CO-OPT VS. CONFRONT. Ultimately, all businesses strive for online praise. Yet negative reviews will be inevitable, so learn to manage and