

# Are One-Star Online Reviews Bringing You Down?

Frustrated by negative online reviews? Does it seem that people only voice their opinions when they have something bad to say? Managing online reviews is a tricky business. As professional service providers, our reputations and trustworthiness are essential for bringing in new business and nurturing existing clients. Negative information online can lead to a serious backlash to your reputation and a damaging impact on your bottom line.

**Studies** show that 91 percent of people regularly or occasionally read online reviews, and 84 percent trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations. For professionals who have traditionally relied on word-of-mouth referrals, developing a process to manage online reviews is crucial, especially as the **under-35 generation** matures. This generation is composed of digital natives who write online reviews, trust online reviews and read corporate responses to online reviews.

## Benefits of Positive Online Reviews

Positive reviews improve trustworthiness and credibility, so it's important to have a steady and up-to-date stream of reviews posting online. Three reviews from two years ago don't carry much weight with your client base. Developing a strategy for gaining reviews on an ongoing basis will help build and sustain your online reputation.

Reviews from Google, Facebook and Yelp factor into Google's search algorithm. Confidence from your client base will correlate to confidence from Google, particularly with people searching for local businesses.

Feedback from your clients or market base can help inform your marketing strategy for reviews. While reviews can provide anecdotal information, you also may see patterns in why people compliment your company. If these characteristics are important to your reviewers, they are probably important to your audience at large. Use reviews to shape your marketing strategy and messaging statements.

## Consequences of Negative Online Reviews

Obviously, negative reviews can degrade your personal reputation and your firm's trustworthiness – and a *pattern* of negative reviews compounds the reputational damage. Since online reviews are highly visible in multiple platforms, your current and potential client base will undoubtedly see reviews when conducting basic online research. Negative reviews on Google, Facebook and Yelp can also hurt your local search rankings because they are an algorithmic ranking factor.

A pattern of negative reviews without responses gives the impression that your company



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doesn't care about its clients or the market's perception. That's why a process for managing reviews is imperative for your company's reputation management.

## Managing Online Reviews

Every online reputation management strategy should include these three elements:

1. a strategy for responding to reviews
2. tools to monitor reviews
3. a process for asking for reviews

## Responding to Reviews

Dealing with negative reviews requires an authentic and thoughtful approach. Even in the case of fraudulent reviews, always avoid online arguments. Giving a reviewer an opportunity to further rant in public only makes the situation worse. As best you can, take the conversation offline by asking the person to call your office, or message the person directly if the platform lets you do so. Never shift blame to a reviewer, attack the reviewer in some manner or threaten to sue for defamation (as tempting as it may be).

When responding to negative reviews, determine whether the review is real or fraudulent. If the review is from a current or former client, gather background information to inform your response. Act quickly – within 24 hours if possible – with a brief reply that recognizes the complaint, apologizes (even if it's for a misunderstanding) and provides a resolution. Often, people just want to be heard and will upgrade their reviews if their grievances are handled professionally.

If you are subject to professional confidentiality guidelines, like the American Bar Association [Model Rule 1.6\(a\)](#), be careful about revealing confidential information when responding to clients' reviews.

Mechanisms for requesting the removal of reviews vary by platform.

Google – Through [Google My Business](#), you can respond to and flag inappropriate reviews. Flag reviews as inappropriate only if they have violated Google's [review policy](#). It may take several days to get a response. Keep your expectations low; Google rarely removes reviews unless you win a legal action against the reviewer.

Facebook – The option to include reviews on your Facebook Page can be turned on and off. Weigh the pros of positive reviews against the cons of negative reviews when deciding whether to include this functionality on your page. Fraudulent or inappropriate reviews can be reported to Facebook on an individual basis, but don't expect a response unless the review is threatening or illegal.

Yelp – As with Google and Facebook, you can request that fraudulent reviews be taken down. However, [Yelp explains](#), "we don't typically take sides in factual disputes and generally allow Yelpers to stand behind their reviews."

# Tools for Monitoring Reviews

When deciding which tools to use for monitoring online reviews, first determine where you get the majority of your reviews. Google and Facebook are obvious, since they dominate online spaces. If most of your reviews are limited to these platforms, you can monitor reviews through Google My Business and create alerts using Facebook notifications.

For more widespread monitoring, consider a platform that provides a comprehensive dashboard and access to manage reviews quickly. *Search Engine Journal* recently posted a [list](#) of 10 great monitoring options.

## Guidelines for Requesting Reviews

One of the best strategies for pushing down and diluting negative reviews is to develop a system for gaining positive reviews. While the [FTC prohibits companies from offering incentives](#) to clients for leaving reviews and is [prosecuting companies for paid fake reviews](#), each online platform has its own set of rules for posting reviews. Here's a breakdown of the top three platforms.

### *Google*

Google's [User Contributed Content Policy](#) allows for wide interpretation about who can leave reviews on Google:

"Contributions must be based on real experiences and information. Deliberately fake content, copied or stolen photos, off-topic reviews, defamatory language, personal attacks, and unnecessary or incorrect content are all in violation of our policy."

In other words, the reviewer has to have real information about the company but doesn't necessarily have to be a client or customer. However, Google clearly states that companies cannot write their own reviews or post fake reviews about competitors.

Examples of disallowed practices include, but are not limited to:

- reviewing your own business
- posting content about a current or former employment experience
- posting content about a competitor to manipulate their ratings

### *Facebook*

Facebook's guidelines for posting [reviews on Facebook Pages](#) indicate that the reviewer should have a personal experience to share, but doesn't necessarily have to be a client or customer.

When recommending a business on Facebook, you:

- Should focus on the product or service offered by the business
- Should base it on personal experience
- Shouldn't manage the Page for that business

## Yelp

Yelp has the most-restrictive rules for [posting reviews](#).

- Don't ask customers, mailing list subscribers, friends, family, or anyone else to review your business.
- Don't ask your staff to compete to collect reviews.
- Don't run surveys that ask for reviews from customers reporting positive experiences.
- Don't ever offer freebies, discounts, or payment in exchange for reviews – it will turn off savvy consumers, and may also be [illegal](#). Yelp has a [Consumer Alerts](#) program to let people know about businesses that engage in this sort of activity. For the same reason, you also shouldn't offer incentives for users to remove reviews.

If you need help with managing your online reputation or have a question about responding to reviews, reach out to me at [mtrudeau@jaffepr.com](mailto:mtrudeau@jaffepr.com).