Managing Your Law Firm's Reputation: Are One-Star Reviews Bringing You Down?

Concerned about the impact of negative online reviews? Ever feel like people are more vocal about their grievances than their positive experiences? As professionals, safeguarding our reputations and trustworthiness is paramount for attracting new business and nurturing ongoing client relationships. The repercussions of unfavorable online content can extend beyond mere criticism, potentially causing significant reputational damage and affecting your financial bottom line.

Research indicates that a staggering 98% of individuals regularly or occasionally peruse online reviews, with Google emerging as the most trusted review platform in all industries. For professionals accustomed to relying on traditional word-of-mouth referrals, establishing a robust system for managing online reviews becomes increasingly vital, particularly as the digitally savvy millennial generation becomes the primary purchasers of legal services. This tech-savvy demographic, along with subsequent generations, actively engages in writing, trusting and reading online reviews, emphasizing the necessity for professionals to navigate and respond adeptly to the dynamics of the digital review landscape.

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Benefits of Positive Online Reviews

Positive reviews play a pivotal role in bolstering the trustworthiness and credibility of law firms, 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.

Notably, reviews posted on platforms such as Google, Facebook and Yelp indirectly contribute to Google's search algorithm. The accumulation of positive reviews not only elevates your online standing and credibility, but can also translate into increased website traffic and improved search engine optimization (SEO) rankings.

Beyond the immediate impact on your online presence, client feedback gathered through reviews can serve as a valuable resource to inform your overall marketing strategy. While reviews offer anecdotal insights, identifying recurring patterns in the positive feedback can unveil valuable information about what clients appreciate most about your firm.

For law firms that accumulate a substantial number of reviews, leveraging advanced technologies such as AI platforms can be particularly beneficial. By inputting reviews into an AI platform, you can systematically analyze and identify patterns, establish a

customized scoring system, and extract meaningful insights. This data-driven approach enables law firms to go beyond anecdotal information, uncover hidden trends and gain a more nuanced understanding of client preferences. These findings can then be used to refine and optimize your marketing strategy, ensuring that it resonates effectively with your target audience.

Consequences of Negative Online Reviews

Negative reviews pose a significant threat to both your personal reputation and the perceived overall trustworthiness of your law firm. The repercussions are particularly pronounced when negative reviews form a pattern, amplifying the damage to your firm's reputation. Given the visibility of online reviews in various platforms, your current and potential client base is likely to encounter these critiques during basic online research.

Beyond the immediate implications for online visibility, a recurring theme of negative reviews – especially when left unaddressed – conveys the message that your firm may not prioritize client satisfaction or could be indifferent to the market's perception. The absence of responses to negative reviews can create the impression that your firm is unresponsive or unconcerned about rectifying issues. This lack of engagement further compounds reputational damage, making it crucial to establish a robust process for actively managing and addressing reviews. Proactive review management not only mitigates the impact of negative feedback, but also demonstrates a commitment to client satisfaction and a proactive approach to reputation management, thereby safeguarding the overall image of your law firm in the eyes of your clients and the broader market.

Don't be discouraged if you can't maintain a full 5-star review portfolio. Research indicates that the majority of individuals are inclined to do business with a company as long as it boasts a rating of 4 stars or higher. Interestingly, only 13% of those who peruse reviews actually anticipate flawless 5-star ratings without any complaints. Furthermore, 44% of review readers expressed skepticism when a company exclusively garners 5-star ratings. This highlights the value of authenticity and the acknowledgment that a diverse range of feedback, including constructive criticism, contributes to a more trustworthy and credible online presence for your law firm.

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 rant further 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 genuine 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 Business Profile Manager, 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 recommendations and 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. (More about Facebook's Community Standards can be found here.)

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 Business Profile Manager and create alerts using Facebook notifications.

For more widespread monitoring, consider a platform that provides a comprehensive dashboard and access to manage reviews quickly. Capterra's recent list of reputation management software can be found here.

What About Fake Reviews?

The prevalence of fake reviews underscores the significant issue faced by consumers, as highlighted in a recent *New York Times* article titled "Fake Reviews Are Rampant Online.

Can a Crackdown End Them?" The article explains the limitations of the proposed Federal Trade Commission (FTC) rule to fine companies involved in the buying or selling of online reviews, pointing out that it overlooks the core contributors to the problem: the review platforms and tech companies profiting from the system, whether the reviews are genuine or fake.

Unfortunately, the options for persuading tech giants to remove fake reviews are limited. Hence, the current recommended approach involves responding to fake reviews proactively, as outlined above, and concurrently establishing a systematic process for acquiring authentic reviews.

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. Before embarking on a review solicitation campaign, though, marketers should be aware of the FTC's guidelines for endorsements in advertising that were revised in 2023. According to the FTC, "The Guides, at their core, reflect the basic truth-in-advertising principle that endorsements must be honest and not misleading."

Google

Google's User Contributed Content Policy allows for wide interpretation about who can leave reviews on Google:

"Posts or edits 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
- Base it on personal experience
- Not 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.