

How to Handle Negative Comments & Reviews Online - By Ken Burgin

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No-one likes hearing bad feedback, even if you know it may be true.

Now there are dozens of online directories, from the Google monster down to local listings, and most have features that allow readers to add reviews. Everyone can be a critic! This won't be changing any time soon, so it's vital to have a fresh, positive presence online and a method for tracking comments as they happen.

Steps for your Response Plan include:

1. Be notified the moment your name is mentioned: Google Alerts is a great tool for this, with automatic tracking for your business name and even your own name. You may even like to keep track of what's being said about key competitors. Yahoo Alerts is a little more specialised - include your name in the Travel or News section.
2. Make sure your website shows up first when a search is done. The problem of the Google Swamp is increasing all the time: let's say your domain is CafeTroppo.com but a Google search shows your café name on dozens of other directory sites before the real site appears. Only by actively improving your search position can you ensure you are #1, not #21.
3. Respond politely to negative reviews or comments as they happen. Some can be ignored, but others need the facts presented in rebuttal. A polite comment is much more business-like than a howl of rage - yelling children don't get much sympathy. There are pre-written 'Critic Reply Letters' in the Download Library. You could write to the website asking for removal of the offending comment, but this is usually fruitless - don't rely on this tactic alone. If the comment is just critical and not grossly offensive, it will probably stay.
4. Be ready to use pay-per-click ads (like the short ads that show on the right side of a Google search). These can be expensive for mainstream promotion, but will put your name up top if you have an urgent, short-term message you need to communicate.
5. Have trusted friends ready to speak up for you. You know who they are - give them the message you want shared and tell them how to do it. It's more effective if they share a positive experience, rather than just trying to negate what's been said.

Insulate your business by being active online:

6. Get involved with social media sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, LinkedIn and TripAdvisor. Go on the front foot and set up a Group or feature page for your business. This channels fans and friends who will be ready to help if you're unfairly treated.
7. Start a commentary about your part of the industry. Setting up a simple 'blog' or web diary can be done quickly, and only needs a short entry or photos once a week to share your news and offer an alternative point of view.
8. Comment on other food or travel blogs in your area - the number is enormous! Search for 'coffee blog in Brisbane' as an example - substitute your town and find more links on the pages you discover. Occasional supportive comments makes you a good friend.
9. Keep building your customer list - another great reason to gather email addresses and communicate regularly. 99% of the time it will be promotion and good news, but if you ever need to put your side of the story...

And finally, take the comments onboard - was there some truth in what was said? It's better to hear it sooner than later, and old-fashioned privacy is a thing of the past...

Profitable Hospitality offers management and cost-control systems (Manuals & CD-ROMs) for restaurants, cafes, hotels, bars and clubs. The systems are based on the extensive consulting and operating experience of CEO Ken Burgin, and enable busy owners and managers to set up complete operating and cost-control systems in minutes, not months. Profitable Hospitality also runs regular management training workshops in the areas of kitchen profit & efficiency, restaurant marketing and functions management. A free monthly e-newsletter keeps you up to date on the latest industry management issues. www.profitablehospitality.com.

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