



Keeping your **REP** in check

Are you paying attention to what's being said about your business services on social media?

You should. Here's why.

Story by J.S. Decker

Years ago, a strong product and good service were all any business needed to build its reputation. Now, so many comments shared so quickly online can be overwhelming – both to track, as well as to respond to when appropriate. Thankfully, an array of software and services give notice when someone, somewhere, is talking about your business online through social media.

"People like to be heard," said Susan Finco, president and owner of Leonard & Finco Public Relations in Green Bay. She, along with other public relations experts, suggests replying immediately to all feedback. Anything less gives the impression those comments are being ignored, and a negative remark could be re-posted and echo out of control.

"You should analyze what they're saying and respond," Finco noted. "If appropriate, apologize and let them know what you're going to do to rectify the situation. It does take someone assigned to do that, but it's an important part of business today."

Responding to positive comments lets customers know how valuable they all are to your business, and complaints become opportunities to showcase good customer service.

Workplace reputation

Customers aren't the only ones using Facebook and Twitter to share their thoughts about your business.

Employees often have a lot to say, too, even after they quit or get fired. Indeed.com is used primarily to find job openings, but also to find reviews of work conditions. Glassdoor.com is similar, allowing employees and former employees to anonymously review companies and their management.

One of the services at Red Shoes PR in Appleton is monitoring that chatter for clients concerned that a few bad seeds might damage a hard-earned reputation as a quality employer by posting exaggerated comments to these sites as petty retaliation.

"The first places potential employees (seeking jobs) go are social media sites and online review sites," said Lisa Cruz, president and owner of Red Shoes. "There's so much transparency today that it really forces the hand of the employer to treat their employees well."

Inflammatory or dishonest posts usually don't get far, Cruz added. "If they're not accurate, the others in that group will call them out."

It can help to encourage current employees to post their opinions, she said, to give a full picture of the employer's workplace. Management can also chime in as well.

When Cruz started in public relations

in 1994, one of her very first jobs was monitoring the online reputation of an Internet provider in Southern California.

"I was paid to go to their office and monitor their chat rooms for eight hours each day. Just to monitor what people were saying about the service and its brand," she recalled.

Desktop computers of that era had less computing power than the smartphones used today, and as a result, many comments are made on the go.

"It's an online pipeline of feedback for your company," Cruz said, and the response needs to be just as quick.

Speed of light response

The faster you react to whatever comments are being made about your company – good or bad – the more in control you are of your own reputation, noted Lisa Piikkila, owner and creative director of Coalesce Marketing in Appleton. Being aware means being prepared.

"The easiest thing you can do is set up Google Alerts," Piikkila suggests. Entering a company name and other keywords builds a list that generates email alerts as soon as they're mentioned online. A newswire service like Agility catches what Google might miss. It's designed to monitor and target news services and other media. Cision Inc. is a service based in Chicago that monitors social media and mainstream media, partly to track the effectiveness of public relations campaigns.

Another online service, Hootsuite, monitors 35 social media sites, providing analytics that give in-depth reports of how well social media efforts are being received. Piikkila said Hootsuite works great with Twitter.

The most popular social media, Facebook, allows users to rate and review businesses, but comments made on someone's personal Facebook page won't be found if a user's privacy settings are strong.

Nearly everyone in the developed world uses the Internet to research products, and nearly two-thirds of all online searches use Google. Piikkila said every

Traditional business reputation management still critical, too

Traditionally regarded as the chief offline reputation forum for businesses, social media has changed how the Better Business Bureau works, too.

"We're really big on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube," said Susan Bach, Northeast Wisconsin regional director for the BBB. Consumers browse reviews at Angie's List or Yelp, but those sites aren't competition, Bach explained, since the BBB's services are so much more comprehensive.

"We never have, and never will, accept anonymous reviews," Bach said. "We do require a real name – not that it will be printed – and a real email address. Once you submit your review you must confirm you are a real person."

Part of Bach's job is resolving complaints about a business, which the review websites don't do. BBB has had more than 100 years to perfect its rating and accreditation system.

"We always weight the number of complaints that a company gets versus their size," Bach said. "If a company is big enough and has been around long enough they are bound to get a complaint. What we look at is how they respond to that complaint." Unless there's a pattern of complaints or a persistent problem, the company's rating remains strong so long as they are responsive.

"Customer reviews will have no impact on a company's rating with us," Bach continued. "Only formal complaints do. The actual rating of the company is based on fact, not solely on other people's opinions."

A company seeking BBB accreditation can't have any unanswered complaints. That evaluation leads to proud use of the BBB logo with their membership fee.

The Internet helped develop a more detailed system for assigning business ratings than when Bach first joined the non-profit 12 years ago. "Twenty years ago we didn't have the A+ through F scale. There were two ratings: satisfactory and unsatisfactory." The more detailed grade system launched five years ago.

Marketing

business should log on to Google My Business to make sure they show up on searches and maps.

Public comments show up right under the map on Google searches for a business. As Coalesce Account Manager Annie Mares said, "It's not a bad idea to encourage people to share positive experiences. Positive reviews will push down the bad." But do note it's a mistake to write those reviews yourself. "They need to appear genuine," she said.

The same goes for responding to comments made on the company's own website.

"Each scenario is totally different," Mares explained, so every response has to be original. Even so, having a plan in place to deal with complaints or other problems is simply smart, proactive customer service.

When responding to a negative comment, be fair and open, Piikkila suggested. It's alright to admit to any mistakes and offer some form of apology.

"It's all in how you handle it," she said. "If you come across as defensive it could all go downhill. That could lead to a whole other social media adventure. You don't want to try to go on the offensive. That could go viral."

Administrators of a company's comment page may be tempted to remove negative posts. Resist the temptation to do that, said Piikkila.

"It's not recommended that you do that, because then it looks like you have something to hide," she pointed out.

"Knowledge is power. If you aren't monitoring what's being said you're missing out from the start."

Annie Mares, account manager, Coalesce Marketing

Finco agrees that deleting any comment should be an absolute last resort. Sometimes the customer won't be satisfied, and sometimes they're just looking for a fight.

"If you feel like it's someone who's trying to bait you into an argument, or it's an unhappy former employee, you should try to deal with that offline," Finco said. "Ask them to directly contact you."

Lessons put into practice

At The Roxy Supper Club on Main Street in downtown Oshkosh, manager Ryan Wolf has a procedure in place for all complaints.

"When responding to a negative review or complaint, I'll talk to the managers that need to be notified and talk to the staff involved," he explained. "I'll apologize for the negative experience and usually offer a gift certificate to come back again."

Wolf receives email notifications from Trip Advisor and Yelp

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and he checks their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages daily. He makes sure to comment on any positive remarks, too.

"I'll congratulate them on the special event or anniversary and say I hope to see them again in the future," Wolf said.

Online reviews are good for the restaurant industry, Wolf believes, "because it allows out-of-town guests or new customers to see what others have to say about the restaurant before choosing to dine there."

The only downside, he added, "is if an individual went out of their way to bash a restaurant on social media and found all of their sites to give them a possibly-undeserved negative review."

Across the street at 920 Tattoo Company, owner Steven Anderson said its online reputation is the source of most new referrals.

"It's an integral part of our marketing strategy," Anderson said. "We thank each person for their feedback, positive or negative, because it's one of the few metrics we have available to evaluate our performance over time."

Anderson said such reviews also help prospective new customers gain a sense of whether or not they'll be comfortable with the services provided and the culture.

"Coming into our type of business can be an intimidating proposal for many prospective clients. Therefore, reading reviews and seeing our artwork online doesn't involve any sort of risk, and it's convenient," he said.

At Oshkosh-based Supple Restaurant Group - which owns Fratellos in Appleton and Oshkosh, Fox River Brewing Company, Golden Corral in Oshkosh and The Melting Pot in Appleton - CEO Jay Supple works with Candeo Creative in Oshkosh to monitor online comments about its brands and respond quickly.

"Candeo checks social media pages - Instagram, Twitter (which often includes people's posts to Untapped and Instagram photos) and Facebook - for comments, reviews, questions and complaints several times each day just in case something didn't come through on email notices," Supple explained.

The format allows the restaurant group to be creative and have fun with imagery, for example, a Facebook "thumbs up" icon holding a beer bottle for positive comments.

"We feel it is also important to tag the customer in the posts, or at least mention their name, so they see that the message is customized to them," Supple said. "A simple 'thank you for your review,' or inviting them to come back soon goes a long way." ■

J.S. Decker is a freelance journalist based in Oshkosh.

Suttner ACCOUNTING



David Lewis

Account Director CPA
david.lewis@suttnercpa.com
920.235.6789

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