THE MARKETER'S GUIDE TO

CUSTOMER REVIEWS

How to Turn Google+, Yelp and Other Review Sites Into Your Favorite New Marketing Channel

By Grade.us Founder & CEO
JON HALL

PRAISE FOR THE MARKETER'S GUIDE TO CUSTOMER REVIEWS

"An excellent guide, well written and documented. Covers all of the intricacies relating to online reviews in one document."

— Mike Blumenthal, Local U

"This book is so timely. Research is increasingly showing the role customer reviews play in the sales and marketing world. Jon Hall's book is spot-on, and should be required reading for every professional who is running a business or selling a product or service, whether online or off, within our current connected world."

— Cheryl Conner, Forbes.com

"Reviews are today's social proof and can make or break a business. The Marketer's Guide to Customer Reviews *is one of the first publications to show you how to take advantage of this increasingly important channel."*

— John Jantsch, Duct Tape Marketing

"Great book. Practical, well-researched, and well-structured. Nice and skimmable, too."

— Phil Rozek, LocalVisibilitySystem.com

"This book sucks!"

— No one ever

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Jon Hall

NEW JERZ

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer opinion now travels faster and further than ever before. Social media, search engines and countless online review sites together form the medium by which traditional "word of mouth" is broadcast globally, shared easily and never, ever forgotten.

Most commerce-related word of mouth today takes the form of customer reviews on sites like Yelp, Google+, and Angie's List. Online customer reviews are arguably the greatest influence in attracting and retaining customers for small and local businesses today. Reviews determine how people perceive a business, whether or not they would buy from it, even its visibility in search engines. If you handle marketing for a small or local business, you need to grab this bull by the horns. Right now.

I talk to marketers all the time who assume there's nothing they can do about customer reviews. They're convinced that reviews "just happen." If the business is well run and the product is good, good reviews *might* follow. But things do go wrong sometimes, and there are those customers who are never really satisfied. So isn't winning online customer reviews a bit like winning at the craps table?

I SUPPORT WORD-OF-MOUTH MARKETING, JUST AS LONG AS WE TIGHTLY CONTROL EXACTLY WHAT THEY SAY.

No, is the short answer. The rest of this book is the long answer, culled from the years I've spent working with small businesses, from our experience at Grade.us building a solution to help clients collect more customer reviews (more below), and from the latest research and best practices for reviews across industries.

Of course, there is no silver bullet for winning customer reviews. There is no substitute for running a great business. And some of the conventional wisdom is correct: neither the marketer nor the business owner is really in control.

To some degree, winning customer reviews is a numbers game, but you can improve your numbers. You can also make lemonade from any lemons tossed your way. That's what this book is all about. With the right commitment, a guiding strategy, and some of the tools and

tactics presented here, you can turn customer reviews into your new favorite marketing channel and score big wins for your company or your clients.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This book is your guide to truly owning what customers say about a business online. Whether you struggle with negative or non-existent reviews or already have a solid online reputation to work with, there are tips here to help you approach, generate, manage and make the most of online customer reviews over the long term.

This guide is written for marketers, but with an understanding that sometimes the marketer is a hired consultant, a firm or agency, or just the business owner herself wearing the marketer hat on a given day. So I mostly address these groups interchangeably but do my best to highlight items of specific interest to individual groups.

Finally, this guide is pragmatic. If I advocate anything, it's pragmatism. More often than not, customer reviews are a sore point for business owners. At Grade.us, we've worked with plenty of business owners who feel powerless and victimized by reviews and review sites, who call site operators "extortionists," who want nothing to do with all that "meaningless chatter."

Believe me, I get it. Nothing feels worse than pouring your heart and soul into your work only to have your efforts go publicly bad-mouthed by a disgruntled customer—or worse, a dishonest competitor—and then feeling like you can't do anything about it. Many, many of us just throw up our hands (or certain fingers) and retreat into our work.

But marketers must be pragmatic. And from that standpoint, we need to pay attention to these channels and address them with less emotion. If customers, clients, patients or even competitors are using these channels to talk about a business, then you need to listen and respond to limit the damage and increase the reward. This guide covers lots of practical advice for doing so.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am the founder and CEO of Grade.us. I have served the digital marketing needs of thousands of small and medium businesses over the last decade and a half, most recently as the co-founder of a Web marketing software solution for medical practices that was acquired in 2013. I love the grit and excitement of working alongside business owners and entrepreneurs, and I live to see them succeed. I hold a BA *summa cum laude* from Harvard, where I studied languages and comparative religion.

You can reach me at *jon@grade.us* or 973-508-9277 (my cell phone). I love talking shop.

ABOUT GRADE.US

Grade.us is a print/online "review funnel" solution that makes it easy to get more customer reviews on the sites that matter, including major directories like Google+, Yahoo! and Yelp, as well as niche and industry review sites like Angie's List, TripAdvisor, Patch, Urbanspoon, Healthgrades, etc.

Grade.us works primarily with marketers and offers several programs to help them make use of our solution: as affiliates, as

resellers, and by white-labeling the software. A free-forever tier lets you explore the solution and put its tactics into practice with no financial investment whatsoever. Sign up for free at:

https://grade.us/signup?ref=guide

"It is the stars. The stars above us, govern our conditions."

— William Shakespeare, "King Lear"

WHY CUSTOMER REVIEWS MATTER

You can find hundreds of recent stats and studies that confirm the insanely influential role online reviews play in getting customers to buy or try new products, services, and local businesses. I cite some of the most salient findings in this section, but for me, the most compelling evidence comes right from our clients:

- An urban chiropractor asks his new patients where they heard about his practice. In the last year, he says that the proportion of total patients identifying review sites as the referral doubled from about 40% to 80% of all new patients.

- A spa with glowing online reviews was getting a steady flow of new client leads. Eager to grow, the owner ran a Groupon daily deal that brought in scores of new clients at once, but the spa staff wasn't prepared, leading to service failures and a spate of scathing reviews. The owner says business slowed to a halt until she took measures to recover her reputation.

- Two competing pizza joints opened a block away from each other in a town with a cutthroat dining scene and high restaurant turnover. One owner decided to go "black-hat"

and buy scores of fake reviews to "prime the pump," while our client focused on collecting a few honest reviews from real customers every month. Our client has grown a steady following, visibly busy most nights and packed on the weekends. The most visible activity from the competitor is online: a bunch of empty five-star ratings and 2 comments from real customers calling out the phony reviews!

These rangy anecdotes are just that: anecdotes. But for me, they expose the power and complexity of what has been dubbed "social proof," the notion that consumers now validate or invalidate for each other the value proposition of your business. It's not quick or easy to build genuine social proof, but it is definitely worth it. Here's why.

REVIEWS ARE INSANELY INFLUENTIAL

We now live in what Forrester Research has dubbed "The Age of the Customer," and guess what? Empowered customers are more demanding than ever, and they have the ability to make or break your business. They don't trust what you say about your product or service, and they really don't trust your ads. Instead, they trust other people like themselves.

So, whether you're talking about a restaurant, a medical practice or an electrical contracting company, it's hard to overstate the influence its customers now have on each other. Because customer reviews are perceived as being written by regular folks with no agenda, people trust them—even more than they trust expert opinions. A 2011 study found that 55% of consumers felt that the opinions of "people like me" had the greatest impact on their buying decisions.[2] To underscore the point, the popular members-only home service review site Angie's List started using this tagline in the same year: "Reviews you can trust, written by people just like you."

And globally, trust in online reviews is on the rise. According to Nielsen's 2012 "Global Trust in Advertising Survey," 70% of consumers trust online reviews from people they don't know, up 15% from four years earlier. Ninety-two percent of consumers around the world say they trust word-of-mouth recommendations, whether from strangers or from friends and family, above all other forms of advertising.[3] And keep in mind that those who regularly read and post online reviews tend to be younger, wealthier and more optimistic about technology—an attractive segment for most businesses to reach.[4]

72% of consumers trust online reviews **as much** as recommendations from friends and family.[1]

4 out of **5** consumers reverse their purchase decision based on negative online reviews.[5]

Before dining or shopping, **93%** of U.S. consumers check online reviews at least some of the time.[6]

15% always check reviews

16.5% check most of the time

30% check half of the time

32% rarely check reviews

ALMOST EVERYBODY READS REVIEWS

Consumers today have access to a wide range of information and opinion from independent third parties about products, services, companies and individuals. We use these data sources to discover, evaluate and compare the things we're interested in. Marketers sometimes call this burgeoning phenomenon of online opinion-sharing "electronic Word of Mouth" (eWOM), a term that encompasses online reviews, social media and discussion forums.

Increasingly, we train ourselves to do a kind of vague triangulation on the truth from these disparate sources of information, whether we're looking at a new TV, an Indian restaurant or a job candidate. According to one study, the typical consumer today checks 10.4 information sources before buying a product or service.[7]

Internet users in the U.S. generate more than 500 billion impressions on each other via eWOM channels specifically regarding products and services—more than a quarter of the number of impressions advertisers make.[8] Given the overwhelming influence that consumer opinions carry, getting a business involved in this peer-to-peer conversation can have a greater marketing impact at a lower cost than almost any paid advertising.

A half-star improvement on Yelp's 5-star rating makes it **30-49%** more likely that a restaurant will sell out seats during its peak hours.[9]

★ = **30-49%** more

REVIEWS ARE WORTH MORE THAN THEIR FACE VALUE

What people say about a business online matters. But that they say anything at all matters even more. As we've seen, review sites and social media are channels that consumers use to discover, research and evaluate new products and services. But perhaps you're saying to yourself, "Not me. I use Google."

It's a good point. Unless we're regular users of a site like Angie's List or Yelp, we probably go straight to the search engines with our immediate needs. After we parse through the organic search results and the ads and winnow them down to a few top candidates, we might check the reviews on our shortlist, but it's their visibility

Positive reviews "stick" with consumers longer than negative reviews.[10]

in search that put them there. So instead of reviews, shouldn't a business owner care more about things like search engine optimization (SEO) and search advertising?

If you have the budget for it, SEO and paid search advertising can be highly effective channels for generating new customer leads. But they're also ultra-competitive and therefore expensive, with high costs involved for either type of campaign to work.

Note also that online reviews are not just about *influence*: they create *visibility*, too. Especially in smaller markets, getting online reviews is one of the most effective and inexpensive SEO tactics you can implement. For example, a physical therapist in Erie, Pennsylvania just wrote us after he got his first Google+ review with Grade.us:

> That SINGLE Google review finally put me on the map, literally! My business never showed up on Google maps with a little letter until that review!

As local SEO consultant and blogger Phil Rozek says, "Google wants to see signs of life."[11] A legitimate review on an authoritative, third-party review site is one of the most powerful signals you can send to Google. And the more reviews you have, the more visible your business listing across the Web, whether that's through better rank in search results or more prominence on review sites themselves.

"I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices a man so."

— Sydney Smith

MYTHS AND TRUTHS ABOUT REVIEWS

MYTH #1: ONLY UNHAPPY CUSTOMERS BOTHER TO WRITE REVIEWS

Business owners are a goal-oriented and driven lot. They often focus their energies on their business to the exclusion of leisure, hobbies, even vacation and family. But they may also project this mindset onto their customers and assume that if anyone is going to volunteer their time to write about a business online, it's going to be a handful of friends and family or else some seriously aggrieved customers.

We hear these comments from small business owners all the time. Maybe my mom or brother will write something positive, but who else is going to bother?

Truth: Most Reviews Are Positive, But Negative Reviews Are Over-Represented

In fact, customers have a wide variety of motivations for rating and reviewing the products and services they buy, both altruistic and self-serving. And as it turns out, the vast majority of online reviews are positive across products, services, industries and online communities.[12] A study by Keller Fay Group and Bazaarvoice found that so long as posting a review is relatively easy, the review distribution in any given community tends to follow a "J-curve" with positive reviews outweighing negative reviews 8 to 1.[13]

Still, negative reviews are over- represented on review sites thanks to the so-called "adverse reviewer problem"—the truism that disgruntled customers have a greater-than-normal incentive to bad-mouth a business online. These people know that complaining publicly creates attention for them and pain for the business that "wronged" them.
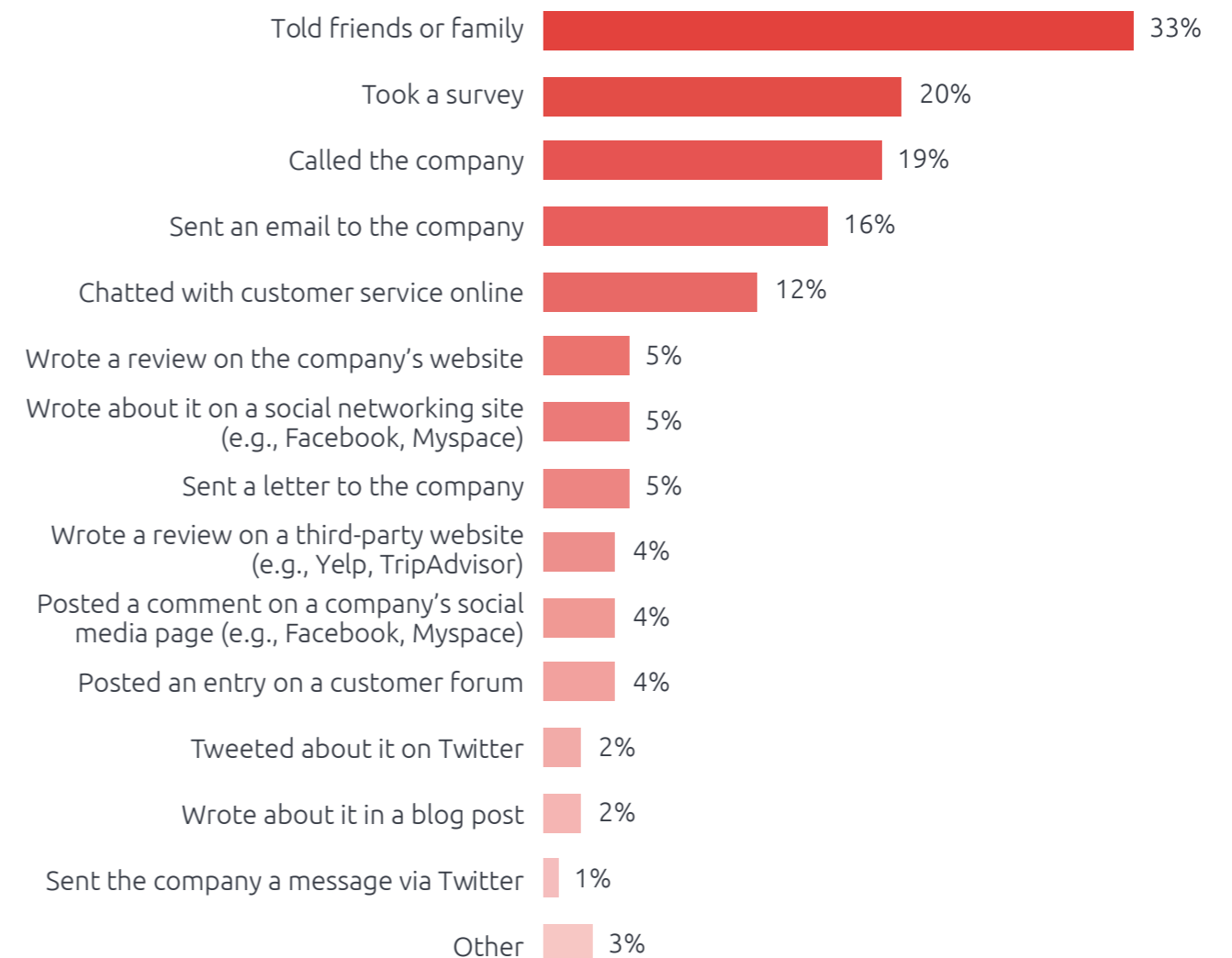
According to one survey, of the 57% of US online consumers who have had unsatisfactory service interactions in the past month, almost half of them (27% of all) have vented in online reviews or via Facebook, Twitter or blog posts.[15] Another study compared the reach of negative vs. positive comments about businesses and found that on average, unhappy customers tell 24 other people, while happy customers tell just 15.[16] Clearly, there's opportunity to unlock more of the positive sentiment customers hold back and get them sharing the good word about any brand.

Unhappy customers tell an average of **24** people about their experience; happy ones tell **15** people.[14]

In which of the following ways have you provided feedback or complained about unsatisfactory customer service interactions in the past 12 months?

Told friends or family	33%
Took a survey	20%
Called the company	19%
Sent an email to the company	16%
Chatted with customer service online	12%
Wrote a review on the company's website	5%
Wrote about it on a social networking site (e.g., Facebook, Myspace)	5%
Sent a letter to the company	5%
Wrote a review on a third-party website (e.g., Yelp, TripAdvisor)	4%
Posted a comment on a company's social media page (e.g., Facebook, Myspace)	4%
Posted an entry on a customer forum	4%
Tweeted about it on Twitter	2%
Wrote about it in a blog post	2%
Sent the company a message via Twitter	1%
Other	3%

Base: 7,440 US online adults who have used any customer service method in the past 12 months (multiple responses accepted)[17]

MYTH #2: CUSTOMERS ONLY CARE ABOUT THE NUMBER OF STARS

Some popular recent statistics about the power of reviews and ratings come from researchers who were able to show a causal relationship between Yelp star ratings and restaurant activity and revenues. One study demonstrated that an extra half-star rating on Yelp causes restaurants to sell out up to 49% more frequently at peak hours.[18] Another found that a one-star increase on Yelp yields a revenue increase of 5% to 9% for restaurants.[19]

These are eye-catching numbers. Why should a business care about anything other than the number of stars customers are giving it?

Truth: Customers Consider Star Ratings in Context

A four- or five-star aggregate rating on a review site can seem a very satisfying achievement, but as marketers we should know better. Customers who look to reviews for insight aren't sheeple, after all. They actually do read reviews and consider ratings in context, and they increasingly cast a critical eye on both. In fact, they probably view a blank or flimsy 5-star review with loads of suspicion, and rightly so: fake reviews are all too common these days.

Fortunately, consumers also scrutinize negative reviews. They know that very low ratings typically reflect just a single aspect of the total customer experience. For example, product reviews that complain of poor customer service are almost universally voted down by potential buyers because they are seen as self-important and unhelpful for evaluating the product itself.[20] For hotel ratings, we see the same thing: In an analysis of one-star hotel ratings on

TripAdvisor, researchers noted that the most prominent issues driving dissatisfaction were front desk service issues, "principally those involving front desk staff responsiveness and empathy."[21] But if you're a budget traveler who's more interested in price and location, those reviews are not likely to sway your booking decision.

One study examined exactly what makes a review persuasive and found that the quality and content of the reviewer's argument is by far the most important factor to most consumers. Other factors such as the reviewer's bias or expertise had little impact on a review's credibility.[22] So, it turns outs, substance matters more than surface in customer reviews.

MYTH #3: NEGATIVE REVIEWS CAN ONLY HURT MY REPUTATION

Most of us appreciate constructive criticism, though we prefer it to be private. Negative online reviews, however, are not always constructive, and they're never private. For business owners, a bad review can literally ruin your day. You find yourself angry at the reviewer, your staff, yourself. You're paranoid that the next customer you serve is going to turn around and stab you in the back. And you worry about the consequences of a bad review just sitting out there.

There's nothing fuzzy about the logic of this situation: Good reviews make good reputations, bad reviews bad ones. Right?

Truth: All Reviews Can Help Your Reputation

Keep in mind that extremely positive and extremely negative reviews are never the most persuasive. A review that gushes about a given

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The Good News About Bad Reviews

Got bad reviews? Don't panic—it's better than you think. In fact, we dare say there's no such thing as a "bad" review. As pointed out by digital marketing maven Lisa Barone, negative comments from an unsatisfied customer may smart at first, but they can have a lot of upside.[23] For example, they help you:

- Project legitimacy and authenticity

- Correct issues that need correcting

- Steer potential customers away from a bad fit

- Demonstrate care and service by how you respond

And it turns out that your most vocal naysayers may actually be your best customers acting as self-appointed "brand managers" for your business. A recent study found that devoted customers actually vent the most in online reviews, ostensibly trying to steer the companies they like back on course. In fact, they sometimes make stuff up just to make a point![24]

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bakery might be read as the reviewer's self-administered pat on the back for his fine taste. A review that rues over a shoddy trim job by an otherwise respectable lawn service might be seen as an empty screed by one of those people who's never satisfied.

In fact, it's the diversity of voices and opinions that create authenticity and ultimately value in a business's online reputation. In evaluating a product or service, consumers want to hear from more than just its ranters and ravers. They triangulate on the truth from many points of view.

If this all sounds like so much hocus pocus and wishful thinking, it isn't. Research has actually corroborated the fact that readers of mixed reviews form more positive judgments of a brand than those exposed to positive reviews alone.[25] Not that you should seek negative reviews, exactly, but rather recognize that when they do occur, they must be viewed in context and can be used to your advantage. (See *Master Class: Responding to Negative Reviews*.) Unless they completely overwhelm the conversation about a brand, negative reviews create opportunities to build your reputation more than they dismantle it. But you have to be paying attention.

MYTH #4: THE MORE POSITIVE THE REVIEW, THE BETTER

Praise is good. Everybody likes praise. The more praise we get, and the more glowing it is, the more we outshine our competition. So why should a business want anything other than glowing praise in its customer reviews?

Truth: The More Substantive the Review, the Better

Positive reviews are good, but substantive reviews are better. To be meaningful—that is, to pique interests and sway purchasing decisions—a review should relate how real customers experienced a product or service so that other real customers can decide whether that product or service is a good fit for them, too.

In providing gritty detail, such reviews often highlight aspects of a product, service or business that you, as a marketer, maybe never thought about and would never have advertised. (Examples: a boutique's own jeans brand runs a bit small; a restaurant's portion

sizes are Weight Watchers-friendly; a staff member is particularly quirky or humorous.)

This "highlight effect" is good: It provides additional hooks to get customers in the door and steers them to what they're looking for—or away from what they're not. Positive, negative or neutral, it's reviews with substance that do the most for customers and therefore for the business under review. Not to mention that richer reviews also make better search engine fodder, casting a wider net of content that can potentially place the reviewed business listing higher up in the search results for diverse queries and keywords.

MYTH #5: MY REPUTATION WILL TAKE CARE OF ITSELF

In this Age of the Customer, customers have unprecedented means by which to voice unfettered opinions: hundreds of online review sites, ubiquitous social media channels, and hand-held apps that connect them to communities of other consumers 24/7. If top brands and Fortune 500 companies have trouble keeping on top of their reputation in this environment (and they do), what hope does a small business have? Shouldn't a small business focus on its product or service and let its reputation take care of itself?

Truth: A Little Attention Goes a Long Way

Consider the golden nuggets of opportunity we've uncovered so far:

- Consumers trust each others' opinions more than expert opinions or any form of advertising

- Pretty much everyone turns to customer reviews to help them make purchase decisions

- Customer reviews tend to be favorable, but few of us actually write them, leaving more positive sentiment to be unlocked

- Some negative reviews help a business look more authentic and provide a chance for it to showcase its customer service in its response

- All reviews can help qualify customer leads and boost the visibility of a business

Online ratings and reviews have the potential to be the single most effective and rewarding marketing channel for small and local businesses, and yet most marketers and business owners do very little to foster and shape reviews because they assume it's out of their hands. They take a wait-and-see approach—forever.

The rest of this book is about how to turn customer reviews into an addressable marketing channel. It's about being proactive with respect to getting more customer reviews and being responsive to the channel over time, minimizing the damage and increasing the reward of any activity there.

Remember: A little bit of attention to customer opinion goes a long way. Here, what Forrester calls "the four Vs" are always building on each other: the greater the *volume* of opinion shared; the greater *velocity* at which it's disseminated; the greater *visibility* it has; and the greater *volatility* it shows as one experience tips off another.[26] We're going to cover what to do to keep these four Vs growing in the right direction for any business.

"Courteous treatment will make a customer a walking advertisement."

— James Cash Penney

WHY WE WRITE REVIEWS

Little more than a decade ago, if a business was subjected to a written review at all, it was one written by a professional journalist or critic who was trained and paid to write it, and who by profession had a mandate to be objective and a broad basis of comparison for making their public pronouncements.

Now everyone and his brother's a critic. And most businesses are regularly reviewed in public forums by a seemingly unending stream of amateurs.[27]

But why do people do it? If you're going to maximize the value you get from reviews written by customers, you should start with an understanding of what motivates customers to write reviews in the first place.

REVIEWER MOTIVATIONS ARE MANY

Writing a review on Yelp or Google+ is a volunteer assignment. (If it isn't, you're doing it wrong.) There's no one motivation that drives every volunteer reviewer, but a survey of the literature on both user-generated content in general and customer reviews in particular suggests that the main drivers fall into just a few categories:[28]

- **Altruism**: to help others find a great undiscovered restaurant or rare medical specialist

- **Justice**: to punish a business that wronged you

- **Reciprocity**: to acknowledge and reward a business that went above and beyond

- **Recognition**: to win distinction as an important or top contributor (Google's "City Experts," Yelp's "Elite")

- **Social image**: to project one's personality or lifestyle through syndication to social networks like Facebook

- **Self-expression**: to cultivate one's opinions and experiences within a community of like-minded people

- **Personal interest**: the same reason a wine connoisseur keeps a journal or a diligent student takes notes
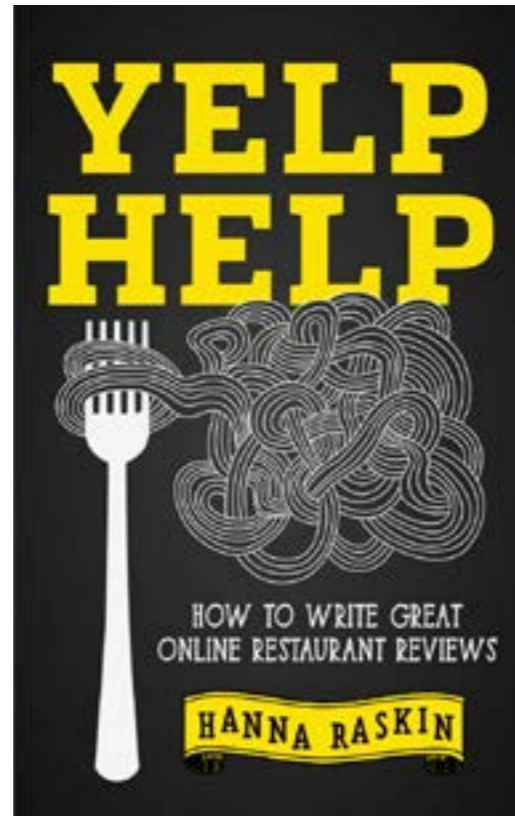
Of these categories, "altruism" and "reciprocity" are what reviewers themselves most frequently cite as the motivation that drives them to write reviews.[29] Whether or not these selfless impulses truly or fully motivate reviewer behavior is, of course, another matter. To say you wrote a review to "help others" is no doubt more socially acceptable than to say you wrote it to be envied, admired or loved by others—which is how you might truthfully express a desire for "recognition" or "social image."

Social rewards are certainly a powerful motivator for some reviewers. Review sites with an overt social component like Yelp or

Foursquare attract reviewers and keep them active by conferring nominal achievements (like Foursquare's "badges") and status (like Yelp's "Elite" program). The strategy works. A comparison of Yelp's reviewers with those on Yahoo and Citysearch showed that Yelpers are more prolific review-writers by an order of magnitude. Whereas the average Citysearch reviewer has posted 2 reviews in their lifetime, the average Yelper has posted 25. Whereas low-output reviewers are dominant on Citysearch, they're marginalized on Yelp:

- 71.2% Citysearch reviewers wrote 1 review; 0.6% wrote 20 or more

- 9.2% Yelp reviewers wrote 1 review; 27.1% wrote 20 or more[30]

Despite their productivity, reviewers motivated by social reward are still a small minority, and their reviews can frustrate marketers and business owners. Why? Because what we write with our social image in mind tends to say more about us personally than the business we're reviewing.

Former restaurant critic Hanna Raskin teaches Yelpers to elevate their craft in her book, Yelp Help (2013)

Restaurant critic Hanna Raskin says that Yelpers who write the most "egregious" reviews are "vindictive diners who'd rather flaunt their own culinary expertise or pen a mini-memoir than help fellow diners."[31] Yelp encourages this behavior because it yields reviews. When asked to evaluate the reviews of others, we're asked whether a review is "useful," "funny" or "cool." No doubt "funny" or "cool" reviews have more to do with the reviewer than the reviewed!

SMALL OBSTACLES STYMIE REVIEWERS

As large as the phenomenon of "electronic word of mouth" is, 80% of its 500 billion annual impressions are produced by just 16% of online consumers.[32] Why don't more altruistic and fair-minded consumers share their experiences online?

Let's face it: Unless you're the Mother Teresa of customer opinion, altruism at the scale required to leave a review of a local business is probably a fairly weak force in your life. You have lots of things going on. You have a career. You have a family. You value your time.

That feeling is most pronounced among educated and affluent folks, according to a study by TripAdvisor.[33] The travel review site found that "have no time" is the most frequently cited reason its users don't post reviews, with educated and affluent users valuing their time the most of any group.

Just ask yourself: Did you write a review of the last good restaurant you visited or dry cleaner you used? Why or why not? Better yet, ask 1,017 typical consumers why they rarely or never write reviews and clear answers begin to emerge.[34] By far, the top two reasons are:

- "Writing reviews is too tedious"

- "I forgot to write the review"

These obstacles to would-be reviewers may seem small, but they're big enough to subdue a weak intent in the first place. In the remaining chapters, we look at how to boost a customer's motivation to review your business and reduce the obstacles to her doing so.

"The only source of competitive advantage is the one that can survive technology-fueled disruption—an obsession with understanding, delighting, connecting with, and serving customers."

— Josh Bernoff, *Competitive Strategy in the Age of the Customer*[35]

HOW TO GET MORE REVIEWS (AND MAKE THEM COUNT)

In this chapter, I let you in on the tools and techniques we've learned at Grade.us (and for years before we created Grade.us) to get happy customers sharing the good word about almost any business, product or service. The overarching strategy here is what I call a "review funnel": anticipate what will motivate customers to write a review and *funnel* them from their experience of the product or service through completing the review process.

90% of typical U.S. consumers read online reviews; **6%** write them.[36]

"With reviews, more is more," as small business marketing mastermind John Jantsch puts it. "The trick is to make sure your happy customers know you value reviews and encourage them to create them."[37]

THE REVIEW FUNNEL STRATEGY

A review funnel strategy can make use of multiple tactics, channels and assets (human, print, email, Web, mobile, etc.), but the formula is simple:

- Provide a way for businesses to ask and remind customers to share their experience online

- Drive customers to an asset or destination that's designed to convert them into reviewers

- Guide each reviewer through selecting the best possible review site and completing a review

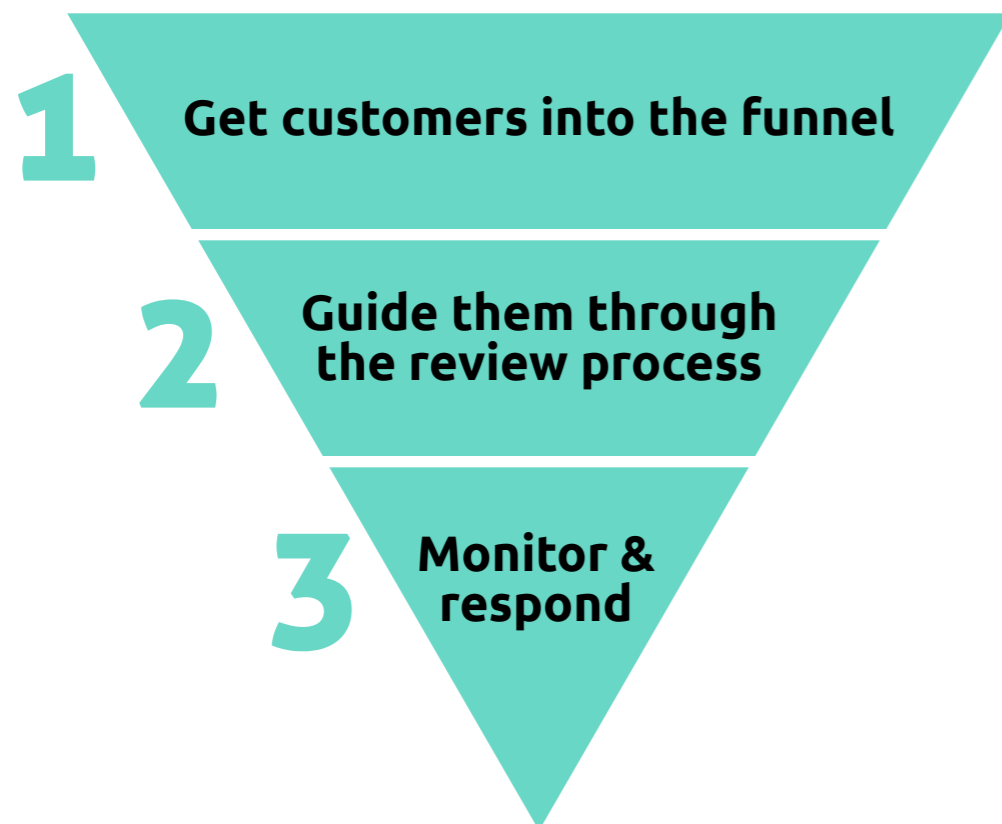> **Inviting, Encouraging and Asking for Reviews**
>
> I advocate only honest and non-solicitous tactics for getting customers to write reviews. No pressure and no incentives. These tactics comply with the vast majority of review site terms. However, keep in mind that Yelp in particular has reached absurd levels of business-unfriendly rhetoric: they discourage even mentioning the word "review" to customers. For more on Yelp, see *Coda: Is Yelp a Four-Letter Word?*

As we've seen, happy customers who intend to write a review still won't do it if (1) they forget; (2) it's too hard; or (3) they're too busy. So the task of any review funnel is essentially threefold:

1. Remind each customer to write a review

2. Make the process easier

3. Avail them of it during their downtime

Grade.us exists to provide a flexible and turnkey print/online review funnel system that serves these functions for a wide range of scenarios and businesses. I also highlight several excellent competing solutions, such as CustomerLobby, GetFiveStars and BrightLocal's ReviewBiz. But if you're the hands-on type, you'll find that everything presented here is doable yourself without any vendors or third-parties. Local marketing expert Phil Rozek, for example, has found a low-tech review funnel solution is often effective for his clients: a one-page handout that covers all three steps above and can be handed directly to the clients' customers.[38]

Stages of the Review Funnel

1 Get customers into the funnel

2 Guide them through the review process

3 Monitor & respond

It's Not About the Tools

Implementing a customer review strategy is not about buying a solution from a vendor or deploying a specific tactic. These things can help, of course, but getting more positive reviews from real customers requires a commitment from the business itself that no technological solution can provide.

In the end, winning the reputation game is about "understanding, delighting, connecting with, and serving customers." As local SEO guru Mike Blumenthal put it during a recent webinar, marketers who count reviews as a measure of success are using an "ass-backwards" metric. "The right metric," he says, "is customer satisfaction."[39]

The "review funnel" strategy presented here is aimed at building a virtuous circle of customer satisfaction and customer reviews. I believe that it's the only proactive way to do reputation management with integrity and foresight for the long term.

STAGE 1: GET CUSTOMERS INTO THE FUNNEL

As we've seen, a customer's motivation to write a review is typically weak at best. Unless she's a "superuser" or just had an awful experience (remember the "adverse reviewer" problem?), she's not likely to even *think* of writing a review. Not to worry, though. You can help. Here's how:

- Invite customers to give feedback

- Craft the right message

- Offer an incentive to engage

Invite the Customer to Give Feedback

When Fox Business recently interviewed several hotels and inns for insights on how they achieved 5-star ratings on TripAdvisor, all of them had just one practice in common: they invited guests to write reviews, whether with a sign or takeaway at the front desk, a handwritten thank you note sent after their stay, or a follow-up email.[40]

It's amazing what effect these simple prompts have. If you collect customer information such as an address, email or phone number, you might send customers a message after a transaction inviting them to give feedback about their experience:

"Thanks for choosing us. We'd like to invite you to share your experience with us. Your feedback not only helps us, it helps other potential customers."

For many local businesses, however, collecting customer contact information is impractical. Still, if you maintain a social media presence for the business, you can periodically poll its friends, fans or followers and achieve the same result, albeit among a (typically small) subset of customers who also engage with the business online:

"If we've served you this month, thank you for the opportunity! We'd love to hear about your experience, and no doubt others would, too..."

When business transactions happen face-to-face, however, such as at a restaurant or doctor's office, we like to arm the business owner (or server, or front desk) with printed review "invites": small takeaway cards with friendly messaging to encourage and remind the customer to write a review.

Handing something tangible to the customer (or client, or patient) is often easier and less solicitous than asking them directly. It also lets you identify the best customers to write reviews and ask them at the most opportune time.

For example, one of our restaurant clients trains servers to deliver the review invite with dessert, a perfect time for sated diners to receive the message and consider what they might say about their experience. Some diners complete a review on the spot, lingering over dessert with smartphone in hand. If not, the handout serves as a physical reminder about the review until the customer writes it, loses the invite, or throws the invite away.

Grade.us provides printed review "invites" as an easy and non-solicitous way to ask and remind customers to leave a review.

Craft the Right Message

Asking for customer reviews can be extremely effective, but getting the ask right is a highly nuanced affair. Note that in the examples above, we've diligently avoided solicitous language and opted for the softer "invite" over the harder "ask." No matter how you do it, encouraging customer reviews should always be low-pressure to avoid putting customers off or risking a possible backlash.[41]

When developing your own message, remember that happy customers generally want to help others find good products and services (altruism) and they want to help business owners who served them well (reciprocity). Of the many motivations that drive customers to write reviews—highlighted in the chapter *Why We Write Reviews*—these are the safest to draw on. On Grade.us printed invites and landing pages, for example, the default message begins,

>   *"Help us. Help others. You're invited to review..."*

It's important to craft a message appropriate to the business, and to train any staff who might be delivering that message. For example, we work with some doctors and medical practices who initially recoiled at the idea of asking patients for reviews—the idea seemed to them to compromise the sanctity of the doctor-patient relationship.

But increasingly, patients rely on sites like Vitals, Healthgrades and RateMDs to choose among healthcare providers, so doctors and medical practices recognize that they can't stand idly by if their reputation is suffering. For them, though, the right message is never about patient reciprocity or doing the doctor a "favor." It's about helping other patients:

>   *"Your feedback helps other patients like you find the best care online."*

Offer an Incentive to Engage

Before the most conscientious among you cry foul, I don't mean to suggest that you ever offer an incentive in exchange for a positive review, a practice that is not only unethical, it violates the terms of service on many review sites and may lead to you getting banned, flamed and publicly shamed.

But you might offer a no-strings incentive to get customers a step further into your review funnel. For example, Grade.us clients can attach an offer to the landing page they drive customers to. It's simply a way of getting more people to the page. The offer—maybe a discount coupon or a free download—is available to anyone, whether or not they post a review. But making the offer available there, on a page otherwise designed to guide customers through the process of submitting a review, increases the odds of getting that review.

> ### A Reminder About, er, Reminders
>
> If you have the ability to reach out again to customers after a transaction or service experience, it doesn't hurt to remind them about leaving a review.
>
> Just be sure not to overdo it. We had a client come to us wanting to implement what he called a "pounding" strategy to get reviews—just "pound" customers with messages and gifts and reminders until reviews shake out. I share the urgency some business owners feel to get reviews, but remember: *easy does it.*

STAGE 2: GUIDE THE CUSTOMER THROUGH THE REVIEW PROCESS

The customer is ready to take the next step in your review funnel. But wait! What's the next step? What are you actually asking customers to do? Where are your invites driving them? To the company website? To a review site directly? Somewhere else?
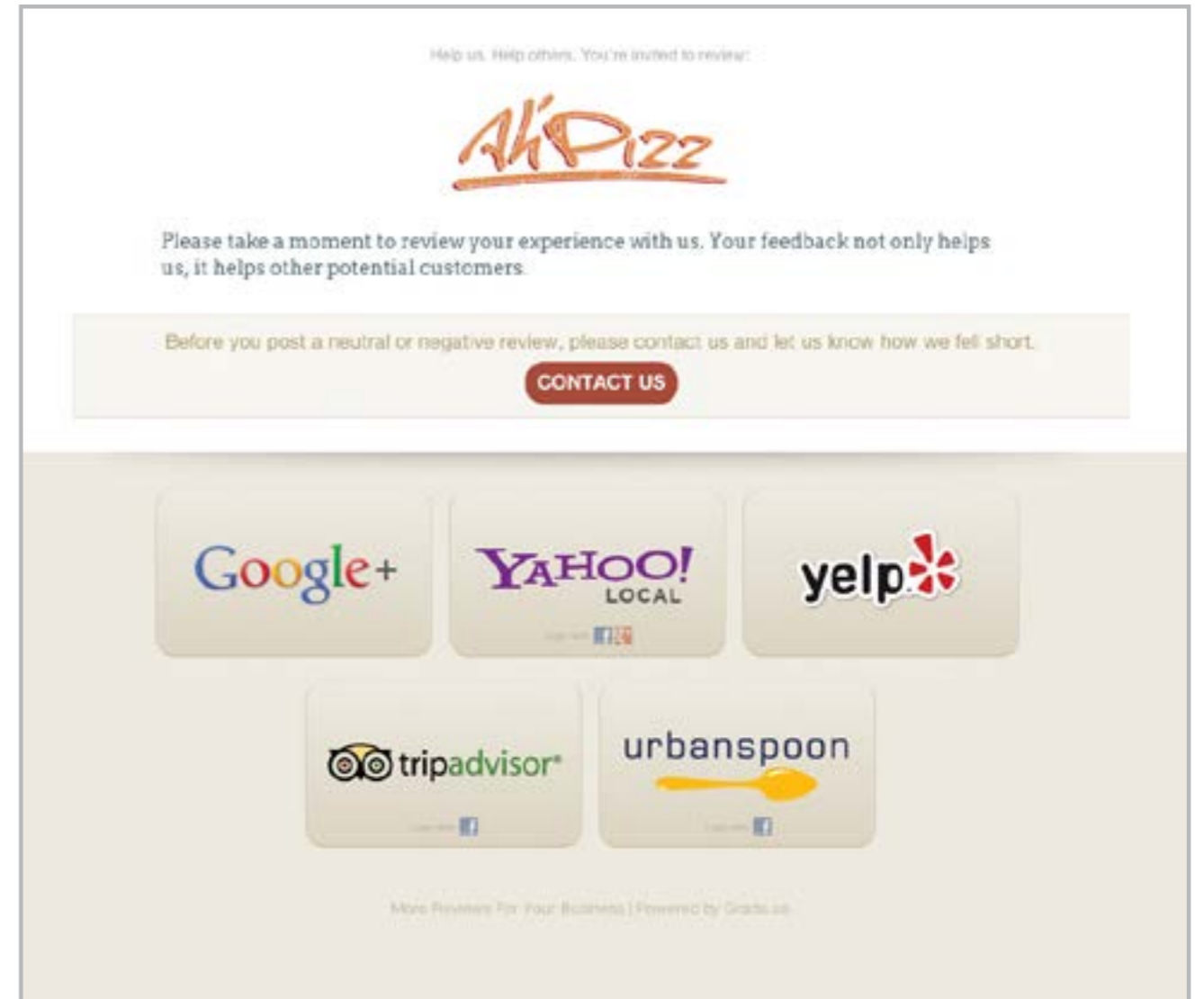
The ideal review funnel solution is one that gets customers leaving reviews where they count the most: on the third-party sites others use to discover, evaluate and compare companies, products or services like yours. No doubt you care about more than one site, and which sites you care about will change over time.

We've developed the following simple approach to be future-proof as well as easy to adapt and maintain over the long term:

- Drive the customer to a landing page you control

- Focus the customer on leaving a review

- Help the customer select a review site and complete their review

Drive the Customer to a Landing Page You Control

Over time, new review sites and communities rise to prominence while others fade away. Google's algorithm creates new winners and losers. And the digital fortunes of any particular business can turn on a dime, including its visibility, rank and reputation online. A plumbing company that needs customer reviews to help build its visibility on Google today may need that attention tomorrow

A single destination designed to turn customers into reviewers.

on Angies' List, the popular members-only review site for home services. As a marketer, you need to be able to respond to these changes, ideally without revamping everything you've already built.

By creating a review funnel landing page online and driving customers to it, you effectively decouple the tactics of asking for feedback from the specifics of where and how that feedback is collected. If you're always driving customers to the same place, you can shift the focus of your review-getting effort as easily as tweaking that page. The business rules never have to change.

To accomplish this decoupling, you will want your landing page(s) to have the following:

- an unchanging and easy-to-remember URL that you can use across media, such as in printed handouts or in a QR code posted at the point of sale

- a mobile-friendly design to ensure that if and when you promote the page to users of mobile devices (such as with a QR code), those customers can access it

In the sections that follow, we'll discuss what belongs on a landing page, and how it converts customers into reviewers.

Be sure customers can take the next step in your review funnel with any device.

Focus the Customer on Leaving a Review

Remember, our goal is to make it easier for customers to write a review. We want to capitalize on their intention to do so, however weak that intention may be. In this delicate situation, any distraction or loss of focus can hinder the customer's progress or lose them entirely.

Many marketers understandably want to drive customers to their own or a client's company website, since that's an asset they already own and control. All of the top vendors of review solutions— including Grade.us, CustomerLobby, GetFiveStars and BrightLocal— facilitate this approach with the ability to embed a reviews widget on your site.

Still, you're going to want a landing page dedicated to collecting customer feedback, whether you build it yourself, use one created by Grade.us or GetFiveStars, or embed a reviews widget on an otherwise empty page of a company website. The last thing you want to do is divert the attention of someone who's about to give you an uber-valuable review to looking at the company's holiday party pics or latest blog post instead! You will want your landing page(s) to:

- focus exclusively on reviews and be stripped of all other calls to action—possibly even the site navigation

- reinforce and elaborate the message that brought the customer to the page in the first place

On this second point, Mike Mandis, an independent mortgage lender and Grade.us client, uses his landing page to make his reviewer message more personal, colorful and specific:

"As a small mortgage company, I can't compete with the Mega-Lenders and their mega-advertising budget. They have stage coaches for crying out loud!

BUT, when it comes actually earning customers through Social Media channels via Customer Reviews, they can't compete with us. Good reviews can't be bought, they must be earned. This is where you come in.

If we've earned your Recommendation, please choose one or two Review sites below and share your consumer experience with others. Your review helps attract the kind of clients we're looking for, clients like you. I appreciate your business, but even more important, I value your trust."
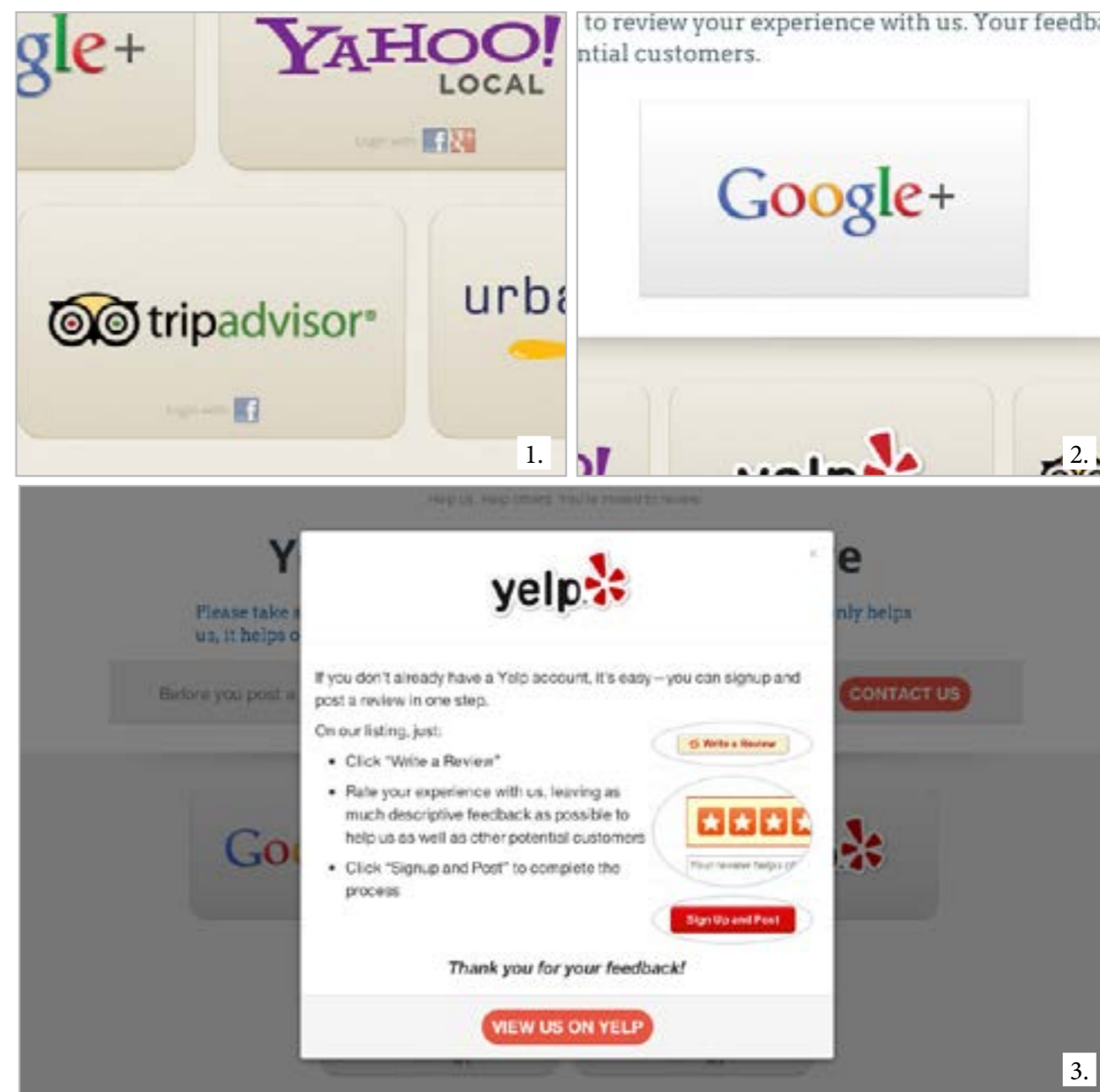
Perhaps the most important components of your landing page, though, are the assets you use to send customers on that final push through your review funnel.

Help the Customer Select a Review Site and Complete Their Review

Since we're primarily concerned with generating customer reviews on important review sites, any landing page will consist of links to business profiles on those sites, where the goal is to move the customer along with the highest likelihood of their completing a review. Here are some ready tips to get more customers clicking through your links with the greatest momentum:

- Offer choice but not too much choice: link to just a few sites at any one time to avoid overwhelming the customer with options.

- Visually highlight the site(s) you care most about by using a larger size, different color and higher position on the page.

- Help the customer identify sites that accept an alternative login, such as a Facebook or Google+ account. (People hate creating new accounts!)

- Educate reviewers onsite (briefly!) about the review process for each site so they know what to expect.

1. Help customers identify where they can login with their Facebook or Gmail account, dramatically increasing conversions. 2. Highlight a preferred review channel over others as needed. 3. Educate customers just enough to help them complete a review.

Finally, be sure to provide unsatisfied customers an alternative to posting a neutral or negative review, such as an email address, phone number or Web form that they can access 24/7. If the business has an active social media presence, directing the customer there can offer heightened attention and transparency to their issue, while keeping it's long-term public visibility to a minimum.

STAGE 3: MONITOR AND RESPOND TO REVIEWS

I've said that turning customer reviews into an effective marketing channel is about being:

- *proactive* with respect to getting customers to share the word about your business on review sites; and

- *responsive* by addressing reviews publicly or privately when they don't reflect the reputation you aspire to

In fact, I don't much like the popular industry term "reputation management" which seems to now refer to the use of technical tricks to bury unflattering information about a business. Working with customer reviews is about *reputation creation,* where all activity has the potential to build a positive, authentic brand over time.

Monitor Reviews

To make reputation creation work for you, you have to be attentive. You need to know what people are saying, good or bad, about your business or the business you work for. And to the extent possible, you need to take in and evaluate those opinions, and act on what you learn. It's a tall order!

There are tools to make it easier. If you're a marketer with a full stable of clients or a business owner with exactly zero minutes a day to devote to this, you'll want to engage an automated review monitoring service to help you keep track of what's being said on review sites. Review monitoring and alerts are included as part of Grade.us and other review solutions, as well as with popular listing services like Yext and the new Yahoo! Localworks. There are also some really good standalone monitoring solutions like ReviewTrackers.

Whatever solution you choose, you'll want to make sure you know about any new reviews within a reasonable timeframe from when they are posted. A matter of hours or days is acceptable. A matter of weeks or months is not. If a highly negative review lingers in the public eye without a countervailing response, the damage is greater.

Keeping your finger on the pulse of reviews can also help you act when there is a flurry of activity that indicates a real problem, such as a staff performance issue or product deficiency. And it's worth noting that your most recent reviews may matter most of all: researchers have demonstrated a "wrap effect" wherein readers of reviews form their impression based largely on the first and last ones they see![42]

Respond to Reviews

Not every review site allows businesses to respond, but you should certainly take advantage of those that do. There are a few rules of thumb for responding publicly to reviews:

1. Do not respond to all reviews—it's hard to keep up and may look less than genuine. Instead, strive to respond to all or

most negative comments, as well as those positive comments that may highlight an aspect of personal attention or detail that customers would otherwise not know about.

2. In general, you should respond to negative reviews wherever possible. Readers tend to see positive reviews as self-serving, patting the customer on back for his or her own good taste, while they may assume negative reviews were directly caused by the customer experience and therefore more valid.[43]

3. In any response, thank the reviewer for their time and feedback—no matter what the truth is, your sanity and your public image do best when you assume that reviewers are trying to help you, not hurt you.

By responding maturely, acknowledging critique and vowing to do better, you not only have a good chance of winning over the reviewer, but readers of the exchange as well. Research by TripAdvisor, for example, found that 79% of the readers of negative reviews say they are reassured by responses from business owners.[44]

MASTER CLASS: HOW TO RESPOND TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

On the late 70s British sitcom *Fawlty Towers*, Basil Fawlty (played by John Cleese) is an ill-disposed owner of a hotel in the seaside town of Torquay, England. He's dogged by relentless hotel mishaps, a naggingly sensible wife, and droves of troublesome guests. In one episode, Mrs. Richards, a particularly troublesome guest, calls Fawlty to her room to make her displeasure with the hotel known:

Mrs. Richards: *When I pay for a view, I expect something more interesting than that.*

Basil Fawlty: *That is Torquay, madam.*

Richards: *It's not good enough.*

Fawlty: *Well, may I ask what you were expecting to see out of a Torquay hotel bedroom window? Sydney Opera House, perhaps? The Hanging Gardens of Babylon? Herds of wildebeests sweeping majestically...*

Richards: *Don't be silly. I expect to be able to see the sea.*

Fawlty: *You can see the sea. It's over there between the land and the sky.*

Richards: *I'd need a telescope to see that.*

Fawlty: *Well, may I suggest that you consider moving to a hotel closer to the sea?* [mutters] *Or preferably in it.*

Richards: *Now, listen to me. I'm not satisfied, but I've decided to stay here. However, I should expect a reduction.*

Fawlty: *Why, because Krakatoa's not erupting at the moment?*

Fawlty's is a brilliant and cathartic display of how not to respond to negative feedback, even when you'd like nothing more than to set a bad-tempered customer straight. Still, a sense of humor is mandatory if you're going to meet the occasional shriveling review with good cheer—though best to keep that humor out of any response to customers, as it may be interpreted as making light of their critique.

In fact, there has been significant research on how to effectively respond to and defuse negative customer feedback, much of it from the hotel and hospitality industry where reviews have a huge impact on bookings and business.[45-48] Here, in a nutshell, are the key ingredients to a successful response:

Relax. If you're the business owner, take a deep breath before responding. Remember that there's no such thing as a bad review.

Say thanks. The customer took the time to right a perceived wrong. You may disagree, and the customer may be ill-informed, unfair or vindictive, but he has created this opportunity for progress.

Don't try to win the argument. You can't. And when the argument plays out in public, you will lose big. An ageless law still holds true in the digital age: the customer is always right.

Decide whether to address the issue publicly or privately. Experts are divided: Some point to the risk of a public exchange becoming messy or unwieldy as a reason to take it offline, while others point out the benefit of demonstrating superior customer service in an open forum. For some professions, however, navigating a public response is even more complex. Physicians can't respond with specifics that compromise patient confidentiality, for example. You will have to use your judgment.

Take responsibility. Apologize for the customer's subpar experience, accept fault and explain what went wrong if you can. Be appreciative and positive, or at least fake it.

Take the big picture into account. When positive reviews of a business outweigh the negative, readers typically dismiss or rationalize any negative comments in the business's favor. But when there's a preponderance of negative opinion, readers will attribute it to legitimate service failures. The latter requires a stronger response from the business.

Consider compensatory action carefully. You want to avoid the appearance that the business rewards complaints, but sometimes compensating the customer for their trouble is the most appropriate response. If the reviews suggest an extensive or undeniable failure, giving the affected parties a voucher or other real compensation shows a commitment to accountability that will give new customers confidence in the business.

If you make amends, suggest an amendment. If things resolve amicably and you deem the negative comments to be unduly damaging, you can request—not demand—the favor of the customer editing or removing his comments.

Make the resolution known. If you resolve a customer issue in private but the negative review remains, let readers know that it was handled offline: "Thank you for bringing this issue to our attention. As discussed on the phone..."

Research shows that customers care about fairness and accountability, and a so-called "service recovery" of the kind described above can convert a dissatisfied customer into a satisfied, loyal one. But it's critical to satisfy both the complainant and the future readers of the exchange, which could live online indefinitely.

Given the stakes of the game and the nuances of playing it, the person charged with responding to reviews should be empowered to make important decisions, have an intimate knowledge of the business and demonstrate decent tact and writing skills. An outside consultant can be successful but needs to provide more than generic or canned responses. Canned responses always seem, well, canned, and may give a worse impression than not responding at all.[49]

"Customer service is the new marketing."

—Derek Sivers, CD Baby

FAVORABLE REVIEWS: DO'S AND DON'TS

DO MAKE A COMMITMENT

"Customer service is the new marketing." This popular little aphorism—attributed to Derek Sivers of the online music store CD Baby—has made the rounds among business consultants and conference panelists for years. But as we grow into the Age of the Customer, where the scope and influence of online word of mouth can be compared with advertising at the same order of magnitude, the notion that customer service *is* marketing seems more compelling everyday.

Still, convincing a business owner that the company's marketing success depends on its commitment to customer service is a tough sell, especially when the cost of providing great service is high and the results long-term. But if the cost of great service is high, the cost of bad service is staggering: More than three quarters of customers today are actively willing to switch to a new provider when their service expectations are unmet.[50]

For small businesses as well as Fortune 500s, reputation is quickly becoming all-important. Survival means remaking companies as "customer-obsessed." It's no small or short-term commitment, but it is the only way to lay a secure foundation for the future.

DO SOMETHING TO DELIGHT CUSTOMERS

You already know that negative reviews rarely reflect a business or product as a whole. Instead, they reflect a lapse in one aspect of the customer experience. Hiccups in shipping an item from an online retailer lead to dramatically lower ratings for the item itself.[51] Negative hotel ratings often cite the lack of "responsiveness and empathy" of front desk staff, a seemingly minor component of the total hotel experience.[52]

In the same way, the "little things" can prompt extremely positive feedback from customers. The primary motivator of online recommendations, it turns out, is not "quality" or "value" but "delight."[53] And the sources of customer delight are manifold. Make a powerful first impression. Go the extra mile. Remember that people aren't going to share their experience online unless it meets a certain threshold of "newsworthiness." Do something worthy of sharing.

DO PAY ATTENTION

When we don't know the drivers of customer satisfaction (or dissatisfaction), we tend to make costly and wrong-headed guesses as to what customers want. For example, research shows that for certain business categories, such as banks, a positive customer experience is by far the most important factor in retaining customers

and accounts for 55% of loyalty, and yet banks big and small routinely try to compensate for poor customer experiences with gimmicks and lower prices.

The solution? As an old friend would say, it doesn't cost a thing to pay attention. Paying attention to customer reviews can help align the priorities of a business with what customers actually care about. Think of reviewers as collaborators doing the kind of business intelligence gathering we used to get only from high-paid professional consultants.

Use Your Reviews, Even the Filtered Ones

Reviews don't just surface problems. Positive reviews may expose subtle, charming or useful features of a business, product or service that you might never have thought to advertise. Be sure to use those reviews! Make them the content of your next traditional ad, email blast, in-store sign, or direct mail piece. Make your staff aware of them. Share the love.

And here's a great tip from David Mihm at Moz.com: If you've got great, *real* reviews caught up in Yelp's fickle review filter, don't despair! For all Yelp's shortcomings, they do have the decency to show you your filtered reviews at the bottom of your profile under "Filtered Reviews."

If you've got a great review in the seventh circle of filter hell, just ask the reviewer for permission to publish it on your website— they'll be happy their effort wasn't in vain, and you'll get a great testimonial for your website to boot.

DON'T BE TOO AGGRESSIVE

If you're launching a new business or trying to recover from a spate of negative publicity, you're probably impatient to start or change the conversation, respectively. Easy does it. Building reputation is a marathon, not a sprint, and getting too aggressive can hurt you by:

- Inciting customer backlash

- Triggering filters on review sites that look for anomalous account behavior

- Using up the will and resources needed for the long haul

For example, if you implement a review funnel and want to get your database of past customers into it now to write reviews, be sure you reach out to no more than a few at a time. Sending scores of reviewers through the funnel at once is bound to produce uneven results and look suspicious to both review site filters and potential customers who read the reviews.
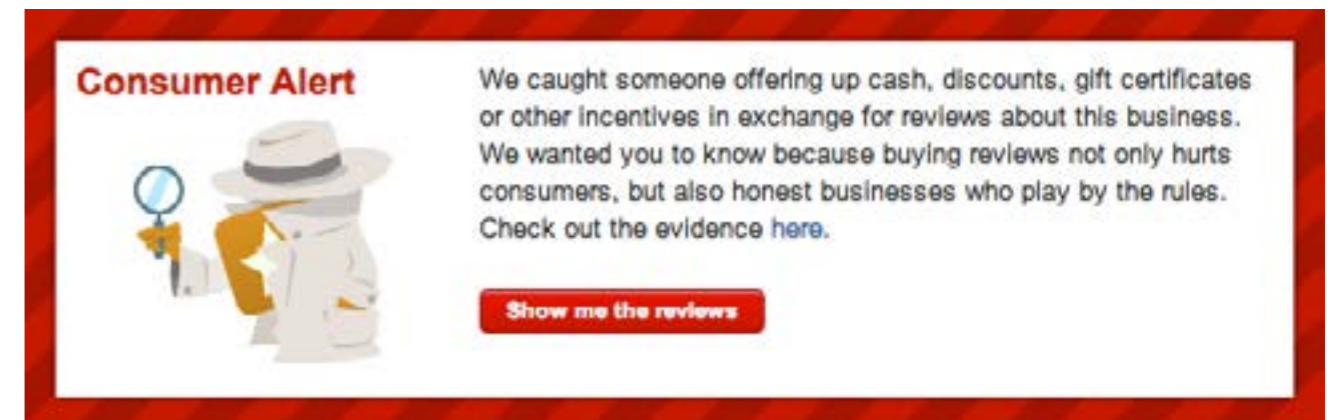
> **Beware Onsite Kiosks**
>
> It may seem like a dandy idea to put out an iPad or laptop in your store or waiting area for customers to leave reviews (a kiosk). However, several review sites, including Google and Yelp, expressly forbid the practice. Their assumption is that you will be standing over customers coercing them into writing a positive review.
>
> And unless you get pretty sophisticated, such kiosk tactics are easy to detect by incoming IP addresses and browser cookies, so best to play it safe: Let customers write the review on their time.

DON'T BUY FAKE REVIEWS

Knowing how trusted and valuable customer reviews are, marketers and business owners can be seduced by the notion that for a few bucks on Elance, Craigslist or Fiverr, they can have an unseen army of amoral magic bees populate their profiles on Yelp and Google+ with 4- and 5-star reviews. The only drawback is that doing so will have the exact opposite effect from what you want: It will destroy your reputation and maybe the business itself.

Sure, there's the brief intoxication of seeing all those stars next to the company name. There may even be a burst of increased visibility online and resulting new business.

Yelp's "consumer alert" publicly shames businesses that buy fake reviews.

But in the end, your reputation with real customers—the kind who actually keep a business running—can't be faked. Maybe the review sites will catch on to the scheme, filter out the fake reviews and publicly shame the business for dishonest practices. Even if their filters don't catch on, the "BS" filters of hundreds of real potential customers will, and they will think worse of the business than if it had negative reviews or no reviews at all.

Remember: Widely disseminated customer reviews are a good thing. They create a better marketplace and help correct the information asymmetry between buyers and sellers.[54] A popular estimate from Gartner says that by 2014, 10-15% of all reviews will be fake, and that estimate extends to fake "likes" and followers in social media.[55] Left unchecked, fake reviews stand to taint all of word-of-mouth marketing, a loss for consumers and businesses alike.

Led by Yelp, review sites are cracking down—hard. And then there's the small matter of the law. Fake reviews are fraud.

In a notorious case in 2011, the FTC fined Legacy Learning Systems $250,000 for hiring fake reviewers. Gartner predicts that at least two Fortune 500 brands will face litigation from the Federal Trade Commission for this practice in the coming years. And at the time of this writing, a firm that offers glowing reviews on sites like Yelp, Google+, FourSquare and Citysearch for $25/month—creatively named Glowing Reviews—is defending itself in court against a lawsuit from Edmunds.com, the automotive research company.[56]

The moral of the story? Don't buy fake reviews. If you do, you will find yourself on the wrong side of history—and the law.

DON'T FILE A LAWSUIT (UNLESS YOU MUST… AND YOU CAN WIN)

Note: I'm not a lawyer, and this isn't legal advice. Consult with an attorney about the particulars of your case.

Negative reviews hurt, and sometimes they are illegitimate or even illegal. Small and local businesses can easily be victimized by fraudulent and defamatory reviews posted by an unsavory competitor or personal enemy, with real damages to boot.

But bringing a case to court often means greater visibility for the comments you were hoping to squelch, not to mention very low chances of success. Winning a lawsuit against the parties responsible for writing or publishing untrue or malicious comments about a business is a long row to hoe. In the U.S., writers have extensive free speech protection, and the publishers who provide the platform for that speech are less liable than you might think.

The climate may be different in other parts of the world where libel and defamation suits are easier to bring.[57] Still, you will need to evaluate whether it's worth it. When Scottish celebrity entrepreneur Duncan Bannatyne got into a fracas with TripAdvisor over a review that likened one of his hotels to Fawlty Towers, everybody heard about it, and he came out looking a bit like Basil Fawlty himself![58]

"A satisfied customer. We should have him stuffed."

— Basil Fawlty

CONCLUSION: DO I NEED A REVIEW STRATEGY?

When you Google yourself, what do you see? Even the top 20 big brands who blanket the web with content and PR see that 25% of search results on their brand are user-generated content.[59] In the Age of the Customer, the power balance and information asymmetries of commerce have tipped away from marketers and business owners toward customers. Or have they?

Customers now have a powerful voice, access to critical information, and shared memory afforded by online reviews. While it may seem like this empowerment of the customer should come at a cost to businesses, in fact businesses have gained immensely, too. Consider what we as marketers and business owners now get for free:

- Our most trusted and effective marketing is being done for us by volunteers

- Those volunteers surface more info about our offering than our own advertising can, and that helps differentiate it from the alternatives

- Our customer service now serves multiple ends: creating customer satisfaction and broadcasting it to potential new customers

- We get focused, real-time business intelligence to assist in quality improvement and competitive analysis

In order to unlock all of this value, we only need to decide how we're going to do it, what tools and tactics we're going to use, and to what ends. My hope is that this little volume has given you some motivation and ideas to get you working with online customer reviews in a proactive and fruitful way. The future of your business may depend on it. Now, to your success!

CODA: IS YELP A FOUR-LETTER WORD?

It's not uncommon for business owners today to complain about being "yelped." Counter to the popular review site's lofty aspirations, to be "yelped" is *not* a good thing. It refers to having your reputation wantonly destroyed by self-serving, obnoxious or vindictive reviewers. Meanwhile, favorable reviews go unpublished, thanks to the site's overzealous filter algorithm.

A years-long class action suit was brought against Yelp by business owners who claimed that their positive reviews disappeared as soon as they refused to buy advertising from the company, basically alleging extortion. Although Yelp ultimately prevailed in that suit, the site's contributors continue to make a bad name for Yelp among marketers and business owners.

Why? Yelpers are notoriously narcissistic. Some rain their petulance onto businesses with little care for the consequences. The YouTube series "Real Actors Read Yelp" makes due fun of the drama and whiny self-indulgence exhibited by a few of Yelp's worst offenders.[60]
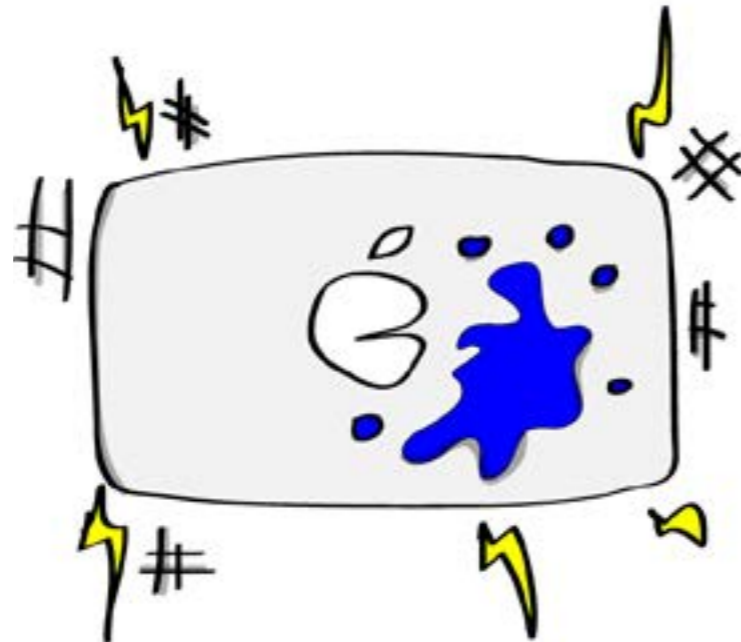

"Why Small Businesses Hate Yelp," a nifty "comigraphic" from Nifty Marketing, continues below.

The most prolific reviewers on Yelp are awarded an "Elite" status that clearly corrupts some of them. Dubbed "the online reviewing mafia," Elite Yelpers occasionally surface in the trade news for alleged extortion of their own—seeking preferential treatment in exchange for positive reviews.[61]

Then, there are all of the absurd ways in which Yelp lectures us marketers and business owners about review ethics and prohibits us from so much as asking for a review even as the site's citizen reviewers run completely rampant.

Here again, we have to be pragmatic. Yelp is arguably the most important online customer review outlet for some business categories. Even if it *is* a four-letter word, Yelp should remain in the vocabulary of marketers and business owners who care about results. Be proactive and responsive to Yelp reviewers as outlined in this book—albeit with some sensitivity to Yelp's particular rules of engagement—and it will yield results worth the effort. Even if you have to hold your nose while you do it.
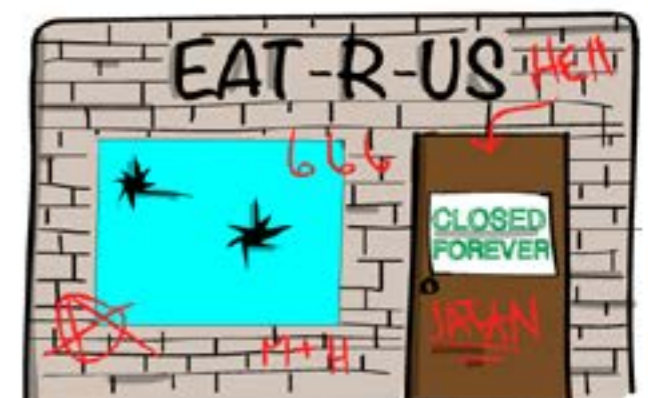
"Why Small Businesses Hate Yelp" from niftymarketing.com. Used with permission.

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