

# EVERYONE REALLY IS A CRITIC

IN THE INFORMATION AGE,  
NEGATIVITY GETS AMPLIFIED. HERE'S  
WHAT TO DO ABOUT BAD REVIEWS ON  
SOCIAL MEDIA.

BY BRENDA PORTER

You've likely heard this statement dozens of times, dripping with sarcasm, from a friend or two: "Everyone's a critic." Today, with the prevailing wind of social media, that statement has never been more literal. From citizen review sites like Yelp.com, Google Local and Angieslist.com, not to mention Facebook and Twitter, everyone really is a critic.

Did your customer enjoy their cup of coffee or did they find that swill so bad they wouldn't serve it to their worst enemy? Whatever their position, there's an online forum waiting for their review. For café owners, it's how you turn that negative into a positive that will save your brand and possibly even grow your business.

For example, one sunny afternoon two sisters stopped by the Green Gables Tea Room (located in the Kindred Spirit Gift Shop) in Beaufort, N.C., for afternoon tea. After their tea service they signed the in-house guest book with pleasantries. But one sister, owner Libby Liles realized, didn't have as good of a time as she penned. The sister, visiting from California, took to the online review site, Yelp.com, and left a scathing report. That was last year.

More than 12 months later, the negative review still pops up with every Google search for Green Gables.

The Yelper complained that Liles' served high tea in plastic cups shaped like real china—a must since the local board of health does not allow dish washing in her building. The writer also complained her cup leaked, something Liles acknowledged has happened before, prompting her to consider changing vendors.



"I was mortified," Liles says. "I didn't expect the woman to say those things after she left."

Social media experts said Liles' first response is to be expected. But it's what happens after the shock wears off that's most important to your business's image.

Social media expert and author Jason Falls advises any café owner to go on the review site and reply or comment in the review thread, clearly identifying him/herself as the owner and mitigate as they would with someone complaining in person.

"Recognize their right to complain, apologize for the circumstance (at least), then assess whether or not a full apology is warranted," Falls says. "Play that role respectfully and with all customers' best interests in mind. You'll win more than you lose."

And there could be some weight to Falls' assertion. In September 2012, a pair of UC Berkeley professors made headlines when they concluded that Yelp.com actually helps businesses increase their revenue.

The study concluded, "Yelp ratings affect both customer flows and the probability of booking a reservation" for restaurants. While this new research has been generating some buzz, the findings are actually quite similar to a study conducted last year by Michael Luca of Harvard Business School. Both sets of independent research

## TOP 7 REVIEW SITES FOR BUSINESSES

Social media experts say to keep an eye on these sites to see what people are saying about your business.

1. Google Local/Google Places
2. Yelp.com
3. Yahoo Local
4. Merchant Circle
5. City Search
6. Insider Pages
7. Angieslist



**"IT'S NOT ABOUT SAYING I'M SORRY, IT'S ABOUT ACKNOWLEDGING THE ISSUE AT HAND."**

—SHAUN NESTOR

reinforce an important fact: Yelp can be a valuable tool for businesses looking to increase their revenue.

Stephanie Zinser, owner of True Brew Barista, Concord, N.H., has been on the receiving end of three negative Yelp reviews. In two of the posts the authors, who appear to have visited the café together, criticize the taste and roast of the coffee served and the café's Wi-Fi policy.

"FYI True Brew you offer free Wi-Fi—a standard in 2012—but you can't stretch to plugging in a laptop?" wrote one poster with a screen name of "Sophie B."

Zinser said after reading the reviews she went back to her staff for more details. That is a move Shaun Nestor, an inbound marketing consultant at Never Mind Marketing in Seattle and a regular speaker at CoffeeFest, says was the best first step.

"I wanted to know what prompted these out-of-towners to post a negative review," Zinser says. "So I asked my staff, 'What happened? Are their statements accurate?' I wanted to get to the bottom of this."

Zinser typically limits the plugging in of laptops and cell phones after users have been sitting for long periods of time nursing one cup of coffee, as each of these visitors allegedly did.

According to Nestor, a negative review is to be expected at some point. However, being preparing for that inevitability will speed the response time and show the author you're taking their complaint seriously.

Nestor adds that business owners should have two or three pre-written responses which address a few different scenarios.

"That will bring a clear communication across to that negative reviewer," he says. "It's not about saying I'm sorry, it's about acknowledging the issue at hand. Try something like, 'I'm sorry to hear about your experience ... let me look into this and get back to you ...'"

While Liles attempted to reach her reviewer by phone, she was unsuccessful. Frustrated, she gave up and let the review stand.

Zinser, however, did not contact the reviewers, saying that after talking with her staff, she better understood the full story and was satisfied with the outcome.

"It was out-of-towners who had posted negative reviews of other places," she says. "If it was a local who had left the review I would have been more likely to respond, maybe had them come back for a free coffee or something. But here I didn't think it would do me any good. I didn't want to generate any more negativity."

While Liles believes the Yelp review is not winning her any more out-of-town customers, Zinser says Yelp, along with

## TIPS FOR DEALING WITH A NEGATIVE REVIEW

Shaun Nestor, an internet/marketing expert and frequent speaker at Coffee Fest, offers three quick tips for dealing with a negative review.

- 1) Assess if this is a valid complaint/experience/review.
- 2) Respond to the reviewer/commenter.
- 3) Address any internal issues/policies/procedures that may need to be improved to prevent this from happening again.

Social media expert and author Jason Falls offers his tips for turning a negative review in your favor.

- 1) Ask your fans to review you.
- 2) Start a blog where you contribute to the community of customers online with your expertise or other content that would appeal to your primary target audience.
- 3) Drive content on your social channels that empowers and recognizes your fans and customers.



**"MAKE SURE THERE'S A LOT OF POSITIVE OUT THERE TO DROWN OUT ANY POSSIBILITY OF NEGATIVE."**

—JASON FALLS

Facebook and Twitter, have been good for her business. Green Gables does not have a Facebook page or Twitter account. Instead, Liles says she primarily relies on networking with hotels and businesses to get referrals.

And for the record, both businesses have gotten other positive Yelp reviews since the earlier negative posts. Zinser takes to Facebook at least once a day posting news about daily specials and, especially, on Fridays, news about that evening's band.

When satisfied customers write in on Facebook, Zinser said she always "Likes" their comments.

Here, Nestor suggesting going the extra mile.

"To capitalize on good reviews, share them on other platforms. Use them on Facebook in status updates, write a blog post about the review, grab a photo of the reviewer next time they are in the shop and post it on the wall for everyone to read," Nestor encouraged.

In the end, like it or not, social media isn't going away. So how can a café owner protect his or her company's reputation on these sites—assuming such a feat is possible?

"You fight the negative by being positive," Falls says. "The search engines will pick up on what you do just as easily as they do on what someone else does. So make sure there's a lot of positive out there to drown out any possibility of negative." SCR