

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



MARKETING
GUIDES
For Small Businesses

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT



**Proven Strategies & Tips for
Improving Your Online Reputation**



Marketing Guides for Small Businesses: Reputation Management

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Introduction

Your reputation matters. This is true in every aspect of life, but especially when it comes to business. The problem is that no matter how good your reputation, all it takes is one dissatisfied customer to tear it all down. A few choice words on the internet, a situation handled badly, and the result is a ding to your reputation. One ding too many and your business starts to fail – fast.

Part of the problem is the way the review process works. The organic, consumer-led review process tends to result in many more negative reviews than positive ones. Most people who are happy with your business don't feel the need to shout it from the rooftops – in fact, the average happy customer only tells 15 people about their experience with you.

But when someone feels wronged, all they can think about is how to “get back” at you. They can easily do this through reviews. Studies have shown that the unhappy customer tells an average of 24 people about their perceived negative experience. But you can't change the review process. You can't change human psychology. So what can you change?

That's where reputation management comes in. Understanding what to do – and what not to do – in the face of negative publicity is what can make or break your reputation. For instance, deleting negative reviews, ignoring customer complaints, “fighting back” with snarky comments or even buying fake reviews to bolster your standing will all backfire and come back to haunt you.

But beyond that, it's important to start working on a very positive reputation quite early, before those negative reviews have a chance to make it to the front page. This handy guide will give you the basics on how to polish your online reputation, maintain it, and respond to the inevitable customer who wants to leave a black mark on your otherwise sterling record.

What Is Online Reputation Management?

Online reputation management is all about taking control over what someone sees when they search for your name or business on the web. Though what customers post about your business is out of your hands, you can take steps to make sure the positive information shows up higher in the search rankings. The idea is to push the negativity off the front page of the search rankings – and even further down if possible – so that most people will only see the positive information.



Let's Get Started. Google Yourself.

Start by learning what's out there. Sign out of any Google account you might have, then search for the following:

- Business name
- Personal name
- Any common nicknames
- Any common misspellings of your name
- Any incorrect information, such as wrong address or wrong hours of operation

Examine the Results

Look through the results, especially on the first page. You want to get an idea of how your online reputation looks to the average consumer. Any mentions of your name or business should go into four categories:

- **Negative:** These are a high priority. Anything negative out there needs attention as soon as possible.
- **Neutral:** These posts don't really add anything to the conversation, but they don't make you look awful, either.
- **Not Me:** These results usually stem from someone who has the same name you do, or their business name is quite similar to yours.
- **Positive:** These are the posts that say something good. Online reputation management helps make sure this category is overflowing and taking up all the valuable search space under your name or business.

So how does your reputation look? Do the positives outweigh the negatives? Were there any surprises? We'll talk about how to tackle the not-so-good parts.

Where to Begin

You might fall into the 'nobody' category, with no content out there at all. You're a blank slate. Good! You can build up your reputation from scratch and control what's out there. Or you might be a 'bad guy' with a reputation that stings. The good news is that now you're aware of it, which means you can take steps to change it.



Or you could be a 'superhero' with great stuff everywhere, but the best stuff needs to be higher on the search results. This is an excellent problem to have!

Get Your Name Out There

If you don't see much in the search engine results, it's time to bolster your presence. Set up a website if you don't already have one, with a domain name in .com or .net. Set up a WordPress blog and a few main pages, including the home page, product and services page, a contact page and a review funnel page.

Then optimize your site for mobile use! According to Statista, the number of people using smartphones worldwide was at 1.5 billion in 2014; forecasts expect that number to go as high as 2.5 billion by 2019. Modern Comment, a social media promotion expert, reports that 63% of individuals who do local searches are likely to buy within one hour. Making sure every part of your website is mobile friendly is critical to success.

Time for Your Social Life

Set up a social media profile on at least three social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+, etc. Fill out the profiles as completely as possible and link to your website. Make sure the profiles link to each other, too.

You don't have to worry about not being online 24/7. There are several tools available, both free and paid, to create a cache of social media content and schedule it to post at a time of your choosing. You will still need to spend a bit of live time on your pages to respond appropriately, but you can post around the clock with relative ease.

Negate the Negatives

What about your negative results? These often stem from a comment someone left about your business. Is their complaint valid? Even if you think it's not, in most cases the best thing to do is turn to the AAA of online reputation management: Acknowledge the problem, Apologize for it, and make Amends. Fixing the problem will work wonders for your reputation.

Once you have contacted the customer directly and made things right, go to the platform where you took the hit. Respond to the comment. Be respectful and positive. Hopefully, your customer will acknowledge the resolution.

Change the Results

Even with the positive comments and spinning a bad situation into a better one, negatives online can hit really hard. Remember, potential customers are more likely to use their mobile phone or tablet to access the Internet than any other device. Most users rarely scroll down the first page, and some just look at the top results. That's why



you must keep your focus on those top results. You do this through Search Engine Optimization.

What Is SEO?

Search Engine Optimization uses keywords or specific words targeted to your business to make your website as search-engine-friendly as possible. Proper SEO includes researching the keywords people type in when they use search engines to find a business like yours. There are tools available to help you drill down on which keywords are more valuable or easiest to rank in the search engines. Place those targeted words and phrases in your title and H1 (header) content. Use a variation of them in subheadings throughout your content. Keywords are also beneficial in the call-to-action, the part where you tell them to call or click now.

What about Local SEO?

Local SEO involves making sure you have all your pertinent information in the right places. The most important information about your business is your NAP: Name, address and phone number. You should have this information listed wherever you can. Make sure you show up in online directories like Yelp and the Better Business Bureau. Every place connecting the same name, address and phone number adds a piece of Internet real estate to your business.

One very important tool is Google My Business. Click into this site and add your business NAP. Make sure all your information is correct and then beef it up. This action will get you updated on Google Search and Google Maps. People can see your hours, contact information and more.

The Right Content Boosts Your Reputation

Content marketing allows you to tell your story the way you want it told. Tell it well enough, often enough, and in the ways the search engines respect, and you'll move upward on the search engine results pages. You'll position yourself as an expert and build valuable credibility for your business. This positioning can help to insulate you from online reputation challenges.

Your content marketing strategy should include text, images, and videos. It's a little like playing the board game Monopoly. The more search engine results you can control, the less room you leave for damaging reputation digs on the first page. Remember, people rarely scroll past the first page when they go looking for the products and services you sell.

Align Yourself with the Giants

Your content should feature an outbound link or two for each page, connecting with an authority website that makes sense for the topic you're covering. Google's looking for the best possible user experience, and now sees that kind of outbound link as valuable.



In addition to outbound links, look for prominent websites that accept regular comments – and leave a thoughtful, valuable comment in a relevant discussion. Include your website address in your comment if possible. Look on the community pages of your local government or college alma mater for articles you can offer beneficial commentary on, along with a link to your website or profile. Find out if your Chamber of Commerce has a website and get on any lists offered to local businesses.

Get Your Blog Going

Producing a regular blog is one of the most reliable ways to influence your page rankings and online credibility. A blog is also an excellent way to show your expertise in your field. By sharing useful information, you establish yourself as credible, knowledgeable and capable. Your audience will begin to seek you out when they need an answer for their problem.

The Right Tools for the Job

There are dozens of different tools you can use to monitor your online reputation. Let's take a look at some of the most popular options.

Google Alerts is by far one of the most helpful tools for online reputation management. You can use Google to set up an alert for your name, your business name, or the name(s) of your products. Once the alert is set up, Google will notify you when someone mentions you online.

Trackur provides both free and paid services in social media monitoring. This is especially useful for finding out if influential people are talking about your brand.

Social media monitoring sites include Social Mention, Mention, and Hootsuite. Other common ones include Klout, Crowdfire, Buffer, BuzzSumo, Keyhole, and SproutSocial.

Your Most Important Media Is Social Media

It's impossible to overstate the power of social media when it comes to reputation management. Anyone can say anything on social media. They can throw up a comment as a knee-jerk reaction, and it's there forever. When it comes to business, this can be bad news – unless you know how to manage the situation.

If a complaint appears, respond immediately on the platform where it appeared, rather than asking for a phone call or email. Acknowledging the problem as soon as possible – and doing so publicly – goes a long way toward cooling off the situation.



Clean Up Your Social Media Accounts

See a negative comment on your own account? One that has no chance for resolution – perhaps one from a disgruntled former employee or a customer who seems hellbent on ruining you? You can remove it in a few ways.

- Go to your profile page on the platform. Most provide an option to scroll to a particular post and delete it. Removing the damage is a definite priority.
- Go to the hosting company of the site displaying the offending post. They are not obligated to take it down, but they might if you ask.
- You might have recourse in libel, copyright, or unauthorized personal material laws if you didn't give permission for some content. Start with an email process of requesting a cease and desist, and follow through with a hard copy if needed.

Hopefully, your business will never get into a situation where legal intervention becomes a reasonable option to consider. Nipping reputation challenges in the bud is a far less stressful and more effective way to protect yourself.

Let's Talk about Online Review Sites

People want to buy from places they trust. That's why online reviews carry so much weight. In fact, according to a survey by BrightLocal.com, 88% of consumers say they trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations.

It's easy to see why positive online reviews are so important. If that doesn't fire you up on the power of online reviews, they also found that 72% of consumers take action after reading a positive review, either by calling your business or visiting your website.

In other words, positive reviews can be your best sales pitch ever!

Help your customers help you get those reviews. Ask them to write one for you. You can use a test message or email drip campaign to request their help in filling out a review. Be sure to include an easy, direct link. However, never promise an incentive for filling out a review – that gets dangerously close to paying for reviews, which is always a huge no-no.

Once you have those reviews, you need to do something more. You must respond to them! According to Modern Comment, 78% of consumers say that seeing management respond to online reviews makes it clear the business cares about them. And yes, this means responding to positive reviews as well as negative ones.

Having at least five 5-star reviews can change the mind of even the most skeptical customer. If you operate in a high competition industry, make sure you're at the top of



the review list if you want traffic from sites like Yelp, Google Reviews, Foursquare or Merchant Circle.

You can use more than one review page option, but limit it to just a few. Too many options are confusing. If they can make it simple and log in with Facebook, they are more inclined to do so.

Don't forget to look at review sites that are very specific to your industry or business. For instance, those in medicine might look to Healthgrades.com. Those in elder care might try Caring.com. Those in the wedding industry could try The Knot. Knowing your field is the best way to find the review sites that matter to your customers.

When is it Time to Call in the Pros?

Your online reputation is critical to business success. If you wind up in a situation where your reputation is taking a huge hit and trying to dig out of the debris is overwhelming, hiring someone experienced in social media is a great move.

But how can you choose the best Online Reputation Management (ORM) company for your needs? That depends on where you stand right now.

Are you a startup or an established business? ORP providers often specialize in different sizes and types of companies. Find one willing to take the time to get to know you. If they aren't willing to see you or at least meet with you over Skype or Facetime to get to know what you're all about, they aren't the best provider for you.

What's their pricing strategy? It is not unusual to invest \$400 a week if you are a small business or up to \$3200 per week for a large business. Some companies will offer an a la carte menu of services along with a full package of reputation building and protection. Other questions include: What is your marketing strategy? How do your customers find you? Will the Online Reputation Management (ORM) company you are considering take you on if you are brick and mortar or solely online? In what ways will they connect with your clients and potential customers to increase your traffic?

It will take time to get this right, but it's worth it. Remember, this is not a one-shot deal; being 'finished' with online reputation management isn't possible. The only way to maintain your good name is to do just that – maintain it. Investigating, monitoring and enhancing your online reputation must be part of your daily routine and a priority for your marketing budget. Get started today and see how online reputation management can change the course of your business.