

How to Manage Online Reviews

BY GREG SISKIND

THE ANTHOLOGY SERIES *Black Mirror* is known for its prescient near-future stories that can often be pretty scary. The “Metalhead” episode about robotic dogs could be the most terrifying hour of television I’ve ever seen. But there’s another episode entitled “Nosedive” that is relevant to the subject of this column, and it deals with a subject a lot of lawyers might also consider dystopian—the use of ratings to judge us. In “Nosedive,” Bryce Dallas Howard’s character lives in a world where everything is rated (including people via embedded chips). Ratings have created a new form of segregation where social status and access to just about everything in society, from whether you can book an airline seat to if you can get cancer treatment, is based on having a high rating. The episode deals with the character’s fall from grace as a 4.8 (out of 5.0) who gets all the perks associated with a high ranking and then, through some bad luck, ends up on a skid row reserved for the low-rated.

Far-fetched, right? But it builds on a reality we’re already dealing with. Namely, ratings have become ubiquitous, and they are now how people are deciding which lawyers to hire. And potential bad ratings from our current clients are making us skittish about how we interact with them. Think about how often we’re using five-star ratings—from making a purchase on Amazon to picking a hotel or restaurant on TripAdvisor. We rely on these ratings to make choices as consumers. And now Google reviews have completely reshaped the way consumers shop for legal services (as well as everything else).

Love or hate ratings, the reality is that we must deal with them. In this column, I’m talking about Google reviews because Google is overwhelmingly the main ratings site consumers are using to decide which lawyer to hire (including Avvo and Yelp).

For most of the history of the legal profession, word of mouth was the most important and effective form of marketing. Reviews have become a new version of word of mouth and are even more influential. Marketing software company BrightLocal conducts a detailed survey every year of consumer attitudes toward online reviews.

- 81 percent of consumers shopping for lawyers and legal services look at attorney reviews, and 81 percent believe online reviews of attorneys are important.
- 79 percent of people trust online reviews as much as recommendations from friends and family, and 92 percent say a negative review makes them less likely to use a business.
- The most important factors when considering reviews, to those surveyed: 1. overall star rating, 2. legitimacy (how real the reviews seem), 3. recency (73 percent will only look at reviews from the last 30 days), 4. sentiment, and 5. quantity.
- Only 48 percent of consumers would consider using a business with fewer than 4 stars.
- 20 percent of reviewers expect a response within a day.

Reviews themselves don’t determine how high your website will come up in online searching. That’s still based on relevance. But verbiage in a review can help determine relevance, and a lot of positive reviews that detail the problem a lawyer solved, why the firm was chosen and the outcome for the client can boost search rankings.

So you know you need good reviews, a decent quantity of them and regular postings of new ones.

Many lawyers don’t seek feedback from clients because they’re afraid they won’t have a 5-star average. But according to rankings expert Joy Hawkins at Sterling Sky, a rating between 4.2 and 4.5 is actually ideal. People with 5.0 ratings are seen as “too good to be true.” Hawkins also encourages lawyers to seek reviews from clients, but to beware of “review gating,” the practice of surveying clients and then only asking the happy ones to write reviews. This violates Google rules, and you can find yourself losing reviews and being penalized in your average review score.

As for handling negative reviews, there are a number of things to keep in mind. First, criticism is often something you need to hear if you’re going to improve your service. A lot of times people are complaining about legitimate problems so you might see feedback as something that is helpful, even if it is embarrassing to receive.



Second, your firm *usually* should write a response and do so promptly. And I said *the firm* should write a response because it’s not always easy for the lawyer being criticized to respond without getting defensive, so having someone else handle the response—often a senior person who will show that the firm is taking the matter seriously—is a good move. And according to Hawkins, getting defensive is usually a very bad strategy, so the tone of the response matters a lot. That’s because you’re largely writing for prospective clients and not the complaining person. In fact, responding well to a negative review can be a net positive. That’s because people want to see that you’re reasonable, empathetic and interested in providing good service. Even if the person complaining is being completely unreasonable or is just wrong, you can often respond in a nondefensive way that doesn’t admit to an error. For example, you can note that you’re sorry the person is upset and invite the person to contact you to discuss further. Taking the matter offline and potentially resolving the issue can sometimes also lead to a person deleting a bad review or updating it to add stars.

There are times, however, when you’ll want a bad review removed and, according to Hawkins, there are a couple of instances when this is possible. That includes the following:

- A review has clearly been left in the wrong place (e.g., complaining about a product or service you don’t actually offer).
- Reviews are being posted with a political motive.
- Reviews are racist/hate-based.

Reviews from noncustomers are hard to get taken down because it can be difficult to prove they never did business with you (especially since simply calling your firm to make an appointment would be enough to justify making a review). But

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sometimes people just admit in the review that they are noncustomers (e.g., “My cousin used these guys and they were terrible”).

Some negative reviews are just spam, and a person has left the same bad review at multiple sites. Google will remove these types of spammers if brought to their attention.

Finally, the best way to counteract bad reviews is just to get a lot of good reviews to dilute their impact. And since most people don’t pay attention to old reviews, eventually that hurtful one will not be easily found. You can also hire a consultant like Hawkins to both help you get good reviews and address the bad ones. Given how crucial reviews are to your practice, this might be one place where spending money to get help from an outside vendor is worth a look. Whether you hire someone from the outside or not, your firm needs to develop a clear strategy for getting good reviews and responding to the bad ones. Ignoring reviews is no longer a sensible option and being proactive could be well-worth the effort. **LP**



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