

**THE ULTIMATE
ONLINE
CUSTOMER
SERVICE GUIDE**

How to Connect With Your Customers to
SELL MORE!

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An excerpt from:

The Ultimate Online Customer Service Guide

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CHECKING OUT WHERE CUSTOMERS REVIEW YOUR BUSINESS

There was a time when the general public had to rely on newspapers, magazines, and television for reviews of restaurants, books, and films. And getting references to most service professionals was almost like sharing trade secrets—from friend to friend or colleague to colleague, over the phone and in person. With the invention of the Internet, eBay started a feedback system; and around the same time, “real people” began posting reviews on Amazon. A whole new world for reviewing began.

Business always knew that marketing could bring great results, and word-of-mouth recommendations were considered golden. Now, we only have to visit Web sites to get information and real-world data on just about everything from solar toothbrushes to dentists.

No brand or profession is immune from scrutiny these days, and you need to know where your customers are looking for counsel before they select providers or purchase products. Anyone can get word-of-mouth data from sites that specialize in almost every profession, product, company, or store. You may be surprised to learn that there are more than 30 sites that compile opinions on medical professionals alone—the leaders being Angie’s List, RateMDs.com, HealthGrades.com, Vitals.com, and Vimo.com.

Although the niche, specialized sites are popular, it seems that the most consumer reviews are posted on generalized sites. The venerable Better Business Bureau already had its own Web site but soon saw the importance of community comments and started another site for “real people” reviews, Trustlink.org. It may be big, but Web citizens have their own favorite sites, several of which I describe here.

Although this site began by covering only restaurants, Yelp.com has expanded to cover all sorts of retail businesses in its local consumer-generated reviews. People regularly go to the site for person-to-person recommendations on businesses of all kinds. In August 2010, Yelp quoted a reach of 38 million visitors per month, and 12 million local reviews (over 85 percent rate a business with three stars or higher).

Yelp.com currently offers business reviews in most major cities in the United States, and is expanding rapidly—first in the United Kingdom. When you visit Yelp for the first time, you may be surprised to see that your business is probably already on the site, because Yelp gets its listings from many sources and puts companies up for discussion.

When someone chooses to review your business listing, he or she can leave a commentary-style review and post a rating of one to five stars. The rating appears at the top of the page and reflects an average of the rating you've received from each person's review.

Yelp can help your business in several ways. It allows you to build exposure for your company, monitor public opinion of how you're doing, and facilitate research as to what your local community wants from an organization like yours.

All you need is about an hour to set up your page.

Yelp offers a free set of tools that you can access by going to yelp.com/business to set up your free business account. The basic account gives you the opportunity to track the number of people who view your page, post offers and photos, and communicate with the customers who post. An enhanced toolset is available for businesses with multiple locations, for about \$75 a month. The site also sends out a weekly e-mail newsletter to its users as a local edition.

Once you've got your business page set up, the posts you provide—announcements, valuable discounts, or in-store events—may just land you your own personal space in the Yelp newsletter. There's also the chance that your discounts may pop up on other local profile pages, as in the AJ Bombers listing shown in Figure 7.1.

Should your business offer a Wi-Fi connection to your customers, it's a smart idea to place a table-tent card for your customers that mentions your Yelp business URL, along with your other social network affiliations.

Other Sites to Watch

There are some other sites to keep an eye on, in case they expand to include user-generated reviews:

- *Citysearch* was a pioneer on the Web in 1995. It began more as a listing service, and reviews are mostly staff written. It is now one of the leading online local guides that enables consumers to stay connected, offering access to neighborhood restaurants, bars, shopping, and beauty and professional services across every zip code in the United States.
- *Insider Pages* is the local user-generated branch site from CitySearch. Launched in 2004, Insider Pages was created to help people find the best local businesses through recommendations from “their friends and neighbors.” These pages cover most trades and professions, and import medical reviews from medicalgrades.com.
- *MerchantCircle*, started in 2005, is more of a community for small businesses, though it claims more than 5 million monthly views for its sites in over 50 states. I found a minimal number of customer reviews on the site, but it is growing as a local source.

Handling Reviews

If you receive a bad review from an online community member, you can deal with the issue immediately and turn the customer around quickly with your brilliantly executed customer service. Once you’ve solved the problem, your new raving fan can update his or her initial review and tell the world how great you are.

The same rule applies here as to responding to a negative comment on your Web site: Do not to go off half-cocked when you come across a less-than-glowing review of your business. Take a deep breath and reign in your emotions first. Sit down quietly and read the review closely. You may find some honesty there—albeit off-putting—that you hadn’t previously considered. You may even find a distinct flaw in the way you do business; and while that certainly doesn’t feel good, it *will* help you solve problems in the future.

Next, investigate the issue with your staff, and once you’ve gotten over the initial insult, contact the reviewer and offer to make

things right. When he or she sees you've been working toward a resolution, that negative attitude may take a 180-degree turn.

You may find that the customer didn't like you or your staff or your service, and that he or she cannot be placated under any circumstances. In such a case, remember there are some things over which you have no control—you can't make everyone a fan. The best you can do is to connect with the customer and show that you care. Once the individual sees that you are interested in his or her opinion—and you offer something to bring him or her back—you may well witness a negative patron turn into the most loyal customer of all. This sort of customer is also one who will probably become your most vocal defender and promoter.

Just keep doing the good work. You can't turn around every person, so simply keep doing your best. It's all you can do.

Conducting business these days is no longer a matter of "if you build it, they will come." Now, engaging your customer is a matter of build it, work it, and be part of it. The saving grace of the hard work you put into the community is that you will enjoy your customers. The more you see them as real people with families and problems like yours, the more you will take pleasure in making them happy online.

The places to build and serve a community will no doubt skyrocket over the next few years. Keep an eye on Twitter for news flashes on new sites, or check my blog and Posterous, where I'll be updating this information regularly.

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