Superfast Business Wales

Business Guide

Managing Your Online Reputation

Managing online reputation has become an essential element of any business's marketing and communications strategy.

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How to Manage Your Online Reputation

Introduction

Managing online reputation has become an essential element of any business's marketing and communications strategy. This has become increasingly important as Superfast Broadband reaches more and more users and drives the use of websites (both through the desktop and mobile devices using WiFi, 3G and 4G), ecommerce, video streaming and social media.

The growth of social media means that customers are now talking constantly across various platforms, as well as in blogs and forums and on review sites, about what they have bought, their experiences good and bad, and their aspirations and disappointments. Even if you don't invite direct feedback on your own website, the digital conversation is endless: it is almost certain that your customers are talking about you online.

Rather than regarding the situation with suspicion, it is vital to treat this as a chance to engage in more focused and responsive customer relationships. The penalty for not doing so – by not responding to a specific criticism or observation, or even by failing to acknowledge a positive recommendation – could be a missed opportunity. Even worse, it could mean the destruction of a reputation built up and sustained over many years, in the time it takes for a few awkward Tweets or negative Facebook comments to be posted.

The last thing any small business needs in a competitive marketplace is for critical feedback about its services to appear higher up the search listings than the firm's own website. Having a proactive, integrated online reputation management strategy is the sign of a business that is tuned in to the way its customers communicate and share information – and is geared up to respond in real time to situations that could have an instant impact on its reputation in the digital world.

"79% of consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations." (Bright Local Consumer Review Survey)

"85% of consumers read online reviews before buying." (Corporate Communication)

"95% of unhappy customers will return to your business if an issue is resolved quickly and efficiently." (Social Media Today)

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Understand

How Technology Supports Online Reputation Management

- **Response times**: A reliable broadband service is essential for responding and reacting to events, comments and reviews – positive and negative - in real time. For example, many leading brands now seem to expect that customer will rush to Twitter to express either grievances or pleasure with the way they have been treated. Addressing situations as they arise, 'by return', is the first step to containing potentially negative fallout.

- **Unified communications**: a holistic approach to engaging with customers (and potential customers) makes a business appear proactive. If you are on top of your online reputation management, it will be easier to steer customers with specific problems into offline channels, taking the discussion out of the public domain and into direct communications between the relevant people.

- **Monitoring your mentions**: 'Buzz monitoring tools' such as icerocket.com and socialmention.com, Google Alerts, and reference tracking tools such as reppler.com all provide free and easy-to-use ways of keeping on top of how and where your business, products or services are being talked about across social media and in blogs. Boardreader.com provides similar analysis of conversations in forums. Even the most basic regular use of these tools will quickly alert you to problems as they arise, helping you to address them with appropriate solutions or anticipate longer term consequences.

Adopt

Getting Started

Take a step back from your business and think about how you currently collect and process any feedback from your customers. Do you have a specific strategy for dealing with it? Have you dipped into various elements such as surveys at the end of online sales, requests to 'like' your Facebook page, or suggestions for customers to review your offering on independent sites, without consolidating them into a strategy?

- Take a look at some of the many free buzz monitoring and reference tracking tools available online

- Test them out by entering your brand or product name, or even just the sector or industry that you are competing in

- Identify the social media platforms, review sites and portals that seem to be most relevant to your sector and customer base

- Start small, with a strategy for encouraging engagement and discussion across these channels – and be prepared to respond in real time when customers start using them to communicate with you and each other.

Exploit

Ten Business Benefits of Online Reputation Management

1. **Turn consumer power to your advantage**
   It is easy to be intimidated by the apparent surge of customer power in the digital age. But if you have an online reputation management strategy in place to begin with, you can turn consumer power into a positive asset for your business, demonstrating how quickly you acknowledge feedback, address problems, answer questions and take control of potentially difficult situations. Countering negative reviews with constructive responses will help to balance any damaging impact on search results, for example.

2. **Discover what they really think**
   If a small business owner does not care what their customers really think, they probably should not be in business in the first place. Digital technologies, and specifically social media, encourage all of us to say, here and now, exactly what we think about the way we have been treated by a retailer or service provider, at the point of delivery. Forward-looking businesses don't wait for the feedback to land on review sites – they invite it on receipts and at the end of the online sales cycle. And they use that information to tailor future customer experiences, not just nip negative criticism in the bud.

3. **Real time communication**
   Customers won't always give an honest opinion face-to-face. It's easier to say a meal was fine and leave quickly, rather than point out that the steak wasn't cooked to the original order, or the bill took half an hour to prepare. Then go home and itemise the restaurant's short-comings on social media. If businesses accept this, they will be ready and able to respond to comments in real time – and offer redress or a remedial perspective. And it isn't only about the negative feedback. Finding a restaurant has re-tweeted a favourable mention and responded with a 'thanks' is a simple and satisfying end to the customer experience, and will influence repeat business.

4. **Present a reasonable front**
   Managing your online reputation is not all about surrendering to the power of social media. There will always be knee-jerk reactions, misunderstandings and unreasonable expectations which complicate circumstances. But if you see your online reputation as the starting point of any customer relationship 'conversation', it will be easier to steer a firm line, keep your tone reasonable and avoid getting caught up in pointless exchanges that are unlikely to be resolved without recourse to other channels.

5. **Manage the discussion**
   Not every situation can be resolved by public discussion. How you manage negative or complicated feedback practically is an equally important part of your strategy. Knowing when to take the discussion off-line, refer customers to specific contact points and indicate a willingness to discuss matters in private helps you to present a positive public face – and can be tracked by potential customers who might make purchasing decisions based on your online profile.

6. **Improve searchability**
   Maintaining an online reputation management strategy goes hand-in-hand with managing your social media presence – and improving your search ranking at a time when the unique content generated on social media and review sites is increasingly favoured by search engines over the generic, static content on many business websites. If you know when your business is mentioned, you can get involved in the conversation, respond and link to it in your own content, reinforcing your reputation for proactive engagement – and potentially boosting search traffic.

7. **Improve your own content**
   If you know what your customers are saying about you – and how – you can take the best of it and incorporate more of their language, phrasing and tone in your own cross-platform digital content. This is an essential way to get inside the skin of your consumers and reflect their passions and aspirations in your website, business blog, YouTube channel, Tweets and Facebook pages.

8. **Cut the risk**
   Nobody likes negative feedback and it is important to keep an eye out for adverse comment that might be fraudulent (from a competitor) or deliberately malicious (from a disgruntled employee, for example). Using some of the monitoring tools will raise quick alarms when these situations arise. But one-off events and bad hair days impact on every business from time to time, and if you have an online reputation management strategy in place, you also will be in a better position to minimise the impact on your business of genuine, less than complimentary feedback – and treat it as an opportunity for improvement.

9. **Show transparency**
   Transparency might sound like a buzzword beloved by government and consultants but it is very meaningful in the context of your business's online reputation. If consumers get a sense that you encourage the open discussion of your products and services (by your staff as well as customers), welcome feedback and respond to it with equal honesty, it will contribute greatly to the digital equivalent of word of mouth – the buzz around your company as a great firm to deal with.

10. **Exploit the buzz**

    User generated content – all those reviews on Amazon, eBay, TripAdvisor and so on – used to scare the wits out of business owners. Today, the digitally-aware small business owner understands that online reviews are an essential element in customers' purchasing decisions welcomes them and promotes them across an integrated social media marketing strategy. Even negative reviews can be turned into a positive if the response is fast and appropriate.

Top Tips

Once you have a basic strategy in mind, you will be ready to develop it proactively, capitalising on the information you are able to gather about your customers – and most important of all, reacting and responding to feedback, and developing your digital profile in ways that will have a positive impact on your reputation and search ranking. Here are three tips to bear in mind:

1. **Accentuate the positive.** Online reputation management is not about dealing with negative feedback all the time. Treat every mention or exchange as an opportunity to improve and develop customer relationships – and reap the benefits in terms of a better-managed reputation. Today, surely only a foolhardy café owner would respond to a customer Tweet about poor Wi-Fi facilities by saying that their business is about coffee rather than communications! That kind of arrogance could go viral in seconds, and cause irreparable damage to an otherwise successful small business. Much better to take the opportunity to acknowledge the point and promise to investigate solutions to the problem.

2. **Be accessible**. Make promises you can keep. The 24-hour society might be an exaggeration but social media discussions and personal bloggers don't keep old-fashioned hours. Make your policy for responding to customer feedback clear across all your digital and traditional channels – and commit resources to address any issues within the timescales determined by your policy.

3. **Avoid knee-jerk reactions.** Attempts to damage your company's online reputation are not always legitimate. Don't rush to a quick defence if you feel a comment or piece of feedback requires deeper investigation. Stay calm and measured in your response, and stick to the facts. Despite the negative headlines around 'trolling' (intentional provocation by unscrupulous web users), it is becoming easier to report and manage this kind of interference.

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1. **Register to attend a fully-funded Business Development Workshop.**
   www.business.wales.gov.uk/superfastbusinesswales/events

2. **Make an appointment to see a Business Advisor who will help you create a personal action plan to grow your business.**
   www.business.wales.gov.uk/contact-us

For further information on Reputation Management take a look at:

See how other businesses in Wales have exploited Superfast Broadband
www.business.wales.gov.uk/superfastbusinesswales/superfast-success-stories

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Find out how much your business could save with our
www.business.wales.gov.uk/superfastbusinesswales/savings-calculator

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