

Be a Negative Review Neutralizer

According to recent surveys, 58% of us are living paycheck to paycheck. That means half the people you see are one paycheck away from disaster. With income taxes and property tax payments this month, people are dealing with tremendous stress.

Let's remember to give each other a little grace in these challenging times!

Unfortunately, an unhappy customer often forgets to give grace when venting online.

- When it comes to online reviews, we often talk about how important reviews can be in influencing buying decisions
- We talk about how search engines give more weight to reviews as social signals
- This focus on customer reviews also creates a lot of fear around negative reviews.

Business owners fear a single bad review can kill their business. Or that a handful of unhappy customers can send new customers away, and ruin your brand in search engines. It's also important to remember that we're all human. When that negative review is first discovered, *it really hurts*.

Three immutable facts about negative reviews:

1. **Every business will get a negative review.** It's just part of dealing with the unwashed public. You put yourself out there, you will become a target.
2. **Consumer research indicates there is a two out three chance that a nasty negative review had nothing to do with you!**
 - It's sad but true, customers bring all kinds of emotional baggage into a transaction and sometimes that baggage lands in your negative reviews.
 - There is also a vast population of internet trolls who will dump negative reviews on a business never patronized, to advance some battle as a keyboard warrior.

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These two situations are caused by the easy accessibility and total anonymity of the review process.

It's a tough situation — it's inevitable, and you have no control, what can you do?

- 3. Believe it or not, a bad review presents a good opportunity — bad is actually good!** More about this in just a moment, but first...

Here are proven strategies you can use to defend yourself and take advantage of the opportunities offered by negative reviews.

- **Clarify expectations** — What should customers reasonably expect from you? How clearly have you laid that out? If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything and good boundaries make good neighbors. Big companies put those "our promise to you" posters on the walls for this reason. You can too. This is called your "brand promise."
- **Use search engine alerts to monitor online comments about your company in real time.** This allows you to respond or intervene before the situation festers. Just use your favorite search engine to look for "how to set up an alert."
- **When you discover online comments** about your business, always respond and always give grace. This is called "brand defense."
- **Give genuinely poorly served customers an outlet other than online reviews.** One of the principal reasons customers complain about us on the internet is because they feel that they have nowhere else to turn. Ask for feedback in an environment you control — your company website, a dedicated email address, a physical or virtual suggestion box or other platform. And when you get feedback, for heaven's sake, respond.

A word about giving grace. As the old saying goes, "No one wins a fight with a customer." This is important both interpersonally and transactionally.

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- Responses like “You obviously know nothing about this!” or other forms of tempting but ineffective responses only worsen the damage of a negative review.
- **Interpersonally**, your most effective long-term focus is to avoid discord in the market.
- **Transactionally**, the force that sustains a business is **deal flow**, not point in time. In other words, the more transactions you have, the greater the likelihood of success. You really don't have the time to stop and squabble. Stopping or slowing that flow to win a battle will cause you to lose the war.

While it is sometimes personally repugnant to follow this guidance, turning the other cheek is a proven strategy for long term business success.

A graceful response flips the script. The responding business shows professionalism, making that five paragraph negative review appear overwrought — at best!

When it comes to responses that give grace, short and sweet is the winning combination.

- Resist the urge to match the negative review paragraph for paragraph
- Resist the temptation to refute the review point by point
- Definitely resist the desire to criticize the customer with responses like "You obviously know nothing about this!"

The recipe here is to thank the customer, acknowledge their experience, share an element of your brand promise, and disengage.

Thank you so much for choosing us, and thank you for taking the time to let us know we did not meet your expectations. The information you have provided is invaluable, and we will review your experience with our team. Thank you for this opportunity to improve.

Thank you for reaching out to our salon. We're sorry we were unable to serve you. Our commitment to customer service prevents us from seating clients without advance

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appointments. There are a number of excellent salons here that might be able to accommodate your needs, our very best wishes.

And this is why bad... is good! A negative review is an opportunity to promote your business and build engagement with prospects. You can repeat your brand promise in your reply, showing future customers how you do business — both exceptional wins for you! **It's one of the few times this kind of self promotion goes over well.**

What if you really did fail the customer?

Few customers expect superhuman perfection and most will accept a genuine apology. Over the years, customer service professionals have developed a recipe for this communication.

The earliest example of this approach is found in a 1918 guide to business letters, in the chapter covering customer service. This recipe still applies over 100 years later because this recipe addresses the basic human needs in effective dispute resolution.

This recipe also focuses on transaction flow, creating opportunities from dissatisfaction.

Greet - Acknowledge - Empathize - Offer - Invite

Greet: Dear Kevin,

Thank you very much for taking the time to let us know about your customer experience. We are grateful you chose our company and we are always interested in hearing your opinion.

Acknowledge: According to our records, you ordered the Chubby Hubby Tee shirt, size XXL, with custom embroidery.

Empathize: Our research confirms that we made a serious mistake in processing your order. We are extremely sorry for your disappointment with this purchase.

Offer: We have credited your account the full amount, including shipping, and we are prepared to send you an immediate refund. **Note:** You don't always need to offer a refund, there are often other ways to resolve the situation. Although it stings, a refund is often a good investment, if possible under the circumstances.

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Invite: We just received a new shipment of the product you requested, may we apply your refund to a follow up order? **This style of communication both resolves the complaint *and* seeks to restore the transaction, a potential double win.**

Over the years I've received several common questions.

- What if you've resolved the issue and the customer fails to update the negative review?

In this case, you have the opportunity to update the review with your own response. In the case of Kevin's chubby hubby shirt, the vendor could respond with something like, *"Thank you again for your order and for letting us know about our mistake. We are glad we were able to reach out to you and resolve this to your satisfaction."*

- What if the reviewer never patronized the business, but posted a negative review anyway? This is sometimes a result of trolling, a dishonest competitor or cancel-culture.

These reviews can generally be dismissed with a simple statement of fact, *"We don't have any record of serving you here in Port Angeles, could you be referring to a different business?"*

One final note — on rare occasions, an over-the-top negative review could be a sign of something more serious. It's important to pay attention to vicious, excessive or repetitive use of the review process.

When a concerning situation arises, be sure to capture, document and retain as much information as possible. Report this behavior to the authorities and keep an eye on business security. **Most negative reviews range from harmless to helpful but pay close attention to red flags and trust your gut.**

Business Bits will be "on the beach" for the next two weeks as the Seattle Mariners invite you to take the afternoon off and take in some day baseball.

When we return, we'll be talking about the oldest new idea in retail, the pop up store. We'll get a quick introduction to the concept and **explore how a pop up store might be a great way to get your start in retail.**