



The importance of Internet reputation

You may not care what others say about you, but prospective clients do

BY CATHERINE WATSON

Most consumers will do Internet research when making a purchase decision, particularly one as important as determining which attorney to hire. Online recommendations can greatly influence a consumer's decision, so it's important for attorneys to monitor and actively manage their Internet reputation. Fortunately, there are proven methods to accomplish this.

Internet searches are now a ubiquitous part of life. Need to find the nearest shoe repair shop? Google it. Want to locate the best-reviewed Italian restaurant in the city? Search Yelp. Not surprisingly, the more a consumer expects a purchase to impact their life and the less familiar a consumer is with the features of the product or service they are purchasing, the more likely they are to do Internet research. For many consumers, the purchase of legal services is both important and unfamiliar, and therefore likely to prompt an Internet search.

Not only do a majority of consumers do Internet research before making purchases, the online recommendations they read greatly influence the decision they make. Worldwide, 89 percent of consumers use Internet search engines to make purchasing decisions.¹ Additionally, according to 90 percent of consumers, buying decisions are influenced by online reviews.² Consumers are swayed by both positive and negative reviews; four-out-of-five consumers have changed their minds about a recommended purchase based solely on negative information they found online.³

Attorneys, perhaps more than any other professionals, rely on their reputations to build their business and the Internet plays a large role in shaping that reputation. An online reputation can be critical to success, especially if you're an attorney working in private practice, where your name is literally your professional identity. Unfortunately, doing your job well may not be enough to create a positive online reputation.

Factors undermining online reputation

Online reviews heavily factor into consumer purchase decisions, yet sometimes these reviews do not fairly portray the quality of services provided by a business. What are the factors that could undermine an attorney's online reputation?

- *The online reviews of your law practice may give a false impression of the quality of your services.* Dissatisfied clients are far more likely to go online and leave a review than those satisfied with the services received. This can lead to a reality-perception gap; an excellent law practice could find itself with online reviews that are disproportionately negative.
- *You're unsure of how to encourage clients to leave positive online reviews for you.* Having zero online reviews, or reviews that are few and far between, can be almost as damaging as having reviews that are negative. Yet, business professionals are often uncomfortable soliciting reviews from clients. Many review sites, including



Google and Yelp, discourage the overt solicitation of reviews. For example, Yelp suggests that, rather than requesting a review, you tell consumers, “Hey, check us out on Yelp!” Supposedly, the savvy consumer will understand that this is an implicit request to leave an online review. This method however, leaves the important activity of building your online reputation to chance.

- *A satisfied client leaving an online review may not be posting on a site likely to be seen by prospective clients.* There are many online review sites, a number of which are industry specific. Clients seeking to hire an attorney may be more likely to search an industry-specific site such as Lawyers.com than a site such as Yelp. Determining effective and appropriate ways to motivate your clients to leave a review can be challenging. Figuring out how to guide them to do so on a review site that’s important to your law practice is a further complication.

- *A busy law practice may not have the manpower to monitor numerous online review sites.* Tracking the reviews left by clients across numerous review sites, and noting and responding to any negative reviews in a timely fashion, is time consuming. Most law firms are focused on providing client services and may lack the resources to monitor online reviews on a routine basis.

In short, negative reviews and reviews left on less impactful sites can be silently reducing your revenue. What can a concerned attorney do to address these issues? The practice of Online Reputation Management arose to meet the need of law firms and other businesses to manage the online public perception of their products and services.

What is Online Reputation Management and why does it matter to an attorney?

Online Reputation Management, also known as ORM, is the practice of building a business’s positive online reputation in order to attract prospective consumers. A key component of this practice

is ensuring that online recommendations fairly reflect the quality of a business and are neither outdated nor misleading.

For a lawyer, the online reputation goal is simple: Encourage often silent, satisfied clients to leave online reviews on impactful review sites. These recommendations will highlight the quality of your services and offset harmful, negative reviews left by dissatisfied clients. The goal is simple and obvious, but to achieve the goal, you need an effective process of capturing and managing the recommendations of your clients.

Whether you hire a professional ORM company or choose to handle the ORM process in house, the basic components of a successful program are the same. An effective program should make the process of creating an accurate, quality online reputation systematic, effective, and palatable for both you and your clients.

What are the components of a successful ORM program?

The first step of a successful program is to capture the feedback of consumers in a private forum. The appropriate means of doing this depend on the nature of a business’s practices and clientele. For those businesses, such as law practices, that frequently communicate with clients electronically, email correspondence is likely the most effective means of collecting testimonials. At the appropriate stage of the client relationship, an email could be sent to the client thanking them for their business and requesting that they provide feedback to you about your services.

At this stage, feedback should be solicited in a nondiscriminatory fashion, from both satisfied and difficult clients. Not only does this provide you with a broad overview of client satisfaction, it gives you the ability to manage the flow of both positive and negative commentary. Feedback from an unhappy client may warrant follow-up communication or action, but unlike positive commentary, it

won’t be directed toward the online review pipeline.

For those clients that provide positive feedback, you want to direct them to a review site likely to be seen by prospective clients. A second email correspondence, thanking the client for their comments, could include links to those review sites that matter most to you. The client would be politely prompted to choose from among the review sites you select. By clicking on the associated URL address for that site, the client would land directly on the page where they could leave a review for your business. Although many review sites discourage the overt solicitation of reviews, reviews are considered acceptable as long as the reviews are legitimate and left by consumers of their own accord.

To further ensure the acceptability of these reviews, the thank-you emails should be sent to clients on a systematic basis toward the end of your engagement with them. You want the timing of the online reviews to mirror the natural flow of your client activity. A large number of reviews posted to a given site in a short period of time could cause the site to consider the reviews suspect and remove them.

Those law firms that have neither the time nor desire to oversee the ORM process on their own have the option of hiring an ORM company to manage the process. As an example, there is a professional ORM program that prompts a business’s clients to leave a review by means of a thank-you email and link to an electronic platform. The platform provides the familiar 5-star rating scale and space for comments. Depending on the rating given, the client is directed down one of two paths. Those clients that provide a positive review are asked to click on a link to a review site (such as Lawyers.com or Avvo) and copy their review to the site.

The business determines the menu of sites from which they want their clients to choose. Those clients that leave an unfavorable review are thanked for their



input, but are not directed further to a review site. However, the negative feedback is immediately forwarded to the business so they can determine if they have a client issue that needs to be addressed. The process thanks the business's client, politely solicits feedback, and offers a simple means of posting recommendations on the Internet.

Additionally, the program provides the business with ongoing and timely reporting of their Internet reputation. All reviews on critical sites are tracked, not just those captured by the platform program. The results are reported in a summary fashion, with the ability to access specific reviews, if desired.

Whether handled in house or by a professional firm, the benefits of an ORM program are several: timely feedback to the business about consumer satisfaction with their products or services; creation of positive reviews on websites that are likely to be viewed by prospective consumers; and prompt notification of any consumer dissatisfaction through a private forum. The vast majority of unhappy consumers (69 percent) will post one negative review only.⁴ If unhappy clients are given an outlet for their grievances before they complain publicly, most negative online reviews can be prevented. Unfortunately, even the most conscientious business owner may be confronted by the occasional negative online review.

What should be done about negative online reviews?

There are differing schools of thought regarding the treatment of negative reviews, but my colleagues and I side with the majority of reputation management professionals who believe a business owner should usually respond to a negative online review. Most online review sites allow for a business owner response; a well-crafted response can take the sting out of a negative review and, if handled well, can serve as a marketing opportunity.

The immediate response of many business owners to a negative review is to

get the review removed. This is a time-consuming and, often, fruitless endeavor. Unless the review is blatantly false, such as criticizing an employee who doesn't actually exist, is profane, or is egregiously offensive, racist, or sexist, the review site is unlikely to agree to remove the negative review.

The following are tips for responding to a negative review:

- *Allow yourself time to calm down* before writing a response. You want your response to be an unemotional, professional reply; you don't want to make a bad situation worse with heated remarks. Additionally, we recommend:
 - *Evaluate the situation from the reviewer's perspective.* Consider if the cause of the complaint is a misunderstanding, a miscommunication, or the result of an outright problem in the delivery of services.
 - *Consider your audience.* In addition to the individual who left the negative review, the audience for your reply is the population of prospective clients that may view the review and your reply.
 - *Be respectful.* Acknowledge the complaint and thank the reviewer for their feedback. If the problem arose as the result of a misunderstanding or miscommunication, you have a chance to rectify the situation with your reply. If there are merits to the complaint, discuss any measures that have been taken to address the issue.
 - *Extend an olive branch.* If appropriate, offer to resolve the issue with them and invite them to come back so you can improve their future experience. If you are successful in mollifying the individual, they may take down their negative review.

Of course, the most desirable scenario is to deter the negative comments from being aired publicly in the first place. Offering an unhappy client a private forum in which to air their grievances will satisfy the client's desire to express their unhappiness without jeopardizing your reputation. A private forum gives you the opportunity to diffuse the situation away from the public eye.

Summary

The vast majority of consumers use Internet searches to research businesses prior to making a purchase decision. The level of Internet research is heightened for impactful and unfamiliar purchases such as hiring legal services. Attorneys, perhaps more than any other professionals, rely on their reputations to build their business and the Internet plays a large role in shaping that reputation.

Online recommendations drive a business's reputation and greatly influence the decisions that consumers make. Online reviews factor heavily into consumer purchase decisions, yet sometimes they do not fairly portray the quality of services provided by a business. Online Reputation Management is a means for businesses to build a positive online reputation in order to attract prospective consumers. Those law firms that do not want to oversee the ORM process on their own have the option of hiring an ORM company to manage the process.

Endnotes:

¹ Fleishman-Hillard, "2012 Digital Influence Index Shows Internet as Leading Influence in Consumer Purchasing Choices." January 31, 2012. Web.

² Dimensional Research, "Survey: 90 percent Of Customers Say Buying Decisions Are Influenced By Online Reviews." *MarketingLand.com*. April 9, 2013. Web.

³ Cone Communications, "Game Changer: Cone Survey Finds 4-out-5 Consumers Reverse Purchase Decisions Based on Negative Online Reviews." *2011 Online Influence Trend Tracker*. August 31, 2011. Web.

⁴ Pepperdine University Graziadio School of Business and Management, "Online Reviews Study." June 2012. Web.

Catherine Watson is Operations Manager of *CertifiedRatings.com*. She has a B.A. in Economics and an MBA from UCLA and spent a decade as a management consultant with Deloitte & Touche. Email: catherine.watson@certifiedratings.com



Watson