

DOWNTOWN BUSINESS TIPS

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Managing an Online Reputation, By KERMIT PATTISON

Your customers are talking about you — and the whole world is listening. Local review sites are reshaping the world of small business by becoming the new Yellow Pages, one-stop platforms where customers can find a business — and also see independent critiques of its performance. How do you manage your reputation when everybody is a critic?

For some business owners, this is a terrifying prospect that seems more like mob rule than the wisdom of crowds. Negative reviews can hang an albatross around your neck if they appear prominently in search results. Happily, there is a big upside: referrals from happy clients are traditionally the best source of new business — and online forums are powerful word-of-mouth. The review process has been democratized. But managing your online reputation requires a whole new skill set, including monitoring the online conversation and engaging with customers and the tech-savvy to promote yourself in the best channels. These skills are becoming essential for mainstream businesses. According to a survey by the Opinion Research Corporation, 84 percent of Americans say online reviews influence their purchasing decisions.

Monitor

Customers are abuzz with opinions — the only question is whether that buzzing reaches your ears. The first step is to tune in. Do a vanity search of your business name and see what comes up. Are you easy to find? What is the first impression? Do you have a Web page and blog, and are they kept up to date? Is your business reviewed in online forums or blogs?

Try to see your business through the eyes of a customer. Indeed, customers increasingly shop with their browser. One study by the Yellow Pages Association and [comScore](#) found that local search for businesses, products and services grew 58 percent last year and reached 15.7 billion searches, more than a tenth of overall search traffic.

Study local search sites like [Yelp](#), [Citysearch](#) and [Yahoo!Local](#). Forums for customer feedback have sprung up everywhere — [Google Maps](#), [Amazon](#), [Angie's List](#), [TripAdvisor](#), [OpenTable](#), [Epinions](#) and a myriad of online communities and niche sites. Build systems to stay on top of this online buzz. A [Google alert](#) can automatically inform you when your business is mentioned in a review, blog or online publication. Some review sites have features that automatically send e-mail alerts to business owners when a review is posted.

Manage

Once you've tuned into the online conversation, the tricky part is managing it. Claim your listing on the local search sites. Many of these listings are free (although some sites offer premium services only to advertisers). The more detailed your profile, the more readily your business will appear in search results.

Responding to reviews is a delicate act of customer relations. A snarky review may make your blood boil — if so, step away from the keyboard and calm down until you can respond graciously.

You don't need to respond to every review, especially if the overall consensus

is positive. A negative review, however, demands special attention. Some business owners post public responses to apologize and try to win back the customer. Some privately message the reviewer.

Even hostile critics sometimes are mollified by a polite response from the merchant.

Another no-no is posting false reviews. Don't write fake reviews to puff up your business or trash a competitor. Businesses have been publicly exposed for shilling and suffered major embarrassment. Indeed, the surest way to generate positive reviews is not to ghostwrite them but to focus on good service. Fortunately, online reviews can help you do just that. These reviewers are a virtual army of secret shoppers who are telling you exactly what works and what doesn't.

Look for patterns.

Are people consistently complaining about poor service? Are they constantly praising something that you can emphasize to differentiate your business?

Promote

These platforms do more than help you protect your good name. They can also serve as tools for marketing, analytics and aiming at customers. Becoming an advertiser can buy you more ability to work the crowd. Benefits vary by site, but advertisers generally get more prominent display and other tools. These platforms also can help business owners mine customer information.

For more business related articles visit [the New Your Times online](#).

Are You a Positive Paula or a Negative Nancy? By RICK SEGEL

As I get older I am really learning to believe in the power of thinking positively more than ever before. I see more people who believe they can do things... in fact, doing them. While the people who say they can't do things... don't seem to do anything. Many of us don't even realize we are doing it. Maybe because it's the end of the year and it is a time to reflect, I look around at both old and new friends and all of the different businesses I have contact with over the course of a year. I realize there are certain people I really want to associate with and those are the people who haven't given up, are looking for ways to make things work and just have that can-do attitude.

Someone who has known me for a long time reminded me last week of what I had accomplished from my early days of working with my mother in a 900 square foot dress shop in a suburban downtown location. He said that it seems like I am a far cry with what my life is today. I thought about all of the places where I have spoken professionally across the United States and around the world. I have written 15 books and have had my articles published in more countries than I can name. So what, who cares? In writing this I am feeling awkward because it sounds as if I am bragging and full of myself. Anyone who does know me, knows that is the farthest thing from who I am. I am saying this because I rarely look backwards. I am constantly looking for ways of making things better and I look at the world which holds infinite possibilities.

There are more opportunities today than ever before for the independent and small business person. Sure, there are a thousand reasons why a business will fail but all it takes is one idea to make it stand out and differentiate itself from its competition.

This past year has been a challenging and difficult year for many while a wonderful year for many as well. Is there a common denominator? Perhaps there is. Maybe it is more a common personality trait that is constantly looking for ways to make something work. Oh sure, knowing what doesn't work may help you to eliminate paths not to journey down. Does that negative talk help you to find the path that has that gem of an idea to put you on a path to make it work?

Last week I worked at a wonderful bridal business in Plano, TX that is helping to recreate the wedding industry with the use of only one word. They don't have salespeople, sales asso-

ciates, sales coordinators, or even use the word consultant the way many bridal shops will. They use the word "stylist" to refer to members of their staff who help to style the entire wedding. It's as if they are brand managers who are controlling every aspect of the brand. After all, every brand has a personality and everything a company does must reinforce that personality. An example would be you will never see Ozzy Osbourne endorsing a Betty Crocker product. It just doesn't go together.

Every wedding has a personality as well. The wedding stylist is working to control that personality in every aspect of the wedding from invitations to the look of all involved in the wedding and the look and feel of where the wedding is held and what kind of experience the guests will experience. By looking at themselves as stylists, it opens the door to so many possibilities. It increases the level of service and the connection between the bride and the business and the stylist. The stylist becomes a valuable resource as opposed to a salesperson trying to earn a bigger commission.

The wedding industry has been challenging, to say the least, over the past few years due to pricing and competitive reasons and has seen many stores close. And every one of those stores will probably tell you the reasons why it closed. Maybe it is because they didn't have enough reasons why customers would find a path to their doors instead of looking for reasons why the business wouldn't work.

This is just one small example of making an old concept re-invented and re-vitalized. The world is changing because of the new inventions that are changing our lives. We can change our world by looking for and changing the way we do what we do. Instead of telling us the reasons why something won't work, let's look for those reasons that will make 2012 the greatest year you have ever had. I am committed to make 2012 that kind of year for me. We have more innovative ways of making your lives better and more profitable than any other year. Get ready for the excitement and the fun.

I look forward to sharing these ideas in the weeks ahead. Happy Holidays and remember, 2012 will be filled with great opportunities.

Read more at <http://www.ricksegel.com/>

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"DAHLONEGA DEVELOPMENT
AUTHORITY (MAIN STREET)"

1. DIRECT SELLING

Not: It used to be that every sales effort started from picking up the phone to “cold call” an industry list. This is no longer effective (partially since no one ever answers their phone!) Besides being a waste of time, the fear of rejection makes this scary to actually do

Hot: We are in the referral economy as John Jantsch frequently discusses. A company can automatically get put in the “maybe” pile for the a sale when a connector or past customer refers that business to another prospect. Don't be afraid to always ask for a referral or reference. Satisfied customers almost always are happy to give them.

2. DEAL-A-DAY WEBSITES

Not: Offering coupons alone through [Groupon](#), [Living Social](#) and other daily deal mechanism is not effective long term. This may get an immediate cash flow bump for your business, but it kills the gross margin or may even may make this particular transaction unprofitable.

Hot: When these daily offers are used to attract new customers and then retain a lifetime value relationship, they can be worthwhile. Businesses are now turning to companies like [Mob Manager](#) that help follow up daily deal purchases with multiple emails that build a future relationship.

3. GIVING YOUR PITCH

Not: Trying to sell a product because it will make the future customer “better” no longer is compelling.

Pain Killers: Every company needs a targeted “elevator pitch” that focuses on the pain the business solves for the customer that has the money. People always buy when they are in pain. JJ Ramberg gives some great guidelines on building your elevator pitch in her [OPEN Forum Crash Course](#).

4. GENERATING WEB TRAFFIC

Not: Using an outrageous YouTube video or other social media stunt that has nothing to do with your business to get website traffic that visits once and never comes again is ineffective. One and done also becomes very expensive.

Hot: Building long-term relationships by consistently giving value through email is important. Common email marketing tools used at low cost are [Vertical Response](#), [Constant Contact](#) and [Mail Chimp](#). Developing your own house email list from those who are interested in your content is key.

5. USING PAY-PER-CLICK

Not: Experimenting with pay-per-click by using [Google Ad-](#)

[words](#), [Yahoo! Search Marketing](#) or [Microsoft adCenter](#) without really understanding how a comprehensive campaign works is a money waster. It only results in high priced ads and low conversion rates.

Hot: Hiring a certified pay-per-click professional who actually does know how to drive qualified traffic on a budget will yield improved results.

6. IT'S STILL THE WEB

Not: Ignoring the Internet because it is not “relevant” to a local brick and mortar business or a professional services provider is a big mistake. In 2012, if your business is not on the Web, it doesn't exist in the minds of most consumers.

Hot: Claiming your company's local listings from Google, Bing and [Dex Knows](#) by verifying that all information is correct. Optimize your website for local shoppers who do research online but want to buy from a physical location.

7. MORE MOBILE

Not: Your company website is not visible or usable from mobile PDA and tablet devices.

Hot: Having an “app for that” on major platforms like iPhone and Android. Prospects should be able to access information on your company through a mobile application that looks good on their phone or tablet.

8. THE SOCIAL MEDIA HARD SELL

Not: Attempting to use Twitter, LinkedIn or Facebook or other social media for a hard sell or spamming.

Hot: Think social CRM. Use social media to make others aware of your expertise. Helpful conversations will develop loyal bonds from people who want to hear more from you.

9. MORE CONTENT

Not: Putting up a blog every week and thinking that's enough to spread your company's message. If you build it, they really don't come.

Hot: Include the latest sharing buttons so readers can spread the content for you. The hot sharing buttons for 2012 are Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn (for B2B businesses) and Google+, plus other selected ones specific to your industry or type of site. The [ShareThis](#) widget is an easy way to add these capabilities to any site.

What do you think is hot for 2012?

Click [here](#) to read more *Small Business Trends*.

The “Downtown Business Tips” newsletter is intended to provide merchants with monthly information about improving their business's position in the market!

Please send your comments & suggestions to Rebecca Shirley, rebeccashirley@dahlongadda.org, 706-482-2707.

Use our website www.dahlongadda.org for business resources.