



Living with Yelp

By Roger McManus

Managing your online reputation: Reputation Management is complicated by Yelp's maddening quirks and rules. Understanding them will smooth your way and probably increase your volume of new business.

Why do people put fences around their properties? Why do people put locks on their doors?

Fences and locks don't keep everyone out. If an outsider is invited in, the fences and locks serve no purpose. Fences and locks are designed to keep out people who are not known. Once they are known, they can come through fences and find that doors are not locked. The issue is with those who are not trusted.

That analogy goes a long way toward understanding Yelp.

The Yelp Trap

Yelp has exploded from an idea to a very powerful force in American business in just a few short years. Consumers love Yelp. It offers lots of information about a businesses in which a consumer is interested; reviews from other customers of the business, directions about how to get to the business, instant coupons and deals and even "check in" specials designed to lure them in while they are in the area.

Business owners, however, have more mixed feelings about Yelp. They have absolutely no say in whether they want to participate in Yelp reviews, but they can play along with varying degrees of enthusiasm to bolster -- or defend -- their positions.

The Accusations

Let's take a look at the accusations business owners level at Yelp and see if they are justified or not. Yelp is a "machine". While there certainly are humans behind the machine, the millions of reviews that are processed every day require automation to make it work. The other factor is that, like Google, nobody outside of Yelp really knows how the machine works. And, just like Google, Yelp changes how the machine works occasionally.

Online marketers are constantly wanting to figure out how Google works so they can "game" the system and gain an advantage. Brick-and-mortar businesses are not so accustomed to such games. They see Yelp using some mysterious system that either helps them or hurts them and

they are suspicious. When Yelp seems to be hurting them, they get downright hostile. Here are some examples:

"Yelp only posts my negative reviews and filters out the positive ones."

Thousands of business people are in agony over Yelp "filters". These filters are not as onerous as they used to be when you would be able to see the hidden reviews only after clicking a very faint grey box hidden at the very bottom of the page and then entering a "captcha" code for reasons that can only be defined as irritating. This made reading filtered reviews far too much effort for the vast majority of people.

Today, however, they are only hidden behind a single, pejoratively named "Not Recommended" button. Easier to find – if you are looking for it and want to take that extra step. And, to those unfamiliar with Yelp's language, the concern about what "not recommended" really means.

Once you get to actually see these reviews, they are often very positive reviews – but, not always. Those business owners who are the subject of positive reviews reason that, if people say nice things about them, these things should be published. Yet, Yelp seems to often publish negative or neutral reviews and filter out the really good ones.

When you build a machine that has to "think" like a human, you have to develop rules around its actions. The people who built the Yelp machine attempted to take human nature into account -- and human larceny, too. People tend to cheat. And, when they are cheating "machines" rather than other humans, they have less compunction about doing so.

So the creators of the Yelp machine made a couple of assumptions. First, they assumed that when people are upset, they tend to speak from the heart. In other words, they speak the truth. That is why negative reviews tend to show up on Yelp faster and stay longer. They are not filtered by Yelp because Yelp believes that they are probably credible.

That is not to say that there are not competitors of the business or enemies of the owner who won't try a little mischief. False negative reviews can make it onto the Yelp site. Obvious and provable falsehoods can be removed by Yelp (or the person who posted it), but the system is not perfect and some "false negatives" still slip through.

On the other hand, if a review comes back all puffy with positive comments from someone who has not submitted many (or any) Yelp reviews in the past, Yelp believes that the owner of the business or practice asked for the review from friends or family (often quite true) and the review is, therefore, lower on the credibility score. It is human nature. People do not generally go out of their way to rave about service that they routinely expect to be good – particularly if they have not been prone to praise in the past.

Sadly, excellence is expected – even taken for granted -- these days. And, Yelp's apparent view of human nature suggests that they do not expect people to go out of their way to write about exceptional experiences. So when glowing reviews come in, they filter them until there is enough evidence that they have veracity.

Filter does not mean erase. Positive reviews are displayed on a secondary page labeled “Not Recommended”, until there is enough evidence to release them. So, what is that evidence?

People who consistently write reviews for Yelp are more trusted to be legitimate. Some people will write reviews – positive and negative – on every business they patronize. Yelp trusts them. A new noun has been created as a result: “Yelper”.

That is why people, who don’t routinely write Yelp reviews and then suddenly write legitimate positive reviews about a business, are filtered and their reviews are not posted – until they have written more. It is simply Yelp’s way of putting up a fence or locking a door. Eventually, the new reviewers will be trusted enough to be allowed in.

The fact is that, eventually, there will be many more people who are “credible” with Yelp. It just takes time. And, you can be ahead of the game.

The Law is on Yelp’s Side

There have been fights and even lawsuits over how business owners have felt they have been damaged by Yelp reviews. What it gets down to is First Amendment rights. Yelp owns their website. They can (within reason) publish anything they want and it is still legal. Yelp is shielded with immunity under US Code 47 § 230 (Communications Decency Act of 1996) which states (in general) that the owner of a website that publishes words written by a third party has no responsibility for the content of those words no matter how heinous. That was what ultimately decided the latest class-action suit against Yelp in Yelp's favor -- even though the judge expressed wariness of this use of Section 230 latitude.

And, while it seems unfair to the business on the surface, those who use Yelp would rather see more factual reviews than "puffery". It makes the Yelp brand more valuable even if it irritates those who suffer under its guidelines.

And, tragically, in a recent court case in California, the judge heard arguments from a business owner alleging extortion by Yelp and ruled, essentially, that it is not extortion, but “strong bargaining by one business with another”.

For its part, Yelp says that reviews get removed (or filtered) when, either the person posting removes it him or herself, the review violates Yelp's guidelines or it gets caught in a filter because the reviewer has not established credibility.

Extortion?

“When I refused to buy advertising on Yelp, my positive reviews stopped showing up

This accusation is one that Yelp flatly and repeatedly denies. There would, however, seem to be enough empirical evidence that it might have some credence. There are lots of stories of business owners who claim such things happened to them. And, who knows? Is it farfetched to

see a rejected Yelp salesperson "turning the screws" a bit on the business who declined to buy advertising? The question remains whether salespeople are actually issued the screwdrivers.

For Yelp's part, they contend that those business owners who claim that their positive reviews have been filtered after a salesperson's visit, were just not paying attention before. The positive reviews they now discover are filtered, were filtered all along and the discovery of them agitates the business owner who now sees all of the filtered reviews that are not displayed.

There is no way to resolve this mystery. We just have to trust that Yelp has ethical standards that would make such an accusation untrue even though it would appear that they have been given permission to do so by the courts.

"Yelp puts competitor ads right inside my listing on Yelp."

This is true and Yelp admits it. This gets back to the concept of ownership. Yelp owns the site and can generally do with it as it pleases. And, who is to object. Not Yelp users. It is all information to them. Business owners cannot refuse to cooperate. Yelp will list and review them just the same. It would be as effective as the kid who wants get his or own way by holding his breath until turning blue.

Those who buy advertising from Yelp do not have competing ads in their Yelp listing. Conversely, if you do buy Yelp advertising, you will have your ad placed in a competitor's space.

Yelp Realities

The fact is, Yelp is powerful. It is not going away. It is not going to yield to pressure by any business that feels wronged. It is protected by current laws. [See www.NASBOinfo.org for an effort to change this.] And, for those who learn how to play the Yelp game using Yelp rules, it can be a very powerful ally to well-run businesses.

There are several studies that have been published suggesting that there is a direct correlation between positive Yelp reviews and gross revenues of the businesses about which positive reviews are written.

Managing Yelp

Unlike most things you cannot totally control, Yelp is a system over which you can exert some influence -- if you learn the rules.

Start by making sure your Yelp profile online is completely filled out. This includes photographs and business hours and descriptions of the business. The more information you give to Yelp, the more credible you are as a participant. Your sign of good faith by actively participating seems to loosen the grips on some of your better reviews.

Next, consider "Yelp Deals". These are much like Groupon. They cost nothing to offer, you can make up the deal yourself and you can turn them on and off as you wish. Like Groupon, you

discount to the customer and share the net revenues with Yelp. Again, this is a sign of participation and cooperation and does seem to enhance your position. It generates revenue for Yelp without upfront money out of your pocket. It is a good cooperative relationship that endears you to Yelp and your customers at the same time.

Also, you can allow check-ins by your customers. This is a Yelp system that emulates FourSquare. You may make different offers to people who "check in" at your place of business. Your offer can be a discount, two-for-one special or percentage off for those who check in on Yelp. Again, this enhances your relationship with your customer and lets Yelp know you are a player, too.

Don't Mess with YELP!

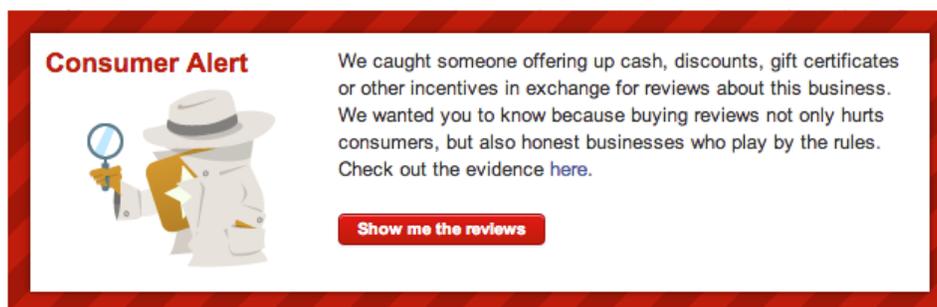
While we have been talking about boosting your credibility with Yelp, there is the other side. Don't mess with Yelp. Do not post reviews about your own business. Don't pay or incentivize others to do it for you (this can actually be a criminal offence). And, don't ever attempt to damage a competitor using Yelp as the tool.

Self-posting seems easy and logical. The problem is that Yelp tracks the source of every review. You might get away with it one time, but the second time you post from the same computer, they will know it is you -- even if it is different person using your computer. Just don't do it.

Additionally, it is very hard to create language that will sound "real" when you are writing about your own business. Oddly placed pronouns and too many adjectives are common errors when puffing your own business. Computers are "smart". Programs now analyze word patterns and flag reviews that don't "look right". Just don't do it.

When it comes to paying for reviews, there are a couple of pitfalls. The first is the Federal Government. The FTC seems to think that if you pay for someone to publicly say positive things about you it is considered "paid advertising". Unless you label it as such, you are in violation of Federal law. This not only applies to Yelp, but all review sites. This is not a good long-term strategy. Just don't do it.

Then there is Yelp, itself. Recently, Yelp has been shopping on Craig's List looking for ads by people who offer to write positive Yelp reviews for a fee. Yelp has decided to make examples of such businesses and slapped a "scarlet letter" on their listing in the form of a consumer alert.



Consumer Alert

We caught someone offering up cash, discounts, gift certificates or other incentives in exchange for reviews about this business. We wanted you to know because buying reviews not only hurts consumers, but also honest businesses who play by the rules. Check out the evidence [here](#).

[Show me the reviews](#)

This is like the "death penalty" in review terms. And, it stays on your listing for 90 days. It warns people away from doing business with a "cheater". There is no telling how far Yelp will go with this program. So, just don't do it.

Finally, damaging a competitor with a bogus Yelp listing is criminal, dangerous and bad manners. Obviously, Yelp takes a dim view of the practice. If you are skilled, you might even get away with it. But, payback can be messy. Just don't do it.

Playing the Game

Businesses that are proactive in soliciting Yelp reviews will be far ahead of the pack when the market "matures" and more people are credible to Yelp. It is a numbers game. It would be a mistake to simply get frustrated with Yelp and ignore it. Being proactive now will yield benefits later.

Yelp is not going away. But, eventually, more consumers will be "qualified" Yelp reviewers and the problem will lessen. You can teach your customers how to play the game, too.

There are systems that can automate review solicitation legitimately and easily. Visit www.rogermcmamus.com/reviewsoftware for access to options.

When you get the opportunity to teach the uninitiated, encourage them to go to Yelp and register, complete their own profile -- including a photo, this seems to be a big deal with Yelp -- and, of course, write a positive review about a *different* business than yours. If you have a cooperating customer, ask him or her to review a couple of other businesses before reviewing yours. The customer's credibility will be enhanced and Yelp will interpret what he or she says about you to be more worthy. After the customer has posted seven or eight reviews, few of the reviews he or she posts will get filtered.

Creating a review solicitation strategy early is critical. It can be as much as a six to eighteen-month process to be solidly entrenched. Frankly, you don't want a whole slew of reviews to show up on Yelp all at one time. Yelp will smell a rat and may punish you for it by filtering legitimate positive reviews. Those business owners who decide to wait until the situation changes will be far behind those who clearly see the future and plan for it now.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are lots of rules in the Yelp game -- not all of which are obvious. Suffice it to say, however, Yelp will be an important part of your business in the future. Do all you can to make Yelp an ally, not an enemy.