

IS THE CUSTOMER ALWAYS RIGHT?

How to handle online reviews

BY COLLEEN BOHEN

Last summer, Samantha Gobeille, owner of Arizona Dance Artistry, happened to look up her studio's name on Yelp. She discovered among the handful of glowing reviews three negative ones. She was stunned.

She realized that she had to put her feelings aside and take action to protect her business. She crafted responses that politely addressed the concerns of each poster and that highlighted her studio's strengths. "I asked myself, if a potential client was reading that, what would I want them to see?" she says.

From Yelp to Google to Facebook and beyond, customers have plenty of opportunities to share feedback about your studio through online reviews. On occasion, you may find a less-than-stellar comment. Since review sites typically don't allow business owners to have reviews removed, you'll need to come to terms with the idea that these comments are there to stay, and figure out how to neutralize them.

"Have a strategy in place so that you'll know how to respond to a negative review before this even happens," advises Jill Tirone, owner of DanceFit Marketing. Read on for advice that will help you stay on top of online reviews, diffuse the impact of negative posts and bolster your studio's reputation online.

KEEP TRACK

You must stay abreast of online comments about your business. As Tirone points out, online reviews have become increasingly influential as consumers adapt to searching for businesses on their mobile devices.

Suzanne Blake Gerety, owner of Kathy Blake Dance

Survey Says

Arizona Dance Artistry's Samantha Gobeille didn't let a few bad reviews get her down. In fact, they inspired her to seek more feedback from all of her customers. She surveyed them on a variety of topics, including class times, performance opportunities and more. "After three months of collecting data, we emailed the feedback results in the form of an FAQ and posted it on our bulletin boards," she says. "We highlighted any changes we were making to better serve our clients. Only 25 percent of the studio actually responded to the surveys, but people really appreciated seeing my responses and clarifications to their concerns."



Samantha Gobeille (right), owner of Arizona Dance Artistry, responded to a few negative online reviews with posts that politely addressed each commenter's complaints and that highlighted her studio's strengths.

Studios and director of DanceStudioOwner.com, suggests claiming your business' profile on individual online review sites such as Google and Yelp so that you can directly monitor what is being posted on those sites. (For more info on how to do this, visit google.com/business or yelp.com/claiming.) She also suggests setting up Google alerts for your studio's name and any other keywords (perhaps your name) so that you'll automatically get an email every time those words are mentioned on websites or blogs. The free service is available to all Gmail users. To set one up, visit google.com/alerts.

RESPOND CAREFULLY

Don't panic if you find a negative review. "It can make you feel very vulnerable if someone is saying something mean about your business," says Gerety. "Before responding, take some time to digest what happened."

First, consider whether or not the customer's complaint is valid and determine if the post warrants a response. "Unless the comment is a really blatant attack, failing to respond is a poor strategy," says Tirone. "It could send a message that you don't care about your studio. Take a breath, sleep on it and then go back and craft a really professional response."

When you do respond, make sure that your comment

comes across as the official word on behalf of the business. For instance, if you're responding to a Facebook review, post using your studio's official business page, rather than your personal account. And if you're responding to a comment on a site like Yelp or Google, claim your business listing first so that your posts will be specially labeled to highlight the fact that they are from the owner.

Watch your word choices in your responses. Tirone says studio owners should use "we" rather than "I" to appear more authoritative and business-like. Gobeille recalls that when she was crafting her responses, she typed them up, printed them out and then removed any "emotional words" before posting. You may even want to show your final draft to a neutral party before posting it to ensure that your message comes across as intended.

Also, don't miss any opportunity to position your business in a positive light. "If the concern is over something related to the studio services, such as 'You don't have a class for my 5-year-old,' the studio owner could craft a response that showcases all of the offerings for that age group," says Tirone. Remember, the goal here is not to convince the original poster to return to your studio, but to provide some context for any third-party readers.

SEEK POSITIVE REVIEWS

"It takes 13 positive reviews to wipe out one negative review—to get it to be less obvious to the person that's looking for a review of a business," says Tirone. "They

never really go away, unfortunately." Indeed, though some sites use algorithms to sort reviews to showcase the ones they deem most helpful, most review sites will not entirely remove any reviews from a page. Instead, the best that most small business owners can hope for is that the critical mass of the reviews that appear on their pages is positive.

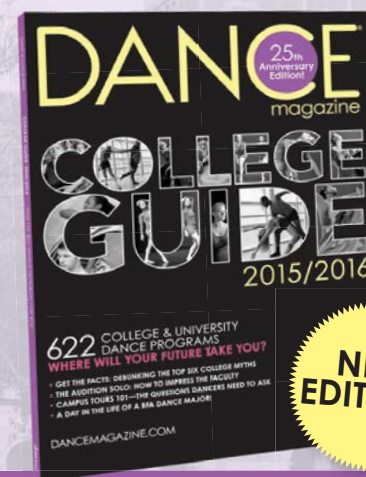
Some of your most loyal customers may think to post positive reviews on their own, but it does not hurt to occasionally encourage a happy customer to share her experience online. Just don't ask for too many reviews at once. If your page is suddenly flooded with positive reviews certain sites will push those reviews out of primary view because they're designed to discredit anomalies. You also should never pay for positive reviews—in fact, most sites expressly forbid it.

The bottom line: Even though online reviews play an important role in the overall picture of your business online, don't let yourself be derailed by some occasional negative feedback. "Think about it," says Gerety. "You can read reviews of an amazing restaurant in a city like New York that everyone loves, with a world-class chef, and then you can go online one day and see that one person wrote 'I didn't like the soup.' Does that mean the chef should stop cooking? Of course not. You're not a failure if you get a bad review." ■

Colleen Bohan is the editor in chief of Dance Retailer News.

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