

Managing Your Business Reputation

by Bobby Parks

It took me years to build the brand and reputation of my Atlanta-based decking company, Peachtree Decks & Porches, but the effort made a big difference when I sold the company. That was before the explosive growth of social media, which has made it faster and easier to create a business reputation, but trickier to maintain and protect it. Because a good reputation gives your company a better chance to be successful, while a bad one could spell the beginning of the end of your company, brand reputation management needs to be taken seriously.

Like it or not, a high percentage of customers do their due diligence online. They're not only searching for contractors in their area but also trying to determine which ones are reputable and trustworthy and to what degree past customers are happy or unhappy. In large part, this determination is made by reading customer reviews.

References vs. Reviews

As recently as 10 years ago, potential customers would ask for references after the initial sales call. Now, thanks to online reviews and posted surveys, prospects can get the equivalent information before you ever meet with them, giving you much less control over what customers can read about your company.

It's estimated that 85% to 90% of consumers read and are influenced by online reviews, while only a small percentage post them. Even so, I've met plenty of contractors who not only don't have any reviews, but also consider themselves too busy to worry about it. But here's the problem: At some point, you or your company will cross paths with a customer who dings you with a bad review. So if

99% of your past customers are satisfied with your work, but your only review is a negative one and you have no "Stars" lit up, you're going to look toxic. How many potential customers do you think will contact you at that point?

Timing Is Important

When I ran my former company, protecting my business reputation started with a commitment to leaving everyone satisfied. Once a project was completed, we mailed our company's warranty to our client, along with a simple survey, a review request form, and a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope. Today, of course, this can be done as one email document with all three forms included in one PDF.

Our survey included five or six brief statements and asked the customers to rate us on a 1-to-5 scale. At the end of the survey, we had a section for comments, which we often transferred to the "Customer Reviews" section of our website. A quicker option now might be to ask a customer to send you a review via a text message, which could then be copied to your website. This won't help with online reviews, but it will have a positive impact on your website.

On our review request form, we explained why the review was important to us and included a link with directions to the site. In our market, the most popular review site is Kudzu.com, but in your market, other sites—including Angie's List—might be more applicable. It's not necessary to ask for multiple site reviews, but it's a good idea to vary your requests to build up a foundation on each site.

In addition to this packet, I also made it a point to follow up with a personal

email thanking clients for the opportunity to work with them. In my email, I included before and after photos of the project to remind them of the changes we created and hopefully inspire them to post a review.

It's when the project has just been completed that clients are likely to be as happy as they're ever going to be (outside the fact that this is when they have to write the last check for your services). Everything's new, they haven't even had to clean it yet, and all the lights still work. So now is the perfect time to press for the review, before the happiness fades.

Protect Yourself

Building a foundation of good reviews creates insurance against the day when an unreasonable customer posts a bad review. Surrounded by good reviews, it won't have the same impact as it would if it were the *only* review. Your 5-star rating may drop to 4.5 or 4.75, but it won't sink your ship.

Most potential prospects understand that no one's perfect, and when they see 20 good reviews and just one bad one, you'll get the benefit of the doubt. Even better, follow up and address the bad review in an unemotional and professional manner, which will likely negate the bad review altogether. What's important is that prospects see that an issue has been addressed. Most can read between the lines. Look at it this way: It's either 20-1 in your favor, or 1-0 against you.

Reviews Influence Spending

Another interesting statistic (I've learned much of this information through my participation in Remodelers Advantage) is that nearly one third of consumers will

spend 31% more on a contractor with solid positive reviews. I can't prove this, but it makes sense. In my market, though I was almost always the highest-priced option, I think it helped rather than hurt my business, because my company was perceived to be the lowest-risk option.

A consumer is making a substantial investment when choosing a deck

builder, and who they select to do the work reflects on their appetite for risk. They've heard contractor horror stories, and there have always been sub-par contractors out there, creating uncertainty about what a consumer's experience will be and how a job will be delivered. So, faced with spending a substantial amount of money anyway, many risk-

averse customers will decide to spend a little more on an established contractor with a history of satisfied customers and strong reviews.

Ask for the Review

I know from experience that it can be challenging to get even the most satisfied customers to go through the hassle of going online, creating an ID and password, and posting a review. And unfortunately, unhappy people just seem to be more motivated to do this than satisfied ones. So, how do you convince those happy customers to let others know how awesome you are?

A lot comes down to your relationship and communication with your customer, which should occur throughout the project, not just at the start or when you want a progress payment. Make sure they understand that you are committed to making them happy, and that you are going to ask them to take the time to help you by doing a review. Acknowledge that it may take 10 to 15 minutes to set up an ID and password, but leverage your established relationship and ask a second and third time if that's what it takes.

I've read that customer reviews impact how Google ranks you in searches. Maybe this is due to the "fresh content" factor, but whatever the reason, it's good motivation for securing those reviews from your clients.

Think about it this way: If you're out of town and Googling for a restaurant "near me" and some have reviews with four or five stars and good comments and others have no stars and negative comments, where are you going to eat dinner? If survey results for something as inexpensive as a meal are a factor in your decision, it certainly makes sense that survey results are going to be a factor in a \$20,000+ deck or remodeling investment. ♦

Bobby Parks owns BP Consulting and Design LLC and is a contributing editor for Professional Deck Builder.