



How to manage your *online reputation*

Learn from one landscape contractor's concerted effort to make his company's online image shine. BY JIM LEWIS

It's easier than ever before for customers to access the Better Business Bureau (BBB) as well as sites like Angie's List, Yelp, Citysearch, Google+ and dozens of others that prompt consumers to leave online reviews. Posting negative reviews to these forums is empowering for consumers. It's a way for them to "get back at you" if, for any reason, they're unhappy with your services. Needless to say, consumers unfortunately often misuse that power.

The problem for contractors is the small percentage of people who are upset with your company is 10 times more likely to sound off than the percentage of happy customers. Your company may have hundreds or thousands of satisfied clients, but a prospect who's checking you out online may get a skewed impression of your business based on remarks from a few displeased customers who, ironically, were happy to take the time to complain online. It's an unfortunate and unfair situation for contractors that

requires you to raise your game and work harder than ever before to protect your company's reputation.

For landscape contractors in the residential landscaping market, this is particularly important. Though, companies with mainly commercial accounts aren't off the hook. People everywhere head to the web to research companies online before they consider giving them a call. Having bad reviews will cost you calls and, ultimately, cost you jobs. Thus, protecting your reputation can make or break your company.

What to do about bad reviews

Fortunately, there are several steps you can take to better manage your online reputation and restore your company image. They require a proactive, diligent approach, meaning you have to make them a priority. The slow season is a great time to work on this.

1 The first thing to do is become aware of your company's current online reputation. Check the aforementioned sites

and find others by doing a web search for your company name plus the word "reviews." Read every review carefully and take note of where you stand now.

2 Next, if you have negative reviews, make a concerted effort to respond to those reviews politely and with facts, not emotionally. For example, don't write: "This customer was a royal pain from the start. Nobody wanted to work with her. Plus, she kept asking for extra stuff for free." A better response is: "We did have difficulty from the beginning trying to understand this client's wishes. But we made an earnest effort to understand what she expected and fulfill those requests. We reworked several areas until she was satisfied and even threw in a few extras."

3 Then make it a point to get your happy clients to leave reviews on that site for you. Your goal is to drown out the negative reviews with positive ones. It's not always easy to get satisfied customers to take time out of their

schedules to leave a review for you, but if you catch them at the right time or surprise them with a little something extra at the end of your project, they will be much more motivated to do so. You have to get creative. Be on the lookout for opportunities to ask customers to post reviews about you, such as when you've just wrapped up a job and they're glowing about their newly installed, pristine landscapes. It gets easier over time. (See Web Extras, "Asking for positive reviews.")

Beyond reviews

There also are things you can do—even without any reviews—to make your company's online image go from mediocre to impressive. For instance, many companies don't have an A rating with the BBB simply because they've never taken the time to update the BBB with their company information.

A few years ago, I found my Beaverton, Ore.-based company Lewis Landscape Services had a B+ rating, despite there being no complaints filed against it. Turns out, BBB rated my firm this way because it didn't have enough information. Once I completed my profile—which is free to do—the bureau upped my grade to an A rating. Next, I asked BBB about how to receive an A+. I was told I needed to be in business for more than 10 years with a good record. I had been, and once I provided proof of my 10-year existence, my rating bumped up to an A+.

After that production, the next step was to begin promoting that Lewis Landscape Services had an A+ rating with the BBB. That meant becoming accredited, which cost time and money. Initially, it took about four hours of completing forms. It cost me \$1,700 last year, based on my annual revenue. It wasn't an enjoyable process, but I'm glad I did it. Once accredited, I was allowed to use the A+ BBB rating on proposals, my company website and other marketing materials. I was surprised how much of a difference it made to our customers. Many of our clients voiced they were very impressed to see we had an A+ rat-

ing. I never knew how much they valued that designation until we promoted it. Our efforts paid off, as the percent of jobs we landed went up.

You can do similar things to improve your profile on sites like Angie's List, Citysearch, etc. Most review sites allow you, as the business, to take ownership of your listing. After you've done that, you can respond to reviews, upload photos of your work, give a description of your company and more. It just takes a little time in front of a computer screen to drastically improve your profile and image.

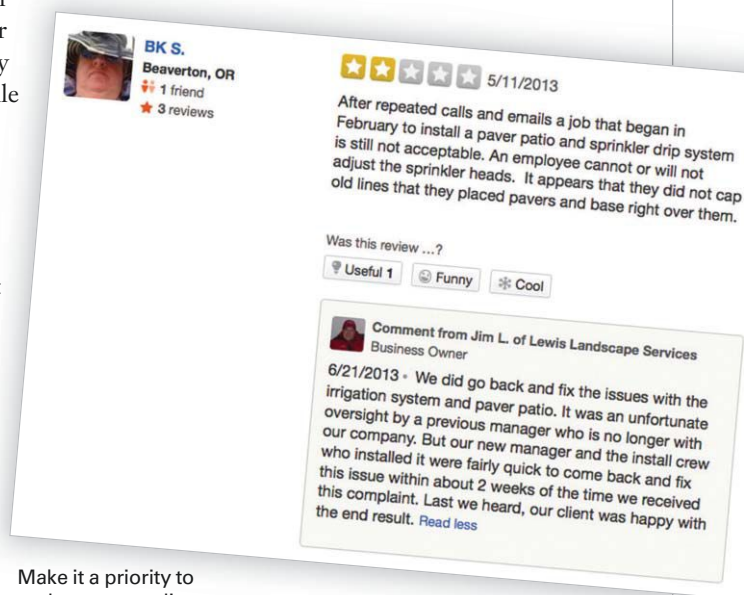
Additionally, many consumers look at more than one review site when checking out companies. The BBB and Angie's List definitely have the most market share. But don't discount all the others. Your goal should be to have the best possible profile on any and all online review sites. Remember, even if you don't yet have reviews on certain sites, just creating a profile, providing a good description and uploading photos of your work can make a big impression on people looking around the Internet for information about your company. So take charge of these profiles. Do everything you can to make them as positive as possible.

Always leave customers happy

The other side of reputation management involves making sure your customers are pleased. That sounds obvious, but occasionally, despite your best efforts, some people are never satisfied. You can't control that. When you run into those clients, you may have to do more than

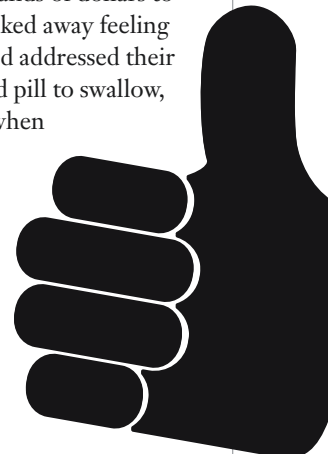
you should to make sure they're at least left feeling like they aren't owed anything. An angry consumer who believes he or she was ripped off is much worse for you than someone who you couldn't please with your services, but with whom you could come to a resolution. The former customer is much more likely to leave a negative review online about your company than the latter.

With the hundreds of customers Lewis Landscape Services serves, it's



Make it a priority to reply to poor online reviews on sites like Yelp (pictured), Jim Lewis says.

bound to run into some difficult, overly-demanding or totally irrational clients. So is your company. How you respond to these situations can make a huge difference for your reputation. My company has had jobs where it refunded customers hundreds or, in rare cases, thousands of dollars to make sure they walked away feeling like I listened to and addressed their concerns. It's a hard pill to swallow, refunding money when you know you did everything right. I've met many contractors who wouldn't do it, just on principle, and I understand their concerns. But you have to *continued on page 26*



ONLINE IMAGE

continued from page 23

look at the bigger picture. If that customer goes away angry with your company, feeling the situation wasn't resolved, how much damage could it do to your reputation?

My company works very hard to make sure all customers are happy with our



GET YOUR HAPPY CLIENTS TO LEAVE ONLINE REVIEWS FOR YOU. YOUR GOAL IS TO DROWN OUT THE NEGATIVE REVIEWS WITH POSITIVE ONES.

workmanship. And at least 99 percent of the time they are. But when a client's satisfaction goes south, you can do your company a huge favor by staying calm,

addressing their concerns as best as you can, acting professionally and keeping your emotions at bay. If the only solution is to give a partial refund, so be it.

In those instances, I try to negotiate as little of a refund as possible and I have the client sign an agreement drawn up by my attorney. A key clause in that agreement is the "hold harmless" clause, in which both parties agree, as part of the settlement, not to defame the other in any way, including via online reviews. I make sure my customer understands that part of the agreement.

Most of the time you're going to be better off losing money and cutting bait than you would be sticking to your guns and fighting the consequences of a negative review.

In today's reputation-driven, consumer-empowered world, your image is key. You'll spend more time and money trying to restore your reputation after a few bad reviews than you would have lost by simply settling with the client.

Your image as a high-quality company will be maintained if you use your reputation to your advantage in your marketing, website and proposals. I ensure it will pay off for you in the long term. The growth and success Lewis Landscape Services has seen in recent years, I can attest, is due to the fact it's worked diligently to quell the negative and promote the positive. Everyone has upset customers from time to time. It's how you address and respond to those situations that can make all the difference for your company's reputation. **LM**

Lewis is president of Lewis Landscape Services, a \$3 million design/build, maintenance and irrigation firm in Beaverton, Ore.

» WEB EXTRAS

To learn about how Lewis asks for positive reviews and for an example of the company's client settlement agreement, visit the Web Extras section of [Landscape Management.net](http://LandscapeManagement.net).

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