

Engaging with online reviews

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Why engage with online reviews

There is clear evidence that online reviews (and responses to those reviews) are increasingly important and influential towards the decisions that people make about products and services. Globally, 89% of consumers check online reviews before making purchases [[https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/2749863/2019-trustpilot/The%20Critical%20Role%20of%20Reviews%20in%20Internet%20Trust%20\(UK\)%20-%20final.pdf](https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/2749863/2019-trustpilot/The%20Critical%20Role%20of%20Reviews%20in%20Internet%20Trust%20(UK)%20-%20final.pdf)]. Similarly, 85% of consumers state that they trust online reviews [<https://www.brightlocal.com/research/local-consumer-review-survey-2017/>] as much as personal recommendations.

As well as reading reviews, members of the public are also increasingly likely to post them, commenting both positively and negatively on levels of service they receive from businesses. It can take just minutes and, with eight in ten UK adults now using smartphones providing them with continual internet access, it is easier than ever to do.

The legal sector is no different. Our evaluation of the SRA Transparency Rules revealed that 42% of consumers who had used a legal service said they would consider posting a review on a comparison website.

With many potential clients starting their search for legal services online and with increasing numbers of consumers reading reviews about a law firm before deciding whether to instruct them, there is a strong commercial rationale for you engaging with the conversation and knowing what your clients are saying about you online.

Did you know?

- 80% of consumers believe businesses that respond to reviews care more about them
- 45% of consumers are more likely to visit businesses that respond to reviews
- Business that proactively handle complaints are on average 2-3% more profitable.

Benefits of engaging

Actively encouraging clients to leave an online review, for example by providing them with a link to a review website of your choice, will:

- demonstrate to existing clients that you care about what they think and their experiences
- increase the number of reviews about your business available to new customers

By welcoming positive feedback, and responding professionally to negative feedback, you can also show that you are open and transparent about the experiences that your clients have. This can create a good impression for other prospective clients and help you secure repeat business from those clients leaving reviews.

Client confidentiality

It is okay for you to respond to, and comment on, an online review left by a current or former client provided that you do not disclose confidential or privileged information.

If a client leaves a review about you or your firm that includes confidential or privileged information, you can respond through the website that has published it, provided that you do not disclose any further details beyond that which the client has disclosed. If you are unsure, you may like to simply acknowledge the review and then contact the client directly about their feedback.

Our guidance 'Confidentiality of client information' [<https://www.sra.org.uk/solicitors/guidance/confidentiality-client-information/#~:text=The%20duty%20of%20confidentiality%20applies,the%20source%20of%20the%20information.&text=Confidentiality%20will%20attach%20to%20all,or%20your%20firm%20are%20will%20help%20you%20understand%20your%20obligations%20in%20relation%20to%20keeping%20clients%20information%20confidential.>] will help you understand your obligations in relation to keeping clients' information confidential.

Responding to negative or fake reviews

When responding to reviews, you must be careful to maintain your professionalism, be aware of the obligations placed on you by the Standards and Regulations and act in accordance with them. Our warning notice 'Offensive communications' [<https://www.sra.org.uk/solicitors/guidance/offensive-communications/>] has more information about our expectations.

Further, we would not expect you to pressurise your past or present clients to retract a negative review or a review you disagree with, or to pressurise the website provider that has published the review to do so. Our Principles require you to act in a way that upholds public trust and confidence in the solicitors' profession and in legal services provided by authorised persons (Principle 2). Regulation 1.2 of our Code of Conduct for Solicitors,

RELs and RFLs also says that you should not abuse your position by taking unfair advantage of clients or others. The same provision applies to firms.

Review websites generally provide opportunities for businesses to respond to reviews made about them and for their responses to be published.

If you believe an online review about you is fake and not from a genuine current or former client you could contact the website which is hosting the review to ask them about the procedures they have in place to deal with such reviews.

Potentially defamatory comments

If you are aware of an online review left by a client that you believe is defamatory towards you or your firm, you can of course pursue legal action. However, you might consider whether you can achieve a better outcome for your firm by taking a different approach.

Potential clients may be deterred from instructing your firm if they feel you have been heavy handed with a dissatisfied client. It may therefore be more beneficial to encourage other clients to leave reviews on the same website, to give potential clients a more balanced picture. You can also contact the website operator to explain your position and enquire about procedures available to remove the review, and you can of course respond to the review as you would any other negative review. If you do decide to pursue legal action you must continue to behave professionally and in accordance with your regulatory obligations.

How to engage with online reviews

Managing online reviews and feedback left about you or your firm does not have to be time consuming or expensive, but as we highlighted above, it can be good for your business.

Some review websites can alert you automatically when a review is left about your firm. You can find out more by visiting review websites.

Here are some things we recommend doing.

Engaging with positive online reviews and feedback from clients

Respond

You can respond to a positive online review through the review website that has published it.

Thanking the client for their feedback can help to strengthen your relationship with them, and incentivise them to use your services again, but also means that they are twice as likely to recommend you to other people. You may not have time to respond to every positive review, in which case, we recommend that you respond to a selection so potential clients can see you value feedback.

Research shows that people trust online reviews that have been responded to, and convert to become customers of those businesses nearly 85% more often [<https://blog.reevoo.com/ebook-bad-reviews-good-business/>].

You can also use positive reviews and quotes on your website, or in email marketing.

Engaging with negative online reviews and feedback from clients

Always respond

Online reviews are more balanced when a business can concede it may have made mistakes but has made attempts to address them.

Negative online reviews can provide opportunities for firms to concede that it has made a mistake, but show what it has done to address them. This can be powerful information for prospective clients.

We recommend that you respond to all negative reviews.

Respond professionally and avoid getting personal or defensive

Responding to a negative review is your opportunity to clarify, correct and learn more about how your clients perceive the service you deliver. Potential clients will look at your responses to see how you handle client dissatisfaction.

If you politely acknowledge and thank the client for raising their concerns, and set out how you will address the issue or will learn from the feedback, you can reassure your existing and future clients that you value their views and take their experiences seriously.

You do not have to respond in detail to complicated or difficult reviews online

Where a complicated or difficult review has been made, it may not be possible to respond without going into significant detail.

In this case, responding simply to the review, such as apologising for the dissatisfaction and setting out a route as to how the issue can be resolved can help to create a positive impression of your firm.

Remember that negative reviews can be good for your business

Not every client will be satisfied with the service you have provided and prospective clients know this. Consumers are increasingly wary and sceptical of businesses with only positive online reviews, and are likely to question whether they are genuine and representative.

Responding to a negative review with empathy and concern for the fact the client leaving the review is dissatisfied, and highlighting your usual high levels of customer service, can help to convert a negative review into a selling point.

Handling fake reviews

Check the authenticity first

If you think that a review left online about you or your firm is fake and has not been made by a genuine client, try to establish the authenticity of the response before deciding your next steps. If the review has been posted on a review website, you should contact the website operator to try and establish authenticity.

You might respond to the review with a polite or neutral statement, for example, "we have not been able to verify this review is from a genuine client". Most review websites have robust procedures in place to help you report or flag up the review as potentially being fake.

You could also ask the review website to remove it, or to confirm their processes for doing so. This is not the same as asking for a negative review from a genuine client to be removed.

General advice

Aim to respond quickly

Over 53% of customers expect businesses to respond to their online review within seven days [<https://www.reviewtrackers.com/online-reviews-survey/>]. Some review websites will be able to automatically notify you if a review is made about you, so that you can respond quickly.

Think about future clients when writing responses

People thinking of instructing your firm are likely to be reading online reviews and your response to them.

You should see each response as an opportunity for you to:

- show that you value feedback from your clients
- reinforce the fact that you deliver a high quality and personalised service
- highlight the characteristics of your business that may not be fully disclosed on your website or evident at first sight for new clients.

Be authentic when you respond

Avoid using technical or complicated language and think about the tone of your response.

It can be easy to spot where a business is simply using a standard template response for each review, so if you focus on tailoring your response to the specific feedback of the client your responses are more likely to be appreciated and valued by potential clients.

As stated earlier you must not reveal confidential or privileged information about clients in your responses to reviews.

Remember that monitoring and responding to online reviews does not have to require significant resource

Monitoring and responding to online reviews may appear daunting if you do not have expertise, time or resources to dedicate to it.

The amount of work involved is likely to reflect the number of clients you have, and it may be worth thinking whether the monitoring and responding to online reviews can be included in the scope of an existing role or whether a small amount of time can be allocated on a daily or weekly basis to check reviews.

As highlighted earlier, some review websites may be able to automatically notify you when a client leaves a review, so it is worth contacting some different websites to find out how this works in practice.