

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

DON'T FLY OFF THE HANDLE OVER NEGATIVE ONLINE REVIEWS



Jacqueline Taylor, Deputy Director, Strategic Operations, Texas Gulf Coast Small Business Development Center Network, shares her expert business advice in her bi-weekly column seen in the Houston Chronicle.

Q. I encourage my customers to “like” my restaurant online so that other people will want to come here, but what do I do when someone says something bad? I know that not every customer is going to be happy, but I get really upset when the reviews are negative.

A. First of all, don't let your emotions guide your response. Even if you think the customer is overacting or just plain wrong, responding in kind will only serve to make matters worse. Diplomacy is the best option.

Don't ignore the post, and don't remove it either. Other customers are bound to have seen it. Do take a moment to at least thank the customer for their feedback and promise to look into what happened. Then take the time to evaluate and investigate the situation. When you uncover the reason behind the negative comment and have figured out how to handle it, you can get back to the customer again.

When you do, let the customer know you can understand the way they feel. Thank them again for taking the time to post a review and tell them you have looked into what happened. Then, even if you don't think you did anything to warrant the bad review, invite them to come back for a better experience.

If you discover a real issue, do what you can to make sure that future bad reviews are few and far between. If it was something specific to an employee, talk to that employee or even replace him or her if appropriate. If it was about a long wait time, perhaps you can change your reservation policy. But don't make changes unless you can determine that the complaint was valid and the issue will continue to be a problem. The reviewer may just be having a bad day and you don't want to turn an isolated complaint into a big deal. If you do find that the complaint warrants a significant change, however, make the improvement and post your own positive comments about it online.

A survey conducted by Harris Interactive (<http://www.harrisinteractive.com/vault/RightNow-Retailers-Social-Media-2011-03-02.pdf>) showed that instead of negatively impacting a business, bad online reviews actually tend to be a benefit – if the business responds. One-third of customers posted a subsequent positive review after the business worked with them to resolve the problem, and many of those customers also deleted their original negative comments.

It's actually a good idea to respond to as many online comments as possible, both good and bad. That lets your customers know you are listening to what they are saying, and could go a long way toward making all your customers feel valued.



The Texas Gulf Coast Small Business Development Center (TGC SBDC) Network serves 32 counties in Southeast Texas. The program is anchored by a vibrant office facility in midtown Houston and supported by fourteen centers located with or sponsored by colleges and universities and economic development organizations throughout the Gulf Coast. The TGC SBDC Network focuses on providing business training and advising to start-up entrepreneurs, emerging businesses, and firms needing strategies for high growth. Professional business advisors work with client companies to assess feasibility of ideas and business models, develop business plans, identify funding opportunities, prepare loan and financing packages, and analyze financial results. Business advising is supplemented by a wide range of training classes and seminars concentrating on growing a successful business. Workshops are taught by experienced businessmen and women who blend formal learning and real-world experiences into practical curriculum.

The TGC SBDC Network is a program of the UH CT Bauer College of Business and a resource partner of the US Small Business Administration, and is funded in part through a cooperative agreement with the US Small Business Administration. All opinions, conclusions or recommendations expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the SBA. SBDC programs are nondiscriminatory and available to individuals with disabilities. The University of Houston is an EEO/AA institution. Reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities will be made if requested at least two weeks in advance. Contact the SBDC at 713/752-8488 for accommodations.