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Reputation Management for Law Firms

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**YOU CAN'T CONTROL
YOUR FIRM'S REPUTATION.**
(BUT YOU CAN MANAGE IT.)

REMEMBER THE OLD DAYS?

Before the internet and social media?

They weren't that long ago. Back then, you could feel confident that your firm was in control of how it was perceived. The quality of your work defined that reputation, and personal recommendations from past clients were among your top sources of new business.

These days, it seems as though your hard-earned reputation is in the hands of strangers. What used to be a private discussion between two or three people has become a public forum where just about anyone can jump in and comment. They don't even need to be former clients.

It can seem like a painful new world. It's difficult for someone who has worked hard over innumerable hours to become a respected professional, and who possesses highly specialized knowledge, to be taken to task online by people who lack your credentials and expertise. It can seem as though all of your years spent building a strong reputation can be erased by a 50-word review or a one-star rating. And each of these reviews, whether good or bad, potentially reaches an audience a thousand times greater than good old word-of-mouth.

In fact, this new reality isn't hopeless. Quite the contrary: It actually offers new opportunities to build your business. The quality of your work is still crucial to your reputation, and so are positive recommendations from past clients. These days, you need to get more active in maintaining that good reputation across a much broader group of people. And by actively engaging past and potential clients via review sites and review platforms, you can actually build your firm's brand and its business. In any case, reviews and ratings are here to stay, and their existence is a fact that you can't afford to ignore.

And as we'll discuss, most people prefer to leave positive reviews. Given the rantings and ravings all too common on the internet, that might surprise you. But it's true. It's one of the conclusions from the 2015 FindLaw Ratings and Reviews Survey, which queried consumers and attorneys alike about their views regarding online reviews. In this white paper, we'll tap research from that survey and other sources, demonstrating the ways that you can put reviews, ratings and comments to work for you.



WHY ARE RATINGS AND REVIEWS SO POPULAR?

Digital technology has allowed consumers to become better informed about all types of products and services. Indeed, you've probably found online sources of information helpful when shopping for, say, a car or a computer. You've no doubt seen ratings and reviews everywhere online, whether on Goodreads (books), on Rotten Tomatoes (movies) or on e-commerce sites (clothing, electronics, and on and on). More and more, consumers of all kinds rely on the opinions and experiences of people whom they've never met to provide trusted insights.

To be sure, legal practices are not consumer products. But they get the same kind of scrutiny from legal consumers. These consumers are looking at more than law firm websites. Consider your own firm's site. Most likely, it contains information about your experience, the school you attended, cases you successfully tried and the community organizations you're involved in, all carefully crafted to show potential clients why you're the right attorney for them. The same information is likely replicated on your social media profiles and online directories.

The most important content about you on the internet isn't written by you

This information and the brand it reflects play a critical part of your overall digital marketing strategy. But in this day and age, the most important content about you on the internet often

doesn't come from you. Your clients' perspectives are having an equal or greater impact on the firm's reputation. They can confirm your abilities, validate your character and describe what having you as their attorney was like. In other words, online marketing isn't a one-way message – it's a conversation that's occurring whether you participate or not.

Searching and Evaluating

To understand how this works, consider how modern consumers "shop" for legal representation. Thanks to the power of the internet, they are increasingly combining search and evaluation simultaneously. As they fire up the search engines to find the law firm that can handle their needs best, consumers also are hunting down information that will help them select or validate an attorney to hire. Before they make contact, they want to know about the attorney's expertise, how long the attorney has been practicing and the expected cost of representation. They also want to know about others' experiences in working with the firm.

How do we know this? FindLaw research has found that third-party insights and input are just the type of information legal consumers want:

- **87 percent** of consumers stated that an attorney's "reputation" was one of the top two most important pieces of information they would rely on when making a choice to hire.¹
- Findlaw's 2017 U.S. Consumer Legal Needs Survey found that **68 percent** of consumers listed "reviews from former clients" as a top two criteria when evaluating an attorney.

¹ 2017 FindLaw Ratings and Reviews Survey

- And the FindLaw Ratings and Reviews Survey also revealed that recommendations from others are the **second-biggest** factor consumers use when selecting an attorney.

You can see similar patterns in other industries. A survey of 2,000 U.S. adults for the American Lifestyles 2015 report conducted by global marketing firm Mintel found that seven out of 10 consumers actually base their purchases on the digital recommendations of strangers.² In other words, consumers do trust the word of anonymous reviewers.

So whether you're willing to embrace it or prefer to ignore it, these discussions are happening, and they are happening on the vast public forum that is the internet.

Consider the evidence:

- 67 percent of consumers who had a legal need in the past 12 months used the internet to find information on an attorney, according to FindLaw research.³
- 44 percent of consumers queried in the same survey stated that they would ask friends and family in person for an attorney recommendation; 24 percent said they would use social media sites such as Facebook.
- According to FindLaw's Consumer Legal Needs Survey, the trend for using social media as an online resource to find legal information and products grew six percent between 2015 and 2014.

- FindLaw research also found that 68 percent of all those with a legal need listed reviews by former clients among the information they would consider important when choosing an attorney.³

The upshot of all this data is this: People are increasingly looking online for attorney recommendations, both on review sites and via social media. They're tapping into the experiences other people have had working with law firms, and they're making decisions based on those rankings, ratings and opinions. As a result, those online information sources are increasingly becoming building blocks of your firm's reputation.

THE BENEFITS OF ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

One of the chief benefits of being actively involved in your firm's online reputation is that you gain a first-hand understanding of how well your firm meets legal consumers' needs. Reviews can help identify strengths and weaknesses in the way your firm manages its clients. This is distinct from diagnosing your legal abilities. Reviews may reveal key ways you can differentiate yourself in your marketing efforts. And strength identification and differentiation is something nearly every type of business does, or at least should do. Your law firm is no different.

Indeed, reviews and ratings can play a useful role in your firm's intake process, providing knowledge to you and credibility to your prospective clients. Review sites offer a useful, measurable way of tracking sources of potential clients. Additionally,

² <http://www.mintel.com/press-centre/social-and-lifestyle/seven-in-10-americans-seek-out-opinions-before-making-purchases> – Published June 3, 2015

³ 2017 Consumer Legal Needs Survey

highlighting reviews and rankings on your website, social media and directory listings can be a powerful tool as you work to turn leads into clients.

The power of reviews in building business has been demonstrated in numerous industries. A survey conducted by consumer research firm ModernComment.com found that companies with more positive reviews can convert up to 183 percent more new business than those with no reviews or predominantly negative reviews.⁴ In addition, 52 percent of local consumers are more likely to use a local business with positive reviews. FindLaw found that having a published recommendation will double a directory ad's performance.

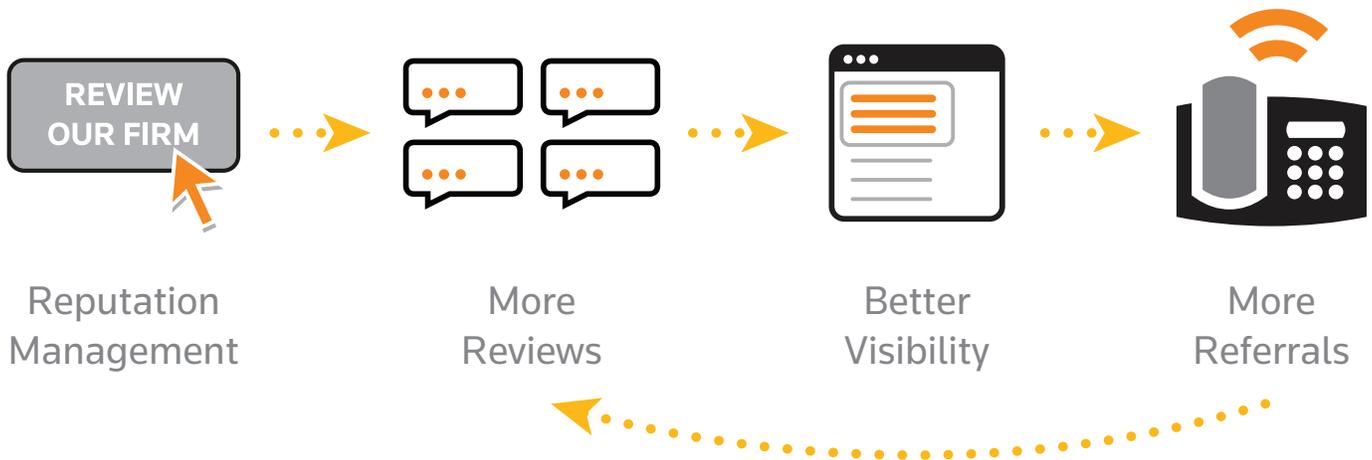
What's more, ratings and reviews can affect your firm's visibility in search engines. A 2017 survey

of search engine optimization (SEO) experts posted on SEO consultancy site Moz.com showed that respondents believed that "Review Signals" – including review quantity, review velocity, review diversity and other drivers – made up 13 percent of the impact on search engine ranking.⁵ While many factors come into play, review signals can positively impact the visibility of your law firm's business listing in relevant search results.

Here is how it works: Reputation management leads to more reviews (and more positive reviews), which enhances your overall visibility, potentially driving even more referral traffic.

In sum, actively managing your online reputation by engaging with those who review and rate your firm can contribute to your continued growth and success. Now we will discuss some strategies for making that work for your practice.

HOW REPUTATION MANAGEMENT WORKS



⁴ ModernComment.com Survey

⁵ <https://moz.com/local-search-ranking-factors>, Published February 27, 2017

EMBRACING REVIEWS

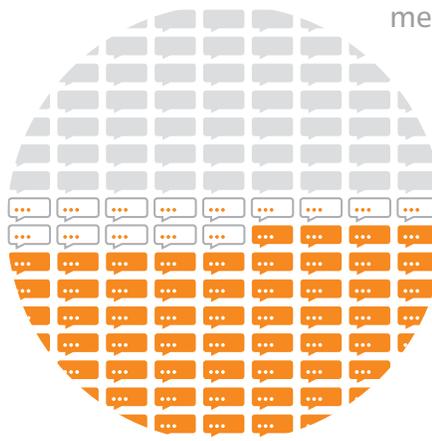
The first step is this: Assess your current reputation online. Pay a visit to the numerous sites that host ratings and reviews of law firms. Notable and familiar ones include Yelp, Google, Lawyers.com, Yellowpages, DexKnows, Yellowbook, Facebook, LinkedIn, Avvo and the Better Business Bureau. Search these sites and see whether there have been any posts regarding your practice.

If your investigations of these sites reveal that, indeed, people have posted their take on your services, you can begin the work of engaging with the reviewers. As we've noted, this is an essential part of online reputation management.

First, let's deal with a common misperception: Only unhappy clients take the time to write reviews. In fact, more than half of all legal consumers are leaving reviews online, and nearly all of those reviews are positive.

Left an online review or rating. **57%**

Here's a perhaps surprising truth: Consumers *want* to leave positive reviews. According to FindLaw's Ratings and Reviews Survey, 57 percent of consumers who have used an attorney recently left an online review or rating for their attorney, and 81 percent of those left positive feedback. The majority of those who did not leave a review simply were not aware that the option existed.



**LEGAL CONSUMERS
THINK POSITIVE**

With this in mind, let's look at the two chief ways you can put reviews and rankings to work for your firm: volume and response.

Gathering More Reviews

Start with volume. The more reviews you receive, the more power you have to overcome any negative responses. In other words, perhaps the best way to handle a negative review is to encourage additional positive reviews. Digitally savvy attorneys already cultivate this approach, and they continue to build on it. They've developed a system that replicates traditional word-of-mouth marketing in the online realm. And they've embraced platforms that allow for and encourage their clients to provide meaningful feedback.

Several recently launched services allow attorneys to encourage, gather and amplify online reviews. They work by allowing the attorney to send requests for feedback to clients as part of the normal client termination. Clients are encouraged to provide feedback on the attorney broadly or as part of narrowly scoped questions.

Left positive feedback. **81%**

They are then encouraged to share this review on a variety of review sites, social media platforms, or the firm's own website or directory listing. By encouraging reviews from all clients, you are more likely to get a true depiction of your reputation represented across a variety of platforms.

So yes, not only should you accept reviews – you should welcome them. However, keep in mind that your state may prohibit the solicitation and use of ratings, reviews or recommendations. Attorneys are responsible for ensuring that they comply with their individual states’ ethics rules. As a good rule of thumb, don’t offer clients compensation or other inducements to provide a recommendation.

Making the ask

That said, here are some powerful strategies for requesting reviews from clients. First, you should direct the request to the client by name – avoid using a form letter – and it should be personal, alluding to some specifics about the case in which you were involved. You should inform the client that the feedback they provide will help you to improve your practice. If you represented multiple parties, it’s perfectly acceptable to request feedback from each party. If you represented an entity, seek feedback from those you interacted with the most.

You shouldn’t attempt to influence or prompt your clients on what to say in the review – that would undercut their value, both to you and to potential clients. But you can suggest that the best reviews include information about what someone hiring an attorney may be interested in knowing, and encourage them to describe what having you as their attorney was like. You could also provide reminders to avoid sharing personally identifying information, unless they agree to be identified.

Assuming your state allows you to do so, when should you request a review? Some attorneys wait until the final termination letter to request

feedback. Others may request feedback at the height of the case, or soon after receiving a successful judgment but before sending out the final bill and termination letter. The decision on when to ask is really up to you based on the kind of connection you developed with the client.

In any case, you should seek an honest and detailed appraisal. Reviews can help you provide reliable information to consumers who are considering your firm for legal representation.

Responding to Reviews

Accentuate the positive

Needless to say, people will post reviews whether you ask them to or not. As the saying goes, you can’t control how you feel (or how other people feel, for that matter), but you can control your actions. Often the effects of online reviews have as much to do with your response as the ratings themselves. Thankfully, these same platforms typically allow you to respond to the reviews received.

Often the effects of online reviews have as much to do with your response as the ratings themselves.

With this in mind, here are some guidelines for “managing” positive reviews:

Keep it real. Reviews must come from actual clients. This should seem obvious, but there have been cases of businesses that have paid for good reviews, or even written those reviews

themselves. You should never pay for reviews or write your own under a different or fake account. Review sites and search engines have the ability to identify these types of reviews and can penalize your performance harshly if they are discovered. On many sites, once they know you've posted artificial reviews, it's nearly impossible to recover.

Share the good news. Facebook allows you to promote posts from those who like your page. You can share your rating via badges on your website; you also can tweet, "favorite" or retweet positive feedback on Twitter. Consider quoting snippets from positive reviews on your website as well.

Spread the love. It's important to not only maintain social media accounts on several platforms but to direct reviews onto multiple review sites. This expands your potential marketing reach and ensures a well-rounded and accurate profile on each site.

Handling positive reviews is, of course, relatively easy. But for most of us, whether we're attorneys or in some other profession or line of work, the chief worry is negative ones. But even bad reviews can offer opportunities of their own.

Mitigate the negative

If you're on the receiving end of a less-than-favorable review, there are effective ways to mitigate the damage. And however counterintuitive it may sound, you actually can turn the negative review into a positive means of marketing. Receiving a negative review provides the opportunity to respond to and address the client's experience. And follow-up has been shown to have a big impact on customer comfort. In short, taking the time and trouble to respond to

an unhappy client can boost how legal consumers see you.

According to a study by travel-industry research firm Phocuswright, 78 percent of respondents agreed that seeing management respond to reviews made the respondents believe that managers care more about them.⁶ FindLaw's own survey of legal consumers revealed that 73 percent found lawyers' written responses to reviews were useful or very useful in their decision to hire an attorney.⁷ Consumers want to see that you care about past clients' experiences, that you've learned from the feedback provided and that you will listen to them if they have a negative experience. Consumers are not seeking perfection from their attorneys. But they're looking for compassion and empathy.

So when you're confronted with a negative review, it pays to resist the temptation to respond immediately. Read the review a few times as dispassionately as possible. Attempt to empathize with the reviewer. Respond, don't react. What happened during your engagement with the client to create the feelings he or she has expressed?

- Did the client misunderstand the scope of your representation?
- Was your bill much higher than he or she anticipated? Is there a good reason for the higher fee?

Responses should always be succinct, polite and constructive – never defensive. Acknowledge the reviewer and communicate your appreciation for the feedback, and speak in your own voice, not in bland, robotic clichés. Use the response as an opportunity to highlight your strengths.

⁶ ModernComment.com infographic citing purchased research, available at <http://www.phocuswright.com/Travel-Research/Search-Research>

⁷ 2015 FindLaw Ratings and Reviews Survey

A couple of examples help illustrate this positive approach to negative feedback. When responding to upset clients about the outcome of their case, you might say:

"I, too, was disappointed by the jury's verdict in your matter. We try dozens of cases every year and have had considerable success obtaining favorable verdicts for our clients. Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain the same level of success with your case."

When addressing a client who is upset about the fees charged, you might respond like this:

"We're sorry to hear you were disappointed with the cost of your representation. We understand that legal services can become costly and strive to adhere to an open billing practice that includes clear hourly rates, electronic timekeeping and regular invoices with an estimate of the remaining time required. If you feel this process was not adhered to, please contact us directly and we will work with you to address the problem."

CAN YOU TAKE DOWN FALSE OR BAD REVIEWS?

As we've noted, you should see a negative review as an opportunity. Still, a review might come along that's so bad you fear it might ruin your reputation, particularly if you believe it contains false information. Can you have this stain removed?

Well, you can try. Your first step would be to seek the cooperation of the website on which the review was posted. Many such sites employ a dedicated team or process to address these types of complaints. If you are unable to obtain assistance from the customer service team, a well-researched and nonthreatening letter to the company's general counsel might be productive.

Threatening or filing a lawsuit should be your last resort. Most rating and review sites are protected by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which grants interactive online services broad immunity from certain types of legal liability stemming from content created by others.⁸ This immunity covers defamation and privacy claims, as well as negligence and other tort claims associated with publication. Not only is the chance of winning a suit slim, but many businesses have suffered public backlash from an attempt to go after the reviewer.



⁸ Communications Decency Act 230(c)(2)(A) <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/230>

In other words, it's worthwhile to engage an unhappy client and to explain your side of the situation. But don't lose your cool. And, at all costs, avoid revealing attorney-client information. The principle of confidentiality is set out in the legal ethics rules in each jurisdiction and in ABA Model Rule 1.6. A violation of the ethics rule may lead to disciplinary sanctions, and several attorneys have already been disciplined for breaching this duty for the ways in which they've responded to negative online reviews.

TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR REPUTATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

In summation, online reviews and rankings reflect a new reality for professions of all kinds. That reality can be painful sometimes. But it can also offer law firms an opportunity to serve their clients better than ever – and therefore gain more of them.

Whether your reviews are positive or negative – and as we have shown, they are more likely to be pro than con – it's far better to be active than passive when it comes to managing your reputation online. If you aren't actively involved, it can cost you business. By engaging with your clients and encouraging them to provide feedback and reviews, you are not only helping to improve your practice, but you are empowering those in the best position to tell your story to others.

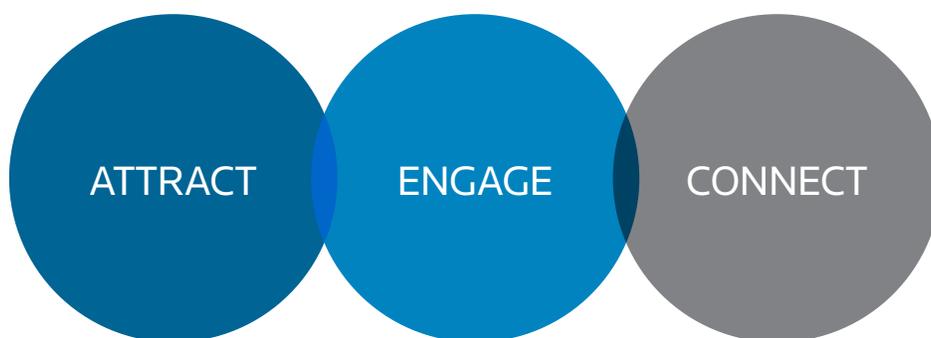
And after all, if you don't take charge of your reputation, who will?

CONTRIBUTORS

This paper reflects the expertise and contributions of several individuals within FindLaw. Jordan Schuetzle, J.D., oversaw market research and content development. Sean Sands contributed editorial oversight, while Mark Jacobsen, Drew Swain and Brad Buelow provided leadership and guidance on the overall structure of the paper.

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