

Online Reviews Offer a Window into Consumers' Opinions, and a Valuable Marketing Research Tool

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

Small-business owners: wake up and read your online reviews! According to The State of Online Reviews, a recent national survey of more than 2,000 consumers conducted by San Francisco research firm Survata for SaaS Platform Podium, over 90 percent of respondents said online reviews influence their purchasing decisions. More than two-thirds were willing to pay more when reviews assured them they would have a better experience.

The survey reported that 3.3 is the minimum star rating of a business with which consumers would engage. Consumers don't look only at the star rating; they read online reviews, trust them, and consider the content influential in deciding whether to deal with a business. Online rating sites have a big impact on the success or failure of a business. A Harvard Business School study found that "a one-star rating increase for a restaurant listed on Yelp translated to a bump in revenues of 5 percent to 9 percent."

Most reviewers are legitimate, and will reveal gritty details of their experiences that a business owner will never discover otherwise. Reviewers write about what's important to them, expressed in words they feel best describe their experience. Many reviewers write their opinions just after their encounter, when they have clear memories of what they liked or didn't like. Readers can see the dates of postings and figure out if a negative review is a trend or an aberration.

In a 2014 marketing-research study by Yodle, 90 percent of consumers said they were influenced by positive online reviews, but only half of small-business owners believed these reviews to be important. More than two-thirds of small-business owners spent no time monitoring online feedback, and less than half responded to bad reviews because they didn't feel they had the time to engage with customers online.

Online reviews constitute a no-cost method of marketing research for a small-business owner. Reviewers are influencers. They want to share the enjoyment of a good experience or spare others the annoyance of a bad one. They write to an audience of potential customers who may patronize or avoid a business based on the review. Reviewers also write to a manager or owner, to whom they offer either praise or suggestions for improvement. Read enough reviews and you will capture nearly all the variables customers care about in how they rate your business.

Yelp is one of the most popular online review sites, with over 40 million unique visitors per month. Yelp rates restaurants, stores, hotels, and even doctors' offices, using a five-star rating system, based on questions plus comments. Additional questions are optional. After joining Yelp (it's free), you can go on the website anytime to enter your rating and review. Yelp's descriptors are creative: one star is defined as "Eek! Methinks not" and five stars mean

"Woohoo! As good as it gets!" The middle stars – two, three, and four – are tagged as: "Meh. I've experienced better; A-OK; and Yay! I'm a fan," respectively.

In my own search for local restaurants and stores on Yelp, I saw plenty of high ratings and positive reviews, as well as some negative ones. Many unhappy reviewers said they were never coming back.

Based on my own experiences, I recommend that business owners respond to negative reviews, without being defensive. The business owner should apologize and say how the business plans to correct the problem. If a business tries to argue with customers' perceptions of their own experience, it just compounds the negative effect.

Consumer Reports and others have questioned whether the rating sites are unbiased. Online review websites use filters to screen out and delete opinions that are likely to be fraudulent, and some have even filed lawsuits against alleged spammers who created fake accounts to influence ratings. Skeptics question the opinions of strangers and say they would prefer to ask their friends. Brad Tuttle, writing for *Time*, says "while only a fool would trust the opinion of a single stranger, millions of people are apt to trust the collective opinion of hundreds, or thousands, of strangers."

Our Greene Countrie Towne

Learn How Honeybees Are Essential Contributors to Our Food System

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

The Philadelphia Beekeepers Guild, a group of local beekeepers, will hold its 8th Annual Natural Beekeeping Symposium at the Franklin Institute on Saturday, February 10, 2018, from 8 am to 5:45 pm.

Although honey production is a huge commercial business, beekeeping has become a popular and enjoyable hobby and small business. Founded in 2009, the Philadelphia Beekeepers Guild encourages and promotes urban beekeeping and raises awareness of the importance of bees to our environment.

Not only do honeybees produce honey but they are essential to our food system, according to Judith Adamson, in her book, *Backyard Beekeepers of the Bay Area*. In the process of collecting nectar and pollen to make honey, the bees pollinate flowers, which then grow into fruits and vegetables. Bees pollinate at least one-third of the fruits and vegetables that humans eat, and they also pollinate plants eaten by animals who then supply humans with meat and dairy. Adamson says that, without honeybees, we would depend on a diet of wind-

pollinated wheat, corn, and rice. Adamson's book contains first-person accounts of the joys of beekeeping in California.

At the Symposium featured speakers will be Thomas Seely, Professor of Biology at Cornell University and author of four books on bees; and Leo Sharashkin, founder of Horizontal Hive (<http://horizontalhive.com/>), editor of *Keeping Bees with a Smile*, contributor to several bee publications, and international speaker on sustainable beekeeping. Purchase tickets at <http://phillybeekeepers.org/>