

Managing your online reputation

Introduction

These days it is incredibly important for any hospitality business to know what is being said about its venue, service and employees online. Managing your online reputation can involve listening to conversations on social media, review websites, blogs or articles written by journalists and then taking action where appropriate. Due to privacy settings and some digital content being on private networks it isn't possible to access everything but it is essential to monitor what you can.

This guide will explain how to manage your online reputation with free and low cost tools. Managing your online reputation should form part of your social media, SEO and PR strategies. The insight you gain from monitoring your brand online should inform business decisions, customer service approaches, training requirements and generally be used to improve your business.

Digital conversations may be there forever

We live in a world where everything you do and say can potentially become part of your permanent and public digital record. With so many people having a smart phone, it's easy for customers to take a picture of a member of staff, a dirty hotel room or a poorly plated meal and post it online. Things that are posted online about you can remain online forever. There are essentially no guaranteed take backs when it comes to what you or others put online. If it's your own post you can delete your Facebook status, blog post, comment, tweet, or video, but someone else may well have already shared it, copied it, taken a screenshot of it, or downloaded the image and reposted it somewhere else. There are even websites that enable you to look back at a site on a certain date in time, take a look at the website WayBack Machine.

What you can and can't monitor

There are a number of digital conversations and content pieces that you will be unable to monitor. This includes conversations that take place in WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and other message services. You will also be unable to access anything behind a password unless you are connected to that person via a social network or have password access to the content in question.

Conversations, posts and articles that you can monitor include websites and blogs that don't require registration or a password to access them. You can also monitor all Twitter and Instagram posts that are on open rather than locked accounts. You will be able to monitor content on brand pages on Facebook together with anything with a privacy setting of "public".

Why is monitoring so important?

Most businesses will be aware they need to manage Trip Advisor reviews, however not all businesses are brilliant at monitoring other channels. To show why this is important, here are a couple of scenarios that will have had an impact on the reputation of the hospitality business. Both are true events that I witnessed and they demonstrate why monitoring is so important:

Scenario 1 - Trade conference taking place in your hotel

A trade conference is taking place in your hotel. The event organisers have heavily promoted the conference hashtag. It gets to lunch time and people are commenting on the poor selection of food on both Instagram and Twitter. The hotel staff do not monitor the hashtags of events taking place in their hotel and have no idea how many unhappy visitors there are in the hotel today.

Scenario 2 - customer service complaint

Two ladies visit a five-star hotel in London, they receive unacceptable service and make a complaint. The handling of the complaint isn't satisfactory so they go to speak to reception and ask to speak to the manager, only to be told they are unavailable. As a last resort, they tweet the hotel at 5pm. It is 9am the following day before anyone sees the tweet and responds as no-one is responsible for managing the social accounts out of office hours.

Monitoring your brand online is a 24 x 7 job and should be the responsibility of someone in your organisation around the clock.

7 steps you should take to start managing your online reputation

1. The first place to start is simply to "Google" your company, your name, the names of the management and anything else that you think people may have written about you somewhere online. Don't just use Google, run searches through other search engines too and ensure you look beyond the first page of results.
2. Start a spreadsheet of all the articles, blogs, posts and comments you find. Mark down the URLs, the position in the search results, whether it is positive or negative.
3. Next search social media channels and forums, by typing your search terms into the "search" bar within each social network. Again, mark down the mentions and complete your spreadsheet columns.
4. Go through everything you have found and mark on the spreadsheet actions such as "respond to negative review", "monitor thread for further comments", "respond to tweet", "speak to staff member concerned"
5. Assign each action to the most appropriate person. Do not just hand this job down to inexperienced staff, this is about managing your online reputation and should therefore be handled by those who are trained in customer service and understand how digital communication works.
6. Follow up on the actions and document what has happened as a result.
7. Put in place a listening and responding strategy on an ongoing basis. You can learn how to do this in the next section of this guide.

Monitoring mentions on an ongoing basis

Once you have reviewed all the online content about you from the past, you should focus your attention to monitoring your reputation on an ongoing basis. Although it is beneficial to conduct manual searches as mentioned above, there are a number of tools that can help you discover mentions of your business as they happen. Take a look at the tools listed in the next section and set-up alerts using the most appropriate tools for your needs.

5 free tools for listening

- **Google Alerts** - Google Alerts let you track search terms, for example your business name or your own name as the general manager. You can set notifications to alert you at different intervals. We'd recommend you set it up to notify you as soon as it's been picked up by Google, so you will know as quickly as possible.
- **Tweetdeck** - Use the columns facility in Tweetdeck to enable you to easily find all tweets related to a topic or hashtag. You could set a stream up for mentions using your Twitter handle and another one which includes when someone types your venue name. You can also set up streams for hashtags. You should do this when you are holding an event at your venue as it allows you to quickly scan for any negative tweets.
- **Hootsuite** - Many people use Hootsuite for scheduling but don't realise its full potential for tracking other tweets. This works in the same way as Tweetdeck so you can set up columns for Twitter lists, your competitors, individual search terms and hashtags.
- **Social media notifications** - Make sure you have notifications turned on via each individual social media channel so you receive a notification as soon as you are tagged in an update. Choose how you want to be alerted, whether its via push notifications or email, so that you can quickly respond before a complaint escalates.
- **Buzzsumo** - This site collects data about the number of links to your website and shared social media content. These insights can help you determine which content formats perform best on your different social networks to help you learn more about your customers and how they engage with your social media channels.

There are many paid for social media tracking tools which can give you even more detail and insight into your account and listening to what people are saying about you. Over the years we have used Social Bakers, Sysomos, Brandwatch and many more.

Tips for responding to positive reviews

- If someone has taken the time to write something positive about you, take the time to show that you appreciate it with a response.
- Thank the person who has given a review and explain that positive feedback is shared with the team, so this will be passed on to them.
- Make the response personal. Write to them using their name and if they were staying for a particular event mention this so they know you have taken the time to find out more about their visit rather than just copying and pasting a generic reply.
- Consider what you could do to entice them to come back again quickly and make them feel wanted e.g. "Let us know next time you are visiting and we'll arrange a little thank you for your kind words."
- Use keywords in your response to help with SEO e.g. "We are so glad you loved your stay at The Golden Eagle Hotel and dining in our restaurant, The Smithys."
- Explore whether there are opportunities for you to take a positive review further. A happy customer could end up being an advocate for your business so don't waste an opportunity. Would they be willing to write a review on a different channel for example? Maybe they would supply a short testimonial for websites and brochures. It may take time to build up to this so keep the relationship going where possible to increase that customer loyalty.
- If the feedback has come in via Twitter you could add positive reviewers to a private Twitter list as you never know when you may need some influencers for an upcoming event or a quote to help sell tickets to an event.
- By showing how much you value positive reviews you are more likely to encourage others to do the same which will increase sales.

Tips for responding to negative reviews

- Respond swiftly as if customers are unhappy then waiting for a response can create more frustration. If someone responds at 4.55pm don't assume that just because you are about to leave the office it is OK to wait until 9am tomorrow. A lot can happen during those hours on social media.
- Whilst a quick response is important, you should always take enough time to really think about your reply. Too often people respond 'in the moment' rather than thinking things through and seeing it in the eyes of the person who has been negative.
- Remember you aren't just responding to this customer, your response will also be read by others checking out the reviews, so the reply needs to be well thought out. It is an opportunity for you to put things right.
- Use the response as an opportunity to market your business. For example, if someone has complained about your food talk about how highly regarded it usually is e.g. "We are sorry to hear you didn't enjoy your dining experience with us. We are known for the quality of food we serve and are disappointed to hear on this occasion you didn't feel the same."
- Unlike positive reviews, don't use the name of your business or other key words as these are reviews you don't want to see high up in the search engine rankings.
- Try and take any further conversations off the public forum. So, if someone has posted to a Facebook page, ask whether they could privately message you with more details or request contact details so you can discuss it offline. The fewer people who can read the conversation the better and things easily get misinterpreted when being read online in the heat of the moment.
- If you need to do some research, make sure you send a holding reply so they know you have seen it and aren't just ignoring the review. Simply saying "Thank you for your comments, please be assured we are looking into this further and will be in touch again as soon as possible" acknowledges their complaint is being handled.
- Before replying, make sure you find out the facts about their visit or stay so you can answer appropriately. You don't know what further information that customer may have (photos, witnesses etc) so always be honest and upfront if a mistake has been made. It will be better for you in the long-term.

- Ask a colleague to read your response before you post it to be sure you have the tone and wording exactly how you would like it to be.

Building a positive presence

The best online reputation management strategy is a proactive one. Instead of trying to suppress negativity from your past, focus on building positive content for the future. By adding new, interesting and useful content on your social channels, blog, website and review sites, you can boost your online presence and hopefully this will rise above any negativity in the Google rankings as search algorithms like to see new content.

Fake reviews and astroturfing

We hear over and over again about people posting fake customer reviews and this causes major problems for hospitality businesses. We are also aware some hospitality businesses will offer an incentive to get people to write positive reviews, again this causes problems for your business. Below are documents and help articles from Trip Advisor and Google to help keep you on the straight and narrow when it comes to reviews:

https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/vpages/review_mod_fraud_detect.html

<https://support.google.com/business/answer/4596773?hl=en-GB>

Another article you might like to read:

<https://www.econsultancy.com/blog/69822-how-to-encourage-online-reviews-and-reasons-why-you-should>

References

Way Back Machine

<https://archive.org/web>

Tweetdeck

<http://tweetdeck.twitter.com>

Hootsuite

<https://hootsuite.com>

Buzzsumo

<http://buzzsumo.com>

About Digital Blonde

As the daughters of hoteliers, Karen Fewell and Nicola Proud were brought up in the industry and were learning about food, hospitality and marketing almost as early as they could read and write.

As managing director of Digital Blonde, Karen is proud to have such a dedicated, experienced and passionate team working with her, who all share the same beliefs and look for different ways to make their clients stand out from the rest. The team has many years' experience in all marketing tools including marketing strategy, digital marketing, PR, market research, copy writing, websites, SEO, marketing training, social media and community management. They also have an outstanding reputation in training others on the wonderful world of social media and digital marketing. You can find out more about them at: <http://www.digitalblondemarketing.com>.

DISCLAIMER

This brief is intended as a guide only. While the information it contains is believed to be correct, it is not a substitute for appropriate professional advice. The Institute of Hospitality can take no responsibility for action taken solely on the basis of this information.

Institute of Hospitality, The Counting House, 14 Palmerston Road, Sutton, Surrey SM1 4QL, UK. Tel: +44 (0)20 8661 4900
Email: library@instituteofhospitality.org Website: www.instituteofhospitality.org