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## What Are People Saying About You?

*Joe Dysart*

Businesses concerned about the havoc online reviews can wreak on their fortunes can take heart: the latest crop of online review software solutions enable you to establish a powerful command center to monitor and influence the reputation of your business online.

Essentially, these best-of-breed dashboards enable you to keep tabs on every major review site on the Internet, see what's being said about your business in real-time and respond lightning quick to those reviews—whether it's to accept an accolade or engage in critical damage control.

You'll also be able to use many of these packages to create a reviews domain on your own website, cultivate reviews from your customers and ensure that those reviews also get posted to the major review websites and on social media.

### The Impact of Reviews

Laura Hammond, director of marketing for Al's Garden & Home in Portland, Oregon, knows firsthand the benefits of closely studying the impact of online reviews.

"In the past year, we have appeared in Yelp search results 5,104 times, resulting in 1,350 user views." That exposure—on one of the most popular review sites on the web—yielded the garden center 325 customer leads, she says.

Notes Peter Mühlmann, CEO of online review management solution Trustpilot, "We live in the consumer era where influence has truly shifted from companies to consumers."

In fact, 85% of people searching the web for goods and services now trust online reviews as much as they do recommendations from family and friends, according to a recent study from BrightLocal. Moreover, reviews that are positive imbue trust in 73% of the people who read them, according to the study. And more ominously: BrightLocal found that a full 49% of review readers simply refuse to do business with a business that's rated below 4-out-of-5 stars on review sites.

### What to Look For

The good news for those businesses looking to manage their online reputation is that it's a buyer's market. There are dozens of packages you can check out to determine which fits your business goals and style best. Plus, you'll be able to narrow the field considerably by visiting business-oriented software review websites, which feature authentic evaluations of online review management packages that have been penned by other businesses. (Check out the sidebar for links to those sites.)

While different businesses have different needs, key features you'll want to look for in any online review software management solution you buy include:

- Real-time monitoring of all major review web sites: This is really Job One of any decent review hosting/nurturing package. A single, negative review that goes viral can significantly damage your business, so you'll need real-time monitoring to ensure you're continuously aware of reviews being posted in every major corner of the web. Review Trackers ([www.reviewtrackers.com](http://www.reviewtrackers.com)) is one of the many packages that offer this service.
- A reviews domain on your website: Many packages, including Trustpilot ([www.trustpilot.com](http://www.trustpilot.com)), offer you the ability to create and manage a reviews domain on your website. This will help you offset unfair reviews that appear elsewhere.

Interestingly, many online review experts recommend that you allow both positive and negative reviews about your business to appear in your reviews domain to establish the overall authenticity of the domain.

Roger Picklesimer, administrative assistant at Bloomers Home & Garden Center in Sewell, New Jersey, is among those who believe full transparency is the best path.

"We're people, just like our customers, and so we make our share of mistakes. Including negative reviews lets our customers know that we hear their concerns and gives us an opportunity to address them," he said. "When appropriate, we'll post a response. But any time we receive a less-than-an-average rating, we like to personally reach out for more information, so we can discuss it with our senior staff. Often times, we can avoid losing a customer if they know we're really listening to their concerns."

Laura agrees. "The whole point of online reviews is that they are credible because they are authentic. They need to reflect many shoppers' individual experiences. The retention of customers is achieved in how you respond to negative reviews and testimonials. We do receive negative reviews that are reviewed, responded to, and influence our operations and employee customer service training."

- Search Engine Optimization (SEO): All the new content you'll be continually generating with a new reviews domain on your website should automatically boost your business' rank in search returns, since search engines reward sites publishing useful content.

Some packages, like Grade.us ([www.grade.us/home](http://www.grade.us/home)), take this SEO boost a step further by ensuring the format and rendering of each review you publish on your website is SEO-optimized.

- Review solicitation: Best-of-breed packages offer you the option to solicit reviews from your customers on your website, via social media, email and smartphone text, at your call center, and at other key points of interactivity with your customers. These review solicitation modules also often enable you to auto-syndicate these reviews to the major review websites or to popular social media networks.

"We use a customer relationship management (CRM) company that asks customers to rate and review us on several major review sites via an automatically generated email," says Roger. "We chose a CRM because our face-to-face customer feedback was always so much more positive than our online reviews indicated and we weren't sure the best way to fix it." In contrast, Aimée Damman, director of marketing and communications at Swansons Nursery in Seattle, says she avoids soliciting online reviews altogether.

"We approach the use of online reviews cautiously. Authenticity and trust are important parts of our business model. As partners to our customers, we do not want to appear to influence our online reviews—nor to push our customers to write a review," she says. "We prefer that our customers be inspired to write reviews—hopefully positive—on their own."

## More Qualities to Look for

- Easy video posting: Given that video is becoming an ever more powerful selling tool on the web and social media, some online review packages make it easy for reviewers to post video along with their review.
- Q&A capability: Some tool makers, like Turnto ([www.turntonetworks.com](http://www.turntonetworks.com)), enable people to post questions on your reviews domain, which can be answered by a business spokesperson or another reviewer. Given that users of Amazon.com have become accustomed to this capability, they may expect the same at your reviews domain.
- Sort-by-star-rating tool: Most Amazon.com users have grown accustomed to being able to auto-sort reviews for any given product based on star rating. The reason: Sure, five-star reviews are influential, but thorough shoppers also look at the three-star and lesser star reviews to verify that the five-star reviews are authentic.

Many online review package makers “get” this preference and include a similar, star-rating sorting tool with their solutions.

- Customizable reports: Most online review packages also come with pre-designed reports and alert systems that you’ll come to rely on regularly. As you become more familiar with a package, you may want to be able to design your own, custom reports. Fortunately, many packages offer the solution built in.
- Monitoring of competitor reviews: Nearly as important as what’s being said about your business is what’s being said about your competitors. Some packages, like Review Push ([www.reviewpush.com](http://www.reviewpush.com)), include this feature. It offers you powerful insights into online reviews that detail your competitors’ triumphs and stumbles.
- Easy integration with other business apps: It’s always easier when your reviews package plays nice with other software you may be using, such as Salesforce, Magento, BigCommerce, Adobe Experience Manager, Hootsuite or Wordpress. Many online reviews solutions offer this kind of easy integration, off-the-shelf.
- Mobile-friendly: In this day and age, you’d assume any online reviews management solution worth anything would be mobile-friendly. Even so, before you buy, you’ll want to thoroughly test your package’s ability to perform on smartphones and similar mobile devices—just in case.
- Tight Facebook and Google integration: Given that a significant percentage of reviews appear on Facebook and Google, some package makers—like Reputology ([www.reputology.com](http://www.reputology.com))—have made it easier to deal with these reviews by giving you the ability to reply to reviews on Facebook and Google directly from the dashboard on your online reviews package.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI): While AI has only very recently made its way into some online review packages, it’s worth taking a look at what’s available. Online reviews tool maker Yotpo ([www.yotpo.com](http://www.yotpo.com)), for example, recently added AI-powered widgets to its solution. Those AI widgets are designed to pull-up reviews they sense are most important to the person reading your reviews.

Overall, look for AI to work its way into increasing numbers of online review packages in coming years. As with all aspects of computing, AI is expected to revolutionize the way companies handle and nurture reviews online. Google CEO Sundar Pichai has described AI as one of the most profound tools humanity is working and will have a more profound effect on humanity than electricity or fire. **GP**

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## Reviews on Review Software

Sites featuring run-downs on all the major packages include:

Finances Online: [financesonline.com](http://financesonline.com)

Capterra: [www.capterra.com/reputation-management-software](http://www.capterra.com/reputation-management-software)

G2 Crowd: [www.g2crowd.com/categories/online-reputation-management](http://www.g2crowd.com/categories/online-reputation-management)

Software Suggest: [www.softwaresuggest.com/us/reputation-management-software](http://www.softwaresuggest.com/us/reputation-management-software)

Software Advice: [www.softwareadvice.com](http://www.softwareadvice.com)

GetApp: [www.getapp.com](http://www.getapp.com)