



THE NEW WORD OF MOUTH: LAWYER RATINGS AND REVIEWS

WRITTEN BY:

Erin H. Gerstenzang and Gyi Tsakalakis

PRESENTERS:

Erin H. Gerstenzang: [@EHGLAWFIRM](#)

Gyi Tsakalakis: [@gyitsakalakis](#)

March 8, 2018

Table of Contents

Introduction

Gladwell's Rule: Protect Your Clients From Being Treated Poorly

Client Experience Matters to Your Bottom Line

Happy Clients Make for Happy Lawyers

Create a System for Earning More Online Reviews

Reviews on Google My Business

Use Reviews on Your Own Site

Use Caution When Responding to Negative Reviews

What About Fake Reviews?

Conclusion

Introduction

Online reviews, much like referrals are social proof of the type of experience a client can expect to have with your law firm. Yet when lawyers talk about these online reviews we often complain bitterly that “anyone can say anything - regardless of whether it is true.”

What is interesting about this response is that it assumes that reviews are just something that happen to us - as if we cannot control what our clients write about us.

But attorneys should be more strategic when it comes to thinking about how to cultivate good online reviews. We have a lot more influence on the frequency and type of review we receive than one might normally assume.

Malcolm Gladwell’s book, *Blink*, offers us insights about why we should start paying more attention to what our clients value and how we can deliver more of it. In his book, Gladwell examined lawsuit trends in the medical field to see what kinds of doctors were being sued for malpractice. He expected to learn that the most competent doctors were sued the least.

To the contrary, the data revealed that incompetent doctors were rarely sued when their patients liked them, despite shoddy medical care. On the flip side, exceptionally competent surgeons were frequently targeted with lawsuits when patients reported that they were “rushed, ignored or treated poorly.”

There is a valuable lesson for lawyers in Gladwell’s findings. Like doctors, lawyers are brought in to solve difficult, and sometimes impossible problems for our clients. We cannot guarantee favorable outcomes, and there are many factors that we cannot control.

But we *can* control for our client’s experience with our firm. We can protect our clients from being rushed, ignored or treated poorly. Gladwell's findings suggest that a good client experience is what the client values most.

Gladwell’s Rule: Protect Your Clients From Being Treated Poorly

Lawyers struggle with the notion that we should be kind, and perhaps even like our clients. We were never told that kindness towards clients matters. We are taught to have the right answers, be honest, and be professional. But it is rare for attorneys to prioritize kindness

Like lawyers, doctors are not always known for treating patients with kindness. This was part of what Malcolm Gladwell found so compelling. The doctors who were most frequently sued were often renowned experts who were well known for also having a poor bedside manner.

The lesson we need to learn as lawyers is that competency is no longer sufficient - and quite frankly, never was. Our clients deserve more, and one of the things they are entitled to is our kindness.

We can have difficult conversations with our clients, but we can also be kind. Not only does it create a fantastic client experience, but it is also the right thing to do.

Client Experience Matters to Your Bottom Line



55% of millennials will ignore brands that don't show up in their searches or have poor reviews.

There are plenty of practical reasons to care about the client experience in the modern world, reasons beyond 'its the right thing to do.'

Ten years ago, an unhappy client might have been fairly ordinary. Lawyers would tell themselves "I'll do better next time." The chances of the client filing a disciplinary complaint or impacting future profit were slim.

Today's world is different, and there are new rules that apply to running a successful business. One bad review can have a severe impact on your bottom line. If you are not prioritizing the client experience, then you are not going to have good reviews. In the absence of good reviews, it is difficult to imagine a lawyer and/or law firm succeeding in the modern business world.

Your next clients will expect to be able to see what your former clients have to say about you online.

Happy Clients Make for Happy Lawyers

There are other benefits to designing a good client experience. A good client experience will

impact how satisfying your work is.

There is a curious truth about human interaction. We tend to enjoy working with people who likewise, enjoy working with us. This is very true in the attorney-client relationship. The clients who seem to like us the most, are also the clients we love to work with.

In fact, isn't the most basic definition of a 'good' client one who likes and values his attorney? When the majority of our clients are 'good' clients, we experience far less stress, fewer sleepless nights, and greater satisfaction in our work.

When people enjoy working with your firm, they will reward your efforts by promoting you online and by posting good reviews.

Create a System for Earning More Online Reviews

Motivating clients to leave online starts with finding ways to deliver remarkable service experiences. However, that's just the beginning. Have a system in place that identifies happy clients and makes it easy for them to post reviews will increase the likelihood that they'll go online and spread the word of your great service.

On the simple side of things, you merely ask clients what they think about your services. This can be done in-person, via phone, or email. Obviously, you must assess your relationship with the client to determine which method makes the most sense. Also, be mindful of timing relating to asking for feedback.

In a more complex system, you may choose to use a reputation management tool. Here are a few to consider:

- GetFiveStars
- Grade.us
- Yext Reviews
- Birdeye

Each of these tools can be used to distinguish happy clients from those who are less-than-happy. They also provide you with the ability to route them based on their feedback.

For example, you can configure the tool to send happy clients directly to a review site like:

- Google
- Facebook
- Yelp
- Avvo

Where ethical and appropriate, the system can automatically add reviews to your firm website too.

For the less-than-happy segment, the system can be configured to notify you to follow-up with the unsatisfied client.

This is a particularly effective way to head-off negative reviews before they're posted. Many times, a simple follow-up with an unhappy client will dissuade them from posting a negative review.

Should you decide to implement such a tool, be sure it's compliant with Google's review markup guidelines. Following the guidelines is important to take advantage of search enhancements including review snippets.

Depending on the nature of your practice, you may find that many of your clients are reluctant to review your practice based on privacy concerns. Clearly, you should never jeopardize your relationship with a client by putting them in an uncomfortable situation. However, where appropriate, educating a client who is inclined to sing your praises about your review process.

Make sure they understand that they don't need to reveal any specifics about themselves or the outcome of their matter. In fact, the best reviews tend to speak to things like:

- Your responsiveness to their inquiries.
- Whether they felt treated with respect throughout the process.
- Whether they felt that you explained what was going on throughout the process.

These are the types of things that your next clients will want to know during the vetting process.

Reviews on Google My Business

No matter how someone gets a lawyer's name, at some point, it's likely that they'll search for information about the lawyer online. And the most likely place that they'll start that search is Google. Therefore, it's important to prioritize Google My Business in the context of earning online reviews.

On searches for your law firm and your name, Google is most likely to serve up your Google My Business (GMB) listing. These listings are also what Google uses to show local pack results for non-brand queries (like "chicago personal injury lawyer").

If you do nothing else online, I encourage you to consider claiming, completing, and optimizing your firm's GMB listing.

Make it easy for happy clients to post reviews on GMB. One way to make things easier is to send them a direct link that opens the review dialogue window for your GMB listing. This way, clients don't have to search for your business or follow extensive instructions about how to leave a review. So long as they're logged into their Google account, they can leave a review with a simple click. This makes asking for a review by email exceptionally simple. It also provides a means for tracking how likely people are to review you.

You should also monitor your GMB's listing Question and Answer section. Some clients are likely to use this feature to ask questions about your practice or, more importantly, their case status. Failing to address questions here can give other viewers a very negative impression of your responsiveness to client questions.

Finally, consider adding reviews as posts to your GMB listing. You can use tools like Small Thanks With Google, to create social networking images in your GMB posts. This is a great way to add an additional review spot in a highly prominent area on Google for searches on your name.

Be sure to include post buttons and add URL tracking parameters to measure engagement with post content.

Not All Review Sites Are Created Equal

Be strategic about which review sites you send your clients to. For instance, Google reviews are usually not anonymous. So, while they are valuable for marketing purposes, if you are requesting reviews from your clients on Google, you may end up with fewer reviews because clients want to protect their anonymity.

Yelp presents a different challenge to lawyers. While some attorneys swear by Yelp as a source of business, lawyers should be aware that Yelp does not always make every review visible, as compared to AVVO and Google. So, if your client has never written a Yelp review before, when he does post a review for the first time, on your page, the review may not be visible to potential clients. This is because Yelp prioritizes reviews written by users who post reviews regularly. AVVO and Google on the other hand, will post almost all the reviews that are submitted.

Don't waste your client's time and efforts by having him write a review that may never be seen by future clients. Send them to a website that will make sure the review is visible.

One of the most effective ways to prioritize highly-visible review sites is simply to search on your name and firm name. Analyze which sites tend to surface for these searches. Here are some of the most common sites that show reviews in search:

- Facebook
- Yelp
- Avvo
- Lawyers.com

Furthermore, while they don't appear directly in search results, LinkedIn has a recommendations feature. This can be particularly impactful to lawyers and other professional referral sources.

Finally, reviews aren't limited to review sites. You can also use video publishing sites like YouTube to publish video testimonials. Video client testimonials provide a rich experience for those trying to determine whether you are the right lawyer for them. You can also publish video testimonials on most major social networking sites (i.e. Facebook, LinkedIn, etc).

Recently, Google added the ability for business owners to post videos to their GMB listings. This gives video testimonials premier real estate in search engine results.

Use Reviews on Your Own Site

In addition to encourage happy clients to review you around the web, you should also consider adding reviews to your own site.

If you choose to include reviews on your site, be sure to check with your state's Rules of Professional Responsibility. Reviews published on your site are different from those published around the web in that you control these reviews.

Be sure to add appropriate structured data to your review pages (i.e. schema or JSON-LD). Further, make sure you follow Google's guidelines for using reviews, including:

- *Snippets must not be written or provided by the business or content provider unless they are genuine, independent, and unpaid editorial reviews.*
- *Critic reviews must allow for customers to express both positive and negative sentiments.*

They may not be vetted by the business or restricted by the content provider based on the positive/negative sentiment of the review before submission to Google.

- *Critic reviews cannot be template sentences built from data or automated metrics. For example, the following is not acceptable: "Based on X number of responses, on average people experienced X with this business."*
- *Critic reviews for multiple-location businesses such as retail chains or franchises can only be submitted for the specific business location for which they were written. In other words, critic reviews for multiple-location businesses cannot be syndicated or applied to all business locations of the same company.*
- *There can't be any commercial agreements (paid or otherwise) to provide critic reviews between the content provider and the reviewed business.*
- *Do not include critic reviews that are duplicate or similar across many businesses.*
- *Only include critic reviews that have been directly produced by your site, not reviews from third-party sites or syndicated reviews.*

By adding appropriate structured data markup and following Google's guidelines, your on-page reviews may become eligible to appear with rich snippets. For example, Google will show the number of reviews, your aggregate rating, and stars right in the search results.

These rich snippets are particularly compelling to search users who might be looking to learn more about your practice.

Also, keep in mind that Google is unlikely to show rich review snippets for your homepage. Therefore, you should use review markup on internal pages (i.e. dedicated client testimonial page, specific office location pages, attorney bio pages, etc).

Use Caution When Responding to Online Reviews

While positive online reviews are great at bringing in new clients, negative reviews are extremely potent and can have an inordinate impact on a law firm. While lawyers may be very comfortable responding to conflicts in a courtroom, generally speaking, we are wholly ill-equipped, emotionally, to respond to these, often vicious and unwarranted attacks online. When one of these reviews is posted, it's impact extends beyond our professional life. For most of us, a negative review would result in lost sleep, added anxiety, and an unnecessary distraction from our current cases.

As a result, when we receive a negative online review, our "gut" response is often wrong and acting on your gut can make the situation dramatically worse, before it gets better.

Betty Tsamis, an Illinois attorney, learned this lesson the hard way. She made national news when her client filed a bar complaint after Tsamis responded, somewhat emotionally, to her client's negative review on AVVO.

She initially contacted the client directly and asked him to remove the review. The client promised to take down the review if she refunded his fee. In hindsight, a \$1,500.00 refund was probably the least expensive way she could have resolved the matter. Instead of exercising restraint and refunding the fee, she lashed out at him online, and in so doing, revealed the fact that he had beaten up a fellow female coworker.

I dislike it very much when my clients lose, but I cannot invent positive facts for clients when they are not there. I feel badly for him, but his own actions in beating up a female co-worker are what caused the consequences he is now so upset about.

Tsamis had to hire an attorney to handle the complaint, alleging that she had violated Rule 1.6(a) governing the confidentiality of client information.

Rule 1.6 applies not merely to matters communicated in confidence by the client but also **to all information gained in the professional relationship, whatever its source.** A lawyer may not disclose such information except as authorized or required by the Rules of Professional Conduct or other law.

Rule 1.6(a) Comment 5 (emphasis added).

It took more than a year to resolve the Tsamis case with a public reprimand. The damage to her online reputation is immeasurable. Tsamis' case continues to be discussed nationally amongst legal ethicists and bloggers, along with more traditional news channels. It is difficult to Google her name without being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of articles written about her online response to her client's review.

One of the important lessons to be learned from Tsamis' experience is that responding to these reviews without careful consideration often only escalates an already precarious situation. In most instances, the attorney would be far better served by a different, more measured approach. In Tsamis' case, she would have likely had much more peace of mind and ultimately saved a lot of money in attorney's fees if she had simply refunded the \$1,500.00 fee as the client had initially requested.

That is sometimes easier said than done. Lawyers abhor the notion of refunding fees - both for emotional and financial reasons. However, in many cases, the cost of returning even a hard-earned fee is much less taxing than dealing with the aftermath of a negative online review.

As demonstrated by the Tsamis case, responding to negative online reviews can be very dangerous for attorney practitioners - primarily because nearly any response will implicate the rules governing client confidentiality. In this respect, the rules seem to put attorneys at a disadvantage since they are prohibited from responding to, what are at times unfounded criticism.

What About Fake Reviews?

New lawyers are particularly vulnerable to bad or scarce reviews. It is fairly common for attorneys to solicit positive reviews from friends or family. However, asking your buddy to write a good review for you while pretending to be a client is a violation of [Rule 8.4 \(c\)](#) which prohibits lawyers from engaging in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or misrepresentation. Similarly, allowing your marketing firm to generate these types of false reviews is also a violation of Rule 8.4, for which the attorney can be held accountable.

Unfortunately, the practice of soliciting fake reviews appears to be altogether too common, especially since it can be tricky to identify fake reviews. However, when one is caught, the consequences can be severe. For example, [In the Matter of Herbert Joni Tan](#), the Supreme Court of New Jersey imposed [disbarment](#) where one of the many ethical transgressions included having his client to write fake reviews on Avvo.

Buying or soliciting fake reviews is not only unethical, but you may also be prosecuted for it.

“Consumers rely on reviews and other endorsements on the Internet to inform themselves in making daily purchasing decisions,” said Attorney General Schneiderman. “This investigation continues my office’s historical work into ‘astroturfing’ over the Internet and signals to companies that consumers deserve honesty and transparency in their reviews, endorsements and related content.”

[A.G. Schneiderman Announces Settlement with Machinima and Three Other Companies for False Endorsement](#), New York State Office of the Attorney General Announcement. (Feb. 11, 2016).

The bottom line is that fake reviews are not a viable option for establishing a credible presence online. It is far easier and more sustainable to focus on improving client experience than trying to

online. It is far easier and more sustainable to focus on improving client experience than trying to bury bad reviews with fake ones.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that online reviews have become the new word of mouth. No matter how someone is referred to you, they're likely to go online and search for information about how your clients describe working with you.

While there are a variety of systems, tools, and processes that can increase the number and quality of online reviews, none of them are a substitute for providing remarkable client service.

If you do nothing else, you should seek ways to make your practice more client-centric. Get regular feedback from clients. Listen to what they are telling you. Make adjustments to how you serve clients.

The internet has put the power in the hands of legal services consumers. Today's potential clients expect to be able to find information about you online as it pertains to how you treat clients.

Lawyers that do not adjust to this new paradigm are likely to lose business to those that adopt a more client-centric approach and motivate their happy clients to sing their praises online.