

# Handling Negative Reviews

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In this world of online communication, every business faces the possibility of receiving bad reviews that are available for the entire world to see... and law firms are no exception. It only takes a moment for a disgruntled client to make unfavorable comments about you, your professional abilities, and your legal practice. But the most important aspect of a negative review is how you choose to respond. It's human nature to immediately want to defend yourself and tell your side of the story, but recklessly doing so could lead to more problems and may even result in an ethics violation. In an effort to help you through this increasingly prevalent problem, I researched advice from some experts on the subject and the following is what I found.

## Respond

If you decide to respond to a negative review, remember that you are making a public statement that can be seen by anyone with an internet connection. So, make sure that the statement you make positively represents you and your legal practice. To do that you must first remain calm. I get it. Some reviews are so inaccurate and demeaning that your immediate reaction is to verbally attack the reviewer with a string of obscenities. Never go with this first reaction. I repeat. Never go with this first reaction. It is bad business to respond angrily to a bad review. Not only does it make you appear unprofessional, but your actions could also escalate the problem, snowballing into a back-and-forth war of words between you and reviewer.

Remember that, as an attorney, you have ethical obligations to maintain client confidentiality. If you do feel compelled to respond, choose your statements wisely and be extremely careful to respect attorney-client privilege. Shama Kabani, author of *The Zen Marketing Book*, [suggests](#) that you use your response as an opportunity to highlight positives about your

business. You might state, “I am sorry to hear that you were not satisfied with your representation from our firm. We have been a staple of the Minneapolis legal community for more than a decade, and we continuously strive to provide quality legal services to each and every client.” See what happened there. A negative review became an effective marketing tool.

Another successful response tactic to a bad review is offering further discussion of the issue offline. Acknowledge the reviewers dissatisfaction and then request that he or she call the office to speak about the matter. Now, there are risks involved with this strategy. You may end up having to further deal with a negative and difficult client. But it also presents an opportunity to turn a dissatisfied client into a happy, matter-referring client.

## **Drown out the negative**

The internet is a game of content strategy. Negative reviews can be overpowered by positive reviews and strong, effective content. First, encourage happy clients to leave positive reviews by creating a process that makes it easy for them. Brian Foucht of The Cyber Advocate [advises](#) attorneys to claim all of their internet listings, including Yelp, Avvo and Google +. Then, establish a process that allows a client to post a single review to numerous sites. An abundance of positive reviews far outweighs the effect of one or two bad ones.

You can also counter this issue by working to control what appears when your name is searched on the internet. Do this by creating a strong online presence that you control. For example, a law firm website with regularly updated content can potentially place higher with the search engines. So, when a potential client searches your practice name, review pages will not be at the top of the search results. The more content you create, the better able you are to influence the search results. Bad reviews are yet another reason why a comprehensive marketing plan is instrumental to your firm’s success.

## **Request removal of the review**

Reviews can be removed by the reviewer or the website's hosting company. To request that the reviewer remove the content, you obviously need to have a conversation (preferably offline). Reach out to the disgruntled client and offer to assist in resolving their issues with your firm. Once you have reached an amicable place, ask that the negative review be removed. As an attorney, I'm sure I don't have to tell you that a certain amount of strategy and finesse is necessary in this situation. Making the request without showing genuine concern can make the client even more upset. You should also be careful not to come off as desperate or too pushy. Remember that your professionalism is on the line, so proceed accordingly.

You may also choose to contact the hosting site to request removal, but this can be an arduous task. Generally, these companies will not take down reviews unless you can prove some type of fraud or illegality. Not only is this difficult to prove, but it is usually not the case. While there are plenty of fraudulent review schemes on the internet, the reality is that bad reviews are most often posted by dissatisfied clients.

## **Do nothing and move on**

This last option is the most difficult for some attorneys. Just knowing that a bad review is out there in the world eats them up at night, egging them on to provide a cleverly demeaning response. But there is actually some value in doing nothing. While a thoughtful response is the best way to handle most negative reviews, there are some situations where any response will only make the situation worse. For example, if you know that the reviewer has an untreated mental illness, why would you waste your time and energy trying to reason with someone who may not have the mental capacity to reason with you. It also may not be the best course of action to respond to a negative review when you honestly know that you really did provide less than stellar services to the client. Do yourself a favor. Swallow that pill and move on with your practice.

In today's world, negative reviews are part of doing business. When deciding how to respond, pick your battles carefully and remember to always remain professional. Instead of obsessing over negative reviews,

place your focus on satisfying current and future clients. A well-earned reputation for excellence is always the best defense to a negative review.

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**About Erika Winston:**

*Erika Winston is a freelance writer with a passion for law. Through her business, The Legal Writing Studio, she helps legal professionals deliver effective written messages. Erika is a regular contributor to [TimeSolv](#) and a variety of other publications.*