

Online reviews: How to engage with them

30 September 2024

Why engage with online reviews?

There is clear evidence that online reviews (and responses to those reviews) are increasingly important and influential towards the decisions that people make about products and services. Globally, [89% of consumers check online reviews before making purchases](https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/2749863/2019-trustpilot/The%20Critical%20Role%20of%20Reviews%20in%20Internet%20Trust%20(UK)%20-%20final.pdf). Similarly, [85% of consumers state that they trust online reviews](https://www.brightlocal.com/research/local-consumer-review-survey-2017/) as much as personal recommendations.

As well as reading reviews, members of the public are also increasingly likely to post them, commenting both positively and negatively on levels of service they receive from businesses. It can take just minutes and, with 92% of UK mobile users now using smartphones, that provide them with continual internet access, it is easier than ever to do.

The legal sector is no different. Our evaluation of the SRA Transparency Rules revealed that 42% of consumers who had used a legal service said they would consider posting a review on a comparison website. Our research shows that over three quarters of people that had used online review websites of legal services found those websites helpful. The majority of these people used them to check information about particular providers, or in just over a third of cases as their main source of information about legal service providers.

Many potential clients start their search for legal services online, and in 2024 41% of consumers shopped around for a legal service provider. With increasing numbers of consumers reading reviews about a law firm before deciding whether to instruct them, there is a strong commercial rationale for you to engage with online reviews. This includes knowing what your clients are saying about you online, and also using your right to reply to their feedback.

Benefits of engaging

Actively encouraging clients to leave an online review - for example by providing them with a link to a review website of your choice - will:

- demonstrate to existing clients that you care about what they think and their experiences
- increase the number of reviews about your business that are available to new customers - responding to these reviews also gives you an opportunity to promote your business to these potential customers.

By welcoming positive feedback, and responding professionally to negative feedback, you can also show that you are open and transparent about the experiences that your clients have. This can create a good impression for other prospective clients and helps you secure repeat business from those clients leaving reviews.

Client confidentiality

It is okay for you to respond to, and comment on, an online review left by a current or former client provided that you do not disclose confidential or privileged information.

If a client leaves a review about you or your firm that includes confidential or privileged information, you can respond through the website that has published it, provided that you do not disclose any further details beyond that which the client has disclosed. If you are unsure, you may like to simply acknowledge the review and then contact the client directly about their feedback.

Our guidance '[Confidentiality of client information](https://rules.sra.org.uk/solicitors/guidance/confidentiality-client-information/#:~:text=The%20duty%20of%20confidentiality%20applies,the%20source%20of%20the%20information.&text=Confidentiality%)' will help you understand your obligations in relation to keeping clients' information confidential.

Responding to negative or fake reviews

When responding to reviews, you must be careful to maintain your professionalism, be aware of the obligations placed on you by the Standards and Regulations and act in accordance with them. Our warning notice '[Offensive communications](https://rules.sra.org.uk/solicitors/guidance/offensive-communications/)' has more information about our expectations. It is also important to be aware of good practice resources here, such as principle 6 of the [Competition and Market Authority's draft consumer law compliance advice for businesses](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/668f7089ab418ab05559236e/Compliance_advice.pdf).

Further, we would not expect you to pressurise your past or present clients to retract a negative review, or a review you disagree with, or to pressurise the website provider that has published the review to do so. The SRA Principles require you to act in a way that upholds public trust and confidence in the solicitors' profession and in legal services provided by authorised persons (Principle 2). Regulation 1.2 of our Code of Conduct for Solicitors, RELs and RFLs also requires you not to abuse your position by taking unfair advantage of clients or others. The same requirements apply to firms and the people that work in them.

Some review websites provide opportunities for businesses to respond to reviews that are published about them, and for their responses to be published. Other providers may collect and verify reviews on behalf of businesses.

If you believe an online review about you is fake and not from a genuine current or former client, you could contact the website which is hosting the review to ask them about the procedures they have in place to deal with such reviews.

Potentially defamatory comments

There is a clear difference between an online review that is expressing dissatisfaction and a review that make defamatory comments. If you are aware of an online review left by a client that you believe is defamatory towards you or your firm, you can of course pursue legal action. However, you might consider whether you can achieve a better outcome for your firm by taking a different approach.

Potential clients may be deterred from instructing your firm if they feel you have been heavy handed with a dissatisfied client. It may therefore be more beneficial to encourage other clients to leave reviews on the same website, to give potential clients a more balanced picture. You can also contact the website operator to explain your position and enquire about procedures available to remove the review, and you can of course also respond to the review as you would any other negative review. If you do decide to pursue legal action you must continue to behave professionally and in accordance with your regulatory obligations.

How to engage with online reviews

Managing online reviews and feedback left about you or your firm does not have to be time consuming or expensive, but as we highlighted above, it can be good for your business.

Some review websites provide free alerts to let you know automatically when a new review is published about your firm. This includes reviews published on any review website, or verified reviews where the identity of the person publishing the review has been authenticated (by the site) as being a client of the firm. You can find out more by visiting review websites and asking about their free-to-use tools for businesses, and other services such as approaches taken to verify the reviewer.

Here are some things we recommend doing.

Engaging with positive online reviews and feedback from clients

Always respond where possible

In most cases you can respond to a positive online review through the review website that has published it.

Acknowledging the review and thanking the client for their feedback can help to strengthen your relationship with them, and incentivise them to use your services again, but also means that they are twice as likely to recommend you to other people. Depending on the size of your firm you may not have time to respond to every positive review, in which case, we recommend that you respond to a selection so potential clients can see you value feedback.

Research shows that people trust online reviews that have been responded to, and convert to become customers of those businesses nearly 85% more often.

You can also use positive reviews and quotes on your website, or in email marketing.

Engaging with negative online reviews and feedback from clients

Always respond where possible

Online reviews are more balanced when a business provides its response in a constructive way. They are opportunities to offer apologies, and to concede it may have made mistakes but has also made attempts to address them. This can be powerful information for prospective clients.

This could be the first time you have had the opportunity hear about a client's dissatisfaction, so it may be a chance to encourage them to get in touch to share their experiences with you directly, so their concerns can be addressed or rectified. There can be real benefit for your business to understand where things could be improved for clients.

We recommend that you respond professionally to all negative reviews, whether or not you agree with the validity or accuracy of the comments that have been published.

Respond professionally and avoid getting personal or defensive

Responding to a negative review is your opportunity to clarify, correct and learn more about how your clients perceive the service you deliver. Potential clients will look at your responses to see how you handle client dissatisfaction and to see if you made efforts to put things right.

If you politely acknowledge and thank the client for raising their concerns, and set out how you will address the issue or will learn from the feedback, you can reassure your existing and future clients that you value their views and take their experiences seriously.

You do not have to respond in detail to complicated or difficult reviews online

Where a complicated or difficult review has been made, it may not be possible to respond without going into significant detail.

In this case, responding simply to the review, such as apologising for the dissatisfaction and setting out a route as to how the issue can be resolved can still help to create a positive impression of your firm.

Remember that negative reviews can be good for your business

Not every client will be satisfied with the service you have provided and prospective clients understand this. Consumers are increasingly wary and sceptical of businesses with only positive online reviews, and are likely to question whether they are genuine and representative.

Responding to a negative review with empathy and concern for the fact the client leaving the review is dissatisfied, and highlighting your usual high levels of customer service, can help to convert a negative review into a selling point.

Handling fake reviews

Check the authenticity first

If you think that a review left online about you or your firm is fake and has not been made by a genuine client, try to establish the authenticity of the response before deciding your next steps. If the review has been posted on a review website that you believe has not been published by a genuine client, you should contact the website operator to try and establish its authenticity.

You might respond to the review with a polite or neutral statement, for example, 'we have not been able to verify this review is from a genuine client'. Most review websites have robust procedures in place to help you report or flag up the review as potentially being fake.

You could also ask the review website to remove it, or to confirm their processes for doing so. This is not the same as asking for a negative review, or a review that you might disagree with, from a genuine client to be removed.

General advice

Aim to respond quickly

[Over 53% of customers expect businesses to respond to their online review within seven days](https://www.reviewtrackers.com/online-reviews-survey/) [<https://www.reviewtrackers.com/online-reviews-survey/>]. Some review websites will be able to automatically notify you if a review is made about you, so that you can respond quickly.

Think about future clients when writing responses

People thinking of instructing your firm are likely to be reading online reviews and your response to them.

You should see each response as an opportunity for you to:

- show that you value feedback from your clients
- reinforce the fact that you deliver a high quality and personalised service
- highlight the characteristics of your business that may not be fully disclosed on your website or evident at first sight for new clients.

Be authentic when you respond

Avoid using technical or complicated language and think about the tone of your response.

It can be easy to spot where a business is simply using a standard template response for each review, so if you focus on tailoring your response to the specific feedback of the client your responses are more likely to be appreciated and valued by potential clients.

As stated earlier you must not reveal confidential or privileged information about clients in your responses to reviews.

Remember that monitoring and responding to online reviews does not have to require significant resource

Monitoring and responding to online reviews may appear daunting if you do not have expertise, time or resources to dedicate to it.

The amount of work involved is likely to reflect the number of clients you have, and it may be worth thinking whether the monitoring and responding to online reviews can be included in the scope of an existing role or whether a small amount of time can be allocated on a daily or weekly basis to check reviews. We know that many smaller law firms successfully manage online reviews.

As highlighted earlier, some review websites may be able to automatically notify you when a client leaves a review, so it is worth contacting some different websites to find out how this works in practice.