

Best Practices for Responding to Online Hotel Reviews Part I by Daniel Edward Craig, 5/5/10

As a hotel manager, when a guest comes to the front desk to register a complaint, do you: 1) look busy; 2) skulk out the back door; or 3) handle the matter personally?

Not that difficult a question, is it? Then why do only 4% of negative reviews on TripAdvisor get a response? Does the fact that reviews are often anonymous and directed at travelers rather than hotels let us off the hook? Or are hoteliers even paying attention? Consumers certainly are. Reviews are playing an increasingly important role in booking decisions. Some would say that online reviews deserve even more time than internal surveys, as the feedback is just as (if not more) valuable, and the impact is public.

According to TripAdvisor, a property's response to criticism can have more influence on traveler decisions than the criticism itself. Hoteliers have a chance to redeem themselves, yet the vast majority chooses to remain silent, willfully allowing reputation and business to suffer. Granted, not all review sites allow hotel responses. Online travel agencies posted three times as many hotel reviews than traveler review sites last year, yet whereas Expedia and Hotels.com allow responses, Priceline and Travelocity don't, effectively shutting hotels out of the conversation.

Given their influence on booking decisions, it's a safe bet that soon all OTAs will allow hotel responses. It's time for hoteliers to make more time for monitoring and responding to public feedback. Here are some tips for responding to reviews to minimize damage and cast your hotel in a more positive light. Each property will have a different approach, so I recommend answering these questions on your own and compiling the results into a brief strategic plan.

Should I respond to all reviews?

You should respond to any feedback that is damaging to your hotel's reputation, even if simply to acknowledge the issue and apologize. An unanswered complaint leaves travelers to draw their own conclusions, as in "I guess it's true" or "The hotel doesn't care".

Respond to positive reviews occasionally to show you're listening, to express appreciation and to reinforce the positive, but don't feel obliged to reply to each one. Travelers read reviews for advice from other travelers, not for a succession of gloating responses from hotel managers. That said, your advocates deserve proper reverence. If the host site permits, send a private note of thanks and flag their profile to acknowledge them in person on their next stay.

Bad response: "It is with tremendous joy that I read your most gracious remarks regarding our cherished employees, who take immense pride in pleasing our valued guests ..."

Good response: "Thank you for your wonderful remarks, which I have shared with our staff. We are thrilled to hear that you enjoyed your stay, and look forward to welcoming you back soon."

Who should respond?

Given their influence, online reviews should be handled at the highest level and disseminated at all levels.

It's okay for a verbally gifted middle manager or executive assistant to draft responses, provided they're approved by—and addressed from—a senior manager. As a rule I discourage hotel owners from responding. They have too much at stake and aren't always as diplomatic as managers.

Bad response: “How dare you insult my bootifull hotel! I spit on your mother’s grave!”

Good response: “We welcome all constructive criticism, as it helps us to get better.”

When should I respond?

The sooner the better. The longer a complaint is left to fester, the more business it will drive away. But first thoroughly investigate the incident, draft a reply, sleep on it, delete all threats and curses, and have it reviewed by a highly literate and judicious colleague.

If your property rarely receives reviews, negative reviews will have a longer shelf-life, which makes monitoring and responding even more important. If you receive frequent reviews, regular responses are necessary to keep them up front and center—ideally on the first page. To stay on top of reviews I recommend a reputation management tool like [Revinote](#) (whom I consult for), which will scour the web for mentions of your hotel on all social media platforms and deliver a daily summary to your desktop.

Bad response: “I would have appreciated it if you had brought this issue to my attention while a guest rather than two years later.”

Good response. “You will be happy to know that, as a result of guest feedback like yours, we have implemented the following changes ...”

What should I say?

A poorly worded response risks making things worse, whereas a well executed response will prompt readers to conclude that, despite unfortunate circumstances, management cares and is on the ball. Thank the reviewer, acknowledge positive comments first, and apologize. Explain what you’ve done to fix the problem—or why it can’t be fixed. Readers will be put off by stock replies, and a few changed words won’t fool them, so tailor each response. Never offer compensation, as it might encourage more complaints.

Bad response. “Let’s try to avoid hyperbolizing, shall we, as in ‘worst hotel experience EVER!’ Yes, we dropped the ball, but we got slammed that morning and two employees called in sick.”

Good response: “Clearly we were not performing to our usual standards that morning, and for that I sincerely apologize. I have reviewed your feedback in detail with our restaurant manager.”

Best Practices for Responding to Online Hotel Reviews Part 2 by Daniel Edward Craig, 05/18/10

It appears that hotels are finally waking up to the importance of monitoring and responding to online reviews. TripAdvisor reports a 203% increase in hotel responses to negative reviews last year. Unfortunately, this equates to a mere 4% response rate. As reviews become ubiquitous, playing an increasingly critical role in travel decisions, hoteliers can no longer afford to let complaints go unanswered. In the second installment of this [two-part series](#), we share more tips for responding to negative online reviews.

What kind of tone should I use?

Some hotel managers write like it’s the Victorian era and they’re running Buckingham Palace. In social media you can be more informal and to the point, though always professional. Address the guest directly, but bear in mind you’re speaking to an entire community.

As difficult as it may be at times, try not to take negative feedback personally. And don't be dramatic, as in "I'm shocked and devastated by your comments"—it's a guest complaint, not a death in the family. Avoid humor and especially sarcasm, and never be defensive, petty or condescending. You might think you're concealing your true feelings, but travelers can read between the lines.

Bad response: "I sure hope all these bad reviews aren't being posted by our competitors. Just kidding."

Good response: "We take all feedback seriously, and sincerely regret that we did not meet your expectations."

What if the reviewer makes false claims?

Dispute the review with the host website, providing backup. Be forewarned, however, that this can be a slow and often futile process. In the meantime, post a reply to set the record straight diplomatically and respectfully. Never accuse a reviewer of dishonesty or exaggeration; erroneous claims are often the result of a misunderstanding, not maliciousness. If a reviewer is obviously delusional, don't feel obliged to respond; travelers will understand. Accept that occasionally you'll be the victim of unfair or false claims. Support your team and move on.

Bad response: "Your claims are at best pure fabrications and at worst a deliberate attempt to slander our good reputation."

Good response: "We can find no record of this incident, and it certainly is not in keeping with how we treat our guests. We urge you to contact us directly to discuss."

What if the claims are true but I can't fix the problem?

Be transparent. Acknowledge that it's an ongoing issue that may take time to resolve, and apologize. Complaints such as a noisy neighborhood, limited services, rooms in need of a renovation, or an inconvenient location can help set expectations for other guests and thereby reduce complaints. Use feedback to make a case to ownership for upgrading facilities and services.

Bad response: "Sorry, but we can't control noise from the street. You should have asked for a quiet room."

Good response: "We sincerely regret the disturbance. Our downtown location can mean extra street activity on weekends, as much as we try to contain it. On your next visit, we would be happy to assign one of our quieter, east-facing rooms upon request."

What if the complaint is about high prices?

Likely the issue is less about pricing than perceived value. The traveler may be unfamiliar with pricing levels in your destination or caliber of property. Resist the urge to lecture. If guests feel they did not get good value for their money, you share responsibility and should express regret.

Bad response: "Our hotel is not, as you claim, a 'RIP OFF'. If you traveled more often you'd understand that it's pricey in this city and we're by far not the most expensive."

Good response: "Our pricing is in line with similar properties in this area and we feel that we offer good value given our central location and extensive facilities. However, in your case it appears we failed to meet expectations, and for that I am truly sorry."

What if we already handled the complaint?

Given that the guest is posting a complaint, it's a safe assumption that you didn't handle it to her satisfaction.

You should have the guest's contact info on file, so call her directly and try to resolve things, with the objective of having her remove the negative remark or post a follow-up comment. In the meantime, post a reply to acknowledge the complaint.

Bad response: "We already comped your meal after your alleged 'near-death experience' from mussels in our award-winning restaurant. I guess you're looking for more freebies."

Good response: "We were under the impression we had resolved this issue to your satisfaction at the time it was brought to our attention. I am sorry if this is not the case. I have left you a message, and look forward to discussing the matter in more detail."

How can I keep track of reviews?

You can subscribe to alerts from TripAdvisor, Google and Yahoo, but considering the explosive growth of online reviews, I recommend subscribing to a social media listening tool for managing your hotel's reputation.

How do I encourage positive reviews?

I'll address this question at length in a future article, but for now I'll say never let a guest leave dissatisfied and don't be shy about asking happy guests to share feedback. If you're not using feedback to improve, it doesn't matter how good you are at responding to complaints. Above all, be remarkable. As marketing guru Seth Godin says, that means worth remarking about.

Daniel Edward Craig is a former hotel general manager turned consultant and the author of the hotel-based Five-Star Mystery series. His articles and blog are considered essential reading for hoteliers, travelers and students alike. Visit www.danieledwardcraig.com or email dec@danieledwardcraig.com.

Contact: Daniel Edward Craig dec@danieledwardcraig.com