

Tech the initiative

The popularity of the internet and social networking has created a growing need to manage reputation using technology, the law and proactive communications. **Andrew Don** investigates

Search TripAdvisor and it will take you just seconds to find derisory comments on individual pubs and their restaurants, on subjects ranging from poor service standards to the questionable quality of the carrots.

Brent Franson, vice-president of Reputation.com, a reputation management company, argues that having some negative reviews and criticism is not always bad.

"If everything is extremely positive it can look false," he says.

JD Wetherspoon spokesman Eddie Gershon says: "You can't monitor everything that's said on the internet otherwise you'll never get round to running the business."

However, where negative comments are malicious, and threaten to

damage trade and reputation, specialists can be hired to intervene if you feel unable, or do not have the time, to handle it in-house.

Plan of attack

Duncan Lamont, a media lawyer at City law firm Charles Russell, says the first plan of attack is to look at the terms and conditions of the host site, which will remove information that is "offensive, defamatory or obscene".

The host will contact the perpetrators and say that, unless the comments can be justified, they will be pulled down – usually within seven days.

The next step, Russell says, is to send out 'cease and desist letters' by post or email to the perpetrators where identifiable. "Usually that can be sufficient to stop these people if they are normal and just disenchanted," he says. "They will under-

★★★★☆
A nice place to visit with decent menu and efficient staff

stand that they overstepped the mark and didn't realise putting it online was the same as putting it on the front page of the *Daily Mail*."

You could sue, but Lamont suggests taking it in "sensible stages" because of the cost implications. However, he says that when there is a concerted campaign "to do you down", a claim might be reasonable where a libel



Case study

How to handle a media mauling

When negative comment about your pub 'goes viral' or spreads like wildfire through the press it could be time to bring in the big guns. But in the case of the Adam & Eve, a Star Pubs & Bars outlet in Mill Hill Village, north London, the group manager opted to handle the fallout himself and did so successfully.

In the Adam & Eve's case, the torrent of coverage during Salt Awareness Week last year was accurate and extended to the national and international press and radio. "Restaurant pizza saltier than sea water," ran the headline in *The Daily Telegraph*. Similar headlines appeared in local press. The BBC News website wrote: "A restaurant in north London has

been selling a pizza that has more than two teaspoons of salt..."

The culprit, as identified in research by Consensus Action on Salt & Health (CASH), was the pepperoni variant. Gareth Leakey, group manager at the Adam & Eve and its sister pub, the Prince Albert in Camden, north London, recalls: "We got international coverage – it made



Leakey: chose to handle matters

the press in China and was in every British tabloid."

Instead of diving for cover, Leakey tackled the situation in what was a classic example of how to limit damage. He was not defensive, but rather embraced the media opportunities the issue afforded.

Leakey told reporters the research had been helpful in giving the pub



Adam & Eve: located in Mill Hill

direction on nutrition, and he moved swiftly to change recipes and ensure suppliers lowered salt content on the four pizzas with the highest content. His approach impressed Professor Graham MacGregor, chairman of CASH, who invited him to the House of Commons for a debate.

Leakey concedes: "If we had given the wrong quote or done it incorrectly, it could have been a different situation."

Today, if you type "the Adam & Eve, Mill Hill" into Google, the story does not appear until the third page – further down than most people will bother looking.

The PMA has visited the pub on many occasions since and it enjoys brisk trade.



**Awful experience!
Extremely poor,
slow service, cold
food, complete lack
of communication
and the cheek
to add service
on to the bill...**



**Nice place, good
food and excellent
service. Will be
going back and
would recommend!**

or malicious falsehood has been made and “people are saying things that are clearly untrue and you are suffering a loss”.

However, bringing this type of action can sometimes be fruitless or inadvisable – the recipients of your action might be asset-poor, or even just children larking about online, and costs can swiftly escalate from £50,000 to £200,000.

“How good does it look when you serve a writ on the local village idiot? Sometimes you need to have a thick skin,” says Lamont.

Engineer and engage

Some specialists will engineer getting negative comments pushed down the search-engine results, but Lamont says the problem with this is it needs to be done continuously.

“When you stop paying the fee, it creeps back again.”

Engaging with people who have genuine grievances can work to a publican's favour. “If you are dealing with a sensible person who perhaps had a bad experience at your pub, there are all sorts of things you can do to change their perception.”

Reputation.com's Franson says that search-engine algorithms (the rules that search engines use to determine the significance of a web page) work on popularity, not accuracy, therefore more salacious content tends to rise to the top.

He says: “You can develop ways to respond, professionally and politely; you can add content on the web that is factual in nature; and you can proactively solicit honest reviews from all your patrons and use their feedback to keep doing what they like and fix what they don't.”

Oyetola Oyewumi, chief executive of Chief Online Business and Solutions Group, explains that negative comments on websites could appear as a result of a search engine auto-completing (completing a word that is only partially typed in) or suggesting web pages.

But he claims addressing this is not a task that anyone can easily manage. “Even the experts need to really do their homework when a client has this problem,” he says.

Negative reviews and articles

about hospitality businesses can go a long way to destroying credibility, Oyewumi adds. “The worst impact is not just losing business but also not knowing where or why, because the chances are that if someone is looking for a pub where they can spend their hard-earned cash, it's not likely to be the one with bad reviews.”

Noteworthy or newsworthy?

When considering whether to call in the experts, Oyewumi says licensees should first ask if the derogatory post is negative enough to be noteworthy or newsworthy.

JD Wetherspoon agrees with this point and says it would take far more seriously comments in established press “than every Tom, Dick and Harry with a Twitter account”.

Even though ongoing intervention to keep negative comments pushed down the search engines can cost on average about £1,000 a month, it is sometimes money well spent when combined with approaches to website owners to pull down postings where appropriate.

And in some cases solicitors and reputational management specialists claim to be able to successfully rescue people's livelihoods.

As Lindsay Urquhart, associate in the online reputation team at BTO Solicitors, says: “Information from social-networking websites, which discloses that there have been fights or underage drinkers in licensed premises, could potentially be produced in support of an objection to a licensing application.”

It is certainly something you cannot afford to overlook.

Top Tips

Handling negative online reviews

In an increasingly online, social and mobile world, reviews play a vital role in influencing consumer behaviour, with many using these to guide their purchasing decisions. Many small business owners rely on their web presence to communicate with customers.

Where once any fallout from a dissatisfied customer was limited to their friends and family, the popularity of social media has magnified the impact.

Unhappy customers can sound off instantly to a wide audience before they've considered taking their complaint up with the company directly.

Business owners should accept that negative reviews are part of running a business, and have a

suitable strategy in place to manage these effectively.

★ Acknowledge and respond straight away

It's vital to respond to a complaint as quickly and thoughtfully as possible. That way you'll minimise potential damage and show customers that you care and take their loyalty very seriously. The longer it takes to respond to a negative or false representation of your business, the more time it has to spread.

★ Be professional and demonstrate strong empathy

Always respond to bad reviews in a respectful way that communicates your empathy with the customer. If you've had a bad day, admit it,

apologise for the customer's negative experience, and invite them to return so you can make it up to them. Even if you don't agree with what's being claimed, be positive and avoid getting into an argument. If you feel the review is wrong, say why but in a reasoned way. The key is to create a meaningful, personal dialogue, and to do this publicly.

★ Take the conversation offline

While it's important to post a short, immediate public response to a bad review, further communication with the dissatisfied customer should be taken offline as soon as possible to avoid potential further public criticism. Communicating via email or phone helps to make things feel more personal, speeds up the

resolution process and protects a customer's privacy.

★ Turn negative feedback into an opportunity

Reviews can provide key insights into the health of your business. Business owners should take full advantage of this feedback and encourage all customers to provide it. Bad reviews should be regarded by business owners as a useful early-warning mechanism for spotting problems and addressing them before they escalate. A company's response to negative reviews provides a perfect opportunity to show customers the management is responsive. *Advice supplied by Elliot Adams, communications manager, Yelp*